

Time for Wallace Stegner: High Time

Bio for Wallace Stegner by Kent Smith

Although sometimes categorized as merely a "western writer," Wallace Stegner was more than that: he wrote 30 books of consequence, both fiction and nonfiction, garnered a Pulitzer Prize and many other honors, served as a mentor to many young writers, and worked in support of conservation issues throughout his lifetime.

In 1909, Wallace Stegner was born in the rural community of Lake Mills, Iowa. Since I am also from Iowa, I can readily identify with him. Most of his childhood was spent moving from place to place as his father, George Stegner, a restless schemer, searched for a way to get rich quick. The family finally settled in Saskatchewan, Canada, although Stegner's father alternated between living with his wife and two sons to roaming the frontier, in search of his ultimate opportunity. George Stegner's life ended violently when he killed a woman he was with and then took his own life. Wallace Stegner purposely set out to be unlike his father by taking refuge in the world of books. Reading and writing gave him a hold on the world. As he said later, "What I most wanted was to belong to something" (*Audubon*). Stegner sought to belong in the embrace of the world of Academia. His longing to fit into the academic community at the University of Wisconsin is detailed in our book selection *Crossing to Safety*. Indeed his quest for "tenure" might be construed as one aspect of his efforts to "cross to safety" himself. (I think that many of us can relate to that.)

Stegner's childhood experiences and the respect he developed for the wilderness while living in Saskatchewan and in many locations across the American West undoubtedly had an influence on his future involvement in environmental and social issues. He published the nonfiction work *One Nation* in 1945. The book criticized the racial and religious lines that were being drawn in the United States and was a foreshadowing of the social commentary Stegner would make in his later years.

Stegner also wrote eloquently about conservation issues in the American West. In 1960, Stegner wrote his famous *Wilderness Letter*. He stated: "I want to speak for the wilderness idea as something that has helped

form our character and that has certainly shaped our history as a people. Something will have gone out of us as a people if we ever let the remaining wilderness be destroyed". He gave voice to the emotional content of the environmental movement as no one else did, particularly in his "Wilderness Coda", in which lies a literary moment, like Thoreau's "In wildness is the preservation of the world," whose echoes will reverberate a generation later and will probably be felt for generations to come: "We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of our geography of hope."

Stegner did not think his message was extraordinary at the time, but it became a mission statement, that inspired conservationists around the world. It was also used to introduce the bill that established the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1964.

The Sierra Club recognized that Stegner's writing "captured the possibilities and spirit of the American West. He understood what it could be."

As a young man Stegner worked his way through the University of Utah, graduating with a bachelor's degree in 1930. He went on to earn a master's degree in 1932 and a doctorate in 1935 from the University of Iowa. I am proud to say that this University of Iowa connection has a storied tradition of producing eminent American Writers. In between his stints in graduate school and for the next several years after, he worked as an instructor at various institutions, including the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Here is another autobiographical connection to the early chapters of the 4 major characters of our book meeting and bonding at the University of Wisconsin. In 1937, Stegner published his first novel, *Remembering Laughter*, which won first prize in a contest sponsored by the publishing company Little, Brown. He won \$2500, which at that time was a fortune. The book became a literary and financial success and helped gain Stegner a position as an instructor at Harvard University, where he taught composition from 1939 to 1945. At Harvard he began his mentoring career. Stegner married Mary Stuart Page in 1934. The couple enjoyed a 59-year marriage and had one son, Stuart Page.

Stegner wrote several more books over the next few years. None of the books achieved the success of his first novel until the publication of *The*

Big Rock Candy Mountain in 1943. The novel is largely autobiographical, telling the story of a family's travels over the American and Canadian West as the father, Bo, relentlessly searches for the opportunity that will earn him his fortune. The character of Bo is obviously based on Stegner's own father, and the book, according to Mark Mardon of *Sierra* magazine, "expressed the dim view he [Stegner] held of those who exploit the West in their elusive dreams of grandeur."

At the end of World War II, Stegner returned to the West and became a professor of English at Stanford University in California, where he remained until 1969. At Stanford he set up what would become one of the most elite writing programs in the country and directed that program until 1971. Stegner established himself as what Peter Collier of *Audubon* magazine called "the leading teacher of writing of his generation." Some of the writers Stegner taught, who would eventually become well known, were Larry McMurty, Wendell Berry, Tillie Olsen, Edward Abbey, Ken Kesey, Robert Stone, and future U.S. poet laureate, Robert Haas. Sandra Day O'Connor was also among his mentees. In addition to his teaching achievements, Stegner won many awards and honorary degrees. He also continued to write, publishing the novels *Second Growth*, which compared the lives of residents and visitors in New Hampshire (1947); *The Preacher and the Slave*, (1950); *A Shooting Star*, which told about the lives of wealthy northern Californians (1961); and *All the Little Live Things*, which contrasted the lives of an older cultured man and a young hippie (1967). Stegner left Stanford in 1971 and devoted his time to writing. In 1972, he won the Pulitzer Prize for his novel *Angle of Repose*, a work that James D. Houston of the *Los Angeles Times Book Review* said is now "recognized as a masterpiece." It was also made into an opera by Oakley Hall and Andrew Imbrie in 1976. The book tells the story of a retired history professor in California who is editing the papers of his grandmother, a writer and illustrator of the nineteenth century. The professor has taken on the project to forget his own marital and health problems, and as he imagines the lives of his grandparents, he reflects on, and comes to an understanding of, his own life. This blending of past and present is vital to Stegner's major works and was apparent again in Stegner's 1976 novel *The Spectator Bird*, which won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1977. In *The Spectator Bird*, the older man first introduced in *All the Little Live Things* recounts a romantic event of his youth.

Stegner's concern with the past's influence on the present and a societal sense of identity is also apparent in his nonfiction books. In discussing his love for the writing of history and his book *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing American West*, published in 1969, Stegner told David Dillon of the *Southwest*

Review, "I think to become aware of your life, to examine your life in the best Socratic way, is to become aware of history and of how little history is written, formed, and shaped. I also think that writers in a new tradition, in a new country, invariably, by a kind of reverse twist of irony, become hooked on the past, which in effect doesn't exist and therefore has to be created even more than the present needs to be created." In his personal and public history of the "last plains frontier," where Montana and Saskatchewan meet and where Stegner grew up, titled *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and Memory of the Last Plains* (1962), Stegner searches for his own identity: "I may not know who I am," Stegner says in the book, "but I know where I came from."

However, Stegner is not just a Western Writer, he also chronicles the more universal journey of the more Human Spirit. Richard H. Simpson of the *Dictionary of Literary Biography* maintains that "the central theme of all of his work is the quest for identity, personal and regional, artistic and cultural." In his last literary work *Crossing to Safety*, Stegner explores this quest for identity so that we, as engaged readers, might reflect on his writing to help us decide for ourselves what we hold dear in our own lives as we ourselves cross to safety.

He leaves a remarkable legacy as a Teacher, Conservationist, and a Writer.

Our novel *Crossing to safety* prompted Doris Grumbach in The New York Times Book Review to comment that "Clearly Mr Stegner has not gone unnoticed. But neither is he a household name, as he deserves to be".