

## ANALYSIS

“Field Guide to the Western Birds” (1956)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“It is in... ‘Field Guide to the Western Birds’... that Stegner first uses as narrator a sophisticated adult concerned with adult experience. ‘Field Guide’ is told by Joe Allston, a literary agent retired to California. The same Joe Allston is the narrator of *All the Little Live Things*, and historian Lyman Ward, equally sophisticated, narrates *Angle of Repose*. The device is neither better nor worse than the third person narrative of the fiction already discussed, but it allows for a voice interesting in itself and able to make commentary, it tends to send speculation even further into the unknown, and it gives a tone and quality of irony particularly suited to the materials of the three works.

In each case, the narrator is an observer who prefers (or thinks he prefers) to be only that. Joe Allston in ‘Field Guide’ watches the human birds much as he watches the feathered kind, but he not only by his very presence precipitates action, he sees himself in what he observes. The two kinds of birds play off against each other well—far less obviously than my brief analysis may seem to imply.... The human birds Allston observes at a party given by the wealthy Casements for Sue Casement’s musical protégé, a ‘Glandular Genius’ to whom Allston takes an immediate dislike. When the pianist, Arnold Kaminski, humiliates Sue publicly, Allston burst out to his wife, ‘Did it ever strike you how much attention a difficult cross-grained bastard gets, just by being difficult?’ ‘It strikes me all the time,’ his wife murmurs. ‘Hasn’t it every struck you before?’

Kaminski, it turns out has talent, but it is perhaps flawed. Through the evening Allston remains crusty, disapproving, curious about Kaminski, who is a kind of bird he is unable to identify. As most of the crowd leaves, Kaminski—drunk by now—insults a prim music teacher, partly because Allston is watching. Soon he proclaims the fact: ‘If I didn’t insult people like that I couldn’t keep my self-respect.... That is why nobody likes me.’ He then launches into an orgy of self-abuse confessing that he wants failure, that he plans it cunningly. He accuses Allston of having watched him all night because he saw through him, knew that he was not the ‘Pole from Egypt’ he claimed to be. Drunkenly ‘falling all over Sue,’ Kaminski says that he lied his way into his confession and can lie his way out, that they all hate him and won’t come through on the offer to set up a concert in Carnegie Hall....

He continues his abuse, telling them they don’t know yet whether he’s lying or telling the truth, until Bill Casement takes the direct approach and tosses him into the pool. As Joe Allston and Ruth drive home, the questions still remain: ‘Was he lying first, lying later, or lying all the time?’.... Joe Allston knows and recognizes a great deal about himself, but he is able to face part of it only indirectly. His kinship with Kaminski—the kinship of them all with Kaminski—is stated in terms of birds, but it reverberates through the entire novella. Finally, he looks at his wife and is ‘filled with gratitude for the forty years during which she has stood between me and myself.’

‘Field Guide’ is radically different in tone, method, characters, movement—what have you—from the straight clean line of *Genesis*, but the two novella are equally real and important, one about a young cowboy’s proving himself and being accepted as a man, the other about an aging man, where no one knows what ‘a man’ is, ‘trying to fight his way past himself.’”

Robert Canzoneri  
“Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence”  
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“‘Field Guide to the Western Birds,’ the true showpiece of Stegner’s second collection, is along short story—really a novella. Eventually, it became part of the novel *All the Little Live Things* (1967).... “Commencing with ‘Field Guide,’ Stegner switched from his habitual third-person, limited-omniscient

point of view to the use of a first-person narrator. In doing so, he was able to achieve a voice close to his own, yet fictional, which would convey a sense of truth and conviction that came not, in the earlier Saskatchewan stories and *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, out of the telling of his own story, but rather out of the force of his personality and belief....

The importance of 'Field Guide to the Western Birds' is that in the identity of its narrator and in its first-person telling Stegner is able to move from personal history to ongoing experience and observation. For many writers the problem of running out of personal history and finding other subject matter can be a crisis in their careers, a problem that some never do address successfully after their first autobiographical novel or group of stories about growing up. What brought Stegner to this success was simply that all his life he had been a person who felt he was without place or history and much, if not nearly all, his fiction as well as nonfiction embodied a search for those things.... All of his late fiction seems to reflect a certain self-criticism, a concern for how prone to error in our relations with others we humans tend to be....

The physical and social setting of 'Field Guide to the Western Birds' is one patterned after Los Gatos Hills, a community behind Stanford where the Stegners built a home a few years after moving up from Santa Barbara. With its abundant trees, large brick patios, swimming pools, barbecues, and horses, it was a community that typified the image of California suburban living. In the late 1940s the area was rural, with almost no houses in the vicinity, but it developed into an upper-middle-class neighborhood where the Stegners could not possibly have afforded to buy into in recent years. As a modestly paid academic, Wallace really did not fit into the mold of someone living in what Los Altos Hills became, although he and Mary did become friends with some of their wealthy neighbors. He was, in effect, both inside and outside the society that surrounded him, and that position, as reflected in the narration of Joe Allston, made him the perfect observer.

Retired from a career as a literary agent in New York to a suburb on the San Francisco Peninsula, Joe Allston spends much of his time looking out his study window, bird watching, rather than writing his memoirs. This in itself is a complicated metaphor that stretches from the story into the two novels that also use him as narrator. First of all, of course, there is the declaration in the metaphor that this character is, above all, an observer. He looks out, away from himself, giving up the more self-involved occupation of writing memoirs, explaining with some irony at one point in the story, 'I am beginning to understand the temptation to be literary and indulge the sense. It is a full-time job just watching and listening here.' Considering this from a biographical point of view, there would seem to be a subtext: Stegner for much of his career had been telling his personal history—in effect, writing his 'memoirs'—and here he seems to be making a declaration that rather than dwelling on the past, he will not be looking outward and listening in the present.

Second, Joe's looking involves identification and classification, a process that extends from real birds to those 'Western birds' or people that he encounters in his neighborhood and at social gatherings. At the party that takes up most of the story, he looks at the various guests and thinks, 'It is all out of some bird book, how that species cling together, and the juncos and the linnets and the seedeaters hop around in one place, and the robins raid the to yon berries *en masse*, and the jaybirds yak away together in the almond trees.' His story is a modified version of Mr. Palmer's story in that despite long experience with various kinds of people he learns, in the case of the guest of honor, that classifying people is not always as certain or as easy as classifying birds.

Joe and his wife, Ruth, have been invited by neighbors Bill and Sue Casement to a concert party—cocktails, a gourmet catered dinner, and after, outside near the pool, a recital by a down-on-his-luck young pianist, Kaminski. Kaminski turns out to be an arrogant and unhappy artist who does his best to insult everyone and to make Sue Casement, his benefactress, as uncomfortable as possible. At one point the pianist throws a tantrum about the guests eating and drinking so much before the performance. Standing in the buffet line, Joe and his wife see him stalk off, apparently threatening not to play, pursued by Sue, and Ruth comments: 'If she weren't so nice it would be almost funny'.... Here, unlike some of the prose in his early novels, often so flat and uninspired, the dialogue crackles and snaps. One of the main things that Stegner achieves through this voice is interest. Joe—not to mention his wife—is intelligent, intensely observant, and, above all, witty.

Although Joe, as we have just seen, takes an immediate dislike to this ‘Glandular Genius,’ as he calls Kaminski, he also begins to feel somewhat uncomfortable himself at the surfeit of food and drink on ‘this movie set where the standard of everything is excess.’ The contradiction here to his objection to Kaminski saying pretty much the same thing underlines the ambiguity of Allston’s position—he is both right and wrong in his reactions to the pianist. But there is also a foreshadowing in his feeling of discomfort at the surfeit of the party, a foreshadowing of the reversal of the ending, a hint that it is the condescension of the wealthy, as well-intentioned as they may be, toward the artist that is at the root of the conflict. It is a conflict that Joe feels but initially misunderstands. Another thing that Stegner achieves with the adoption of the Joe Allston voice is a narrator so complex in himself that the author is able to extend the dimensions of his narrative.

As the poolside performance begins, Joe listens carefully in order to hear how good a pianist Kaminski is, but typically, backtracks mentally, wondering if, after all, he is capable of any final judgment: ‘God spare me from every being called a critic, or even a judge of music—even a listener....’ Later Allston almost gloats when he thinks he hears ‘a botch, a fat naked, staring discord’ during Kaminski’s performance of a difficult Bach piece. Here, as elsewhere throughout the story, Allston shows himself to be, if not expert, certainly very knowledgeable about music—once again contradicting himself and showing the difference between how he chooses to present himself to the reader—the modest appreciator of music—and the very acute critic he actually is.

The reader, who by now shares Allston’s dislike of Kaminski, is likely to want to celebrate the pianist’s apparent incompetence and to find the pianist’s disintegration after the recital almost predictable, almost enjoyable. In genteel terms, Kaminski turns out to be a thoroughly despicable case: in a long drunken public confession he proclaims his need to fail and his fraudulent identity as a Polish Jew victimized by the Nazis. Finally, when the host tries to pull him off to bed, he staggers into a chair and then falls into the pool. The harmony, the ‘niceness’ as it might better be called in this upper-middle-class atmosphere, of the occasion has been thoroughly shattered.

But things are not as they seem. As Joe and Ruth drive home Joe discovers that Ruth, whose judgment in such matters he respects more than his own, thinks that Kaminski is, indeed, very good, exceptional—worth helping toward a concert in New York. But, of course, this chance, which might have been his only chance, is now gone. Joe wonders, ‘Why would he?... Where in God’s name does he belong?’ and ‘How shall a nest of robins deal with a cuckoo chick?... The epiphany is ambiguous—the moral escapes him, and life remains as obscure as the fog that they drive through on the way back from the party. Joe can only be grateful to Ruth ‘for the forty years during which she has stood between me and myself.’

A complicated narrator—a fallible wise man, as he might be called—has led us down the garden path into a complex of emotions difficult for the reader to sort out. It is a pattern repeated over and over again in the final novels. Kaminski is brimming over with self-pity; he is a phony, a pretender; he is arrogant and cruel and filled with self-importance—so that Joe Allston’s dislike, and ours, certainly seem justified. But Kaminski is also a poor Jewish young man of low self-esteem with a very real talent, thrust into a scene of upscale opulence dominated by a wealthy society that is with few exceptions largely populated by pretenders and Philistines—the entire party is a kind of charade of artistic appreciation. Isn’t the artist’s discomfort, posturing, and anger justified? Just because he makes a social stink, are we justified in hating him, gloating over his downfall? Just as in ‘Pop Goes the Alley Cat,’ we encounter the implicit question, how far can we stretch our empathy? Does it stretch only to those who model themselves after us, who look like us, who behave ‘nicely’? Despite his liberal inclinations and despite himself, Joe Allston has given us a demonstration of the workings of prejudice.

But even Joe Allston, who knows something about art and music, is wrong and comes to admit it, realizing that the identification of the human species can be a lot more difficult and fraught with possible error than he earlier in the story thinks it to be. At the end, the narrator is mired in doubt: ‘I don’t know whether I’m tired, or sad, or confused. Or, maybe just irritated that they don’t give you enough time in a single life to figure anything out.’ If there is a lesson, it is not so much about the nature of life as it is about the processes of observing and judging others, a process that needs to be performed with humility and openness, with conclusions always subject to revision.

Such is the nature of this narrator as he evolved through the stories to become the voice, the fallible wise man of the late novels. Stegner has remarked that '[a]ny work of art is the product of a total human being,' but it is only with these late works that he was able to bring himself totally to his art. The author is fond of quoting Robert Frost as saying that 'a fiction writer should be able to tell what happened to himself as if it has happened to someone else, and what happened to someone else as if it had happened to himself'.... But it is only with the evolution of the Joe Allston voice and stance that he was able to create a narrator that is a fiction, someone other than himself, yet bring to that fiction all his faculties, all the force of his personality.... The voices of Joe Allston and his counterparts make use of Wallace Stegner's personal assets—his dry sense of humor and wit; his willingness to laugh at himself and to examine himself; his skepticism; his openness to learning; his search for the truths behind cultural and historical myth; his concern for the preservation of the earth. Over time these narrators get closer and closer to the inner man, his concerns and values, as the man sheds his reluctance to risk and reveal himself. They are supercharged by the author's investment but remain fictions....

In 'Field Guide to Western Birds' and 'He Who Spits at the Sky,' two California stories, Stegner illustrates the...theme—man's perversion of nature through civilization. In the first story, Stegner uses Joe Allston, the ironic narrator of *All the Little Live Things*, to view the civilization of lost hope, purity, and innocence. As an 'ex-literary agent,' Allston identifies himself as an 'incipient birdwatcher,' who, with his wife Ruth, attends a cocktail party designed to give public exposure to an up-and-coming pianist, Kaminski. The narrator pursues his point of view as birdwatcher throughout the party, reporting the artificiality of California society and the subsequent behavior of the party-goers. Reflected in 'artificial moonlight,' this food is described in its lush perversion...

The lush feast is supplemented with a suckling pig reminiscent of Golding's version in *Lord of the Flies*. Trapped in the artifice of the residence, Allston describes a 'radiant-heated magic carpet...abandoned chairs and empty lawn [with] translucent green-blue pool fumes.' He finds himself feeling like he is 'marooned on a space ship.' The perversion is complete when pianist Kaminski plays his pieces imperfectly, yet gets encouraging applause, and, after too many drinks, insults a proper music teacher.

In closing the story, narrator Joe Allston reflects on how he would love to shoot an irritating though 'unidentifiable' bird that bashes itself against the window, 'hypnotized by the insane hostility of his double.' Likewise, Joe feels contempt for those he observed at the party the evening before. He will 'watch the fool thing [the bird] as long as [he] can stand it, and ruminate on the insanities of men and birds, and try to convince [him]self that as a local idiocy, an individual aberration, this behavior is not significant.' Unable to explain human nature, Joe Allston has nonetheless clearly shown that the artifice and perversion in California society, the attempt to 'mirror' nature, does not cultivate man's best self."

Jackson J. Benson  
*Wallace Stegner: A Study of the Short Fiction*  
(Twayne 1998) 79-86, 128, 134-35

Michael Hollister (2015)