

## Crossing to Safety Wallace Stegner

### Introduction

*By Molly Lundquist*

Like other famous authors who claimed to write small (Jane Austen's miniatures on "a little bit of ivory" and William Faulkner's "postage stamp" of native soil), Wallace Stegner says of *Crossing to Safety* that he "was trying to make very small noises and to make them thoughtful." He succeeded on both counts, creating an intimate, thoughtful portrait of friendship between two married couples over a 35-year span.

Stegner isn't a household name, though he should be. He had a long and prolific career, writing more than 30 books: novels, story collections, and non-fiction. He won awards and taught his craft to writers better known than he. His best known work is *Angle of Repose*, which won him the Pulitzer Prize in 1972.

This novel delves into the friendship and marriages of the Morgans and Langs, who first met as young academics during the Depression years. The book opens in 1972, in Vermont, where the Morgans have traveled to visit Charity Lang, now dying of cancer. Told as a series of flashbacks by Larry Morgan, the work ponders the nature of youthful expectations and goals unfulfilled, the dynamics of marriage, the power of personality, and dependence, all set against the evocative beauty of Vermont's natural landscape.

Charity and Sid's relationship is central to the story, and Charity becomes the book's most powerful figure, obsessive, domineering, even cruel, but also loving and generous. Sid suffers under her control. Or he seems to, which is the question left unanswered at the book's end: will he live without Charity?

This is such a beautiful book. The characters burrow into your heart, and Stegner's prose, as one critic put it, is "prismatic, lush and painterly." Don't miss this one.

Called a "magnificently crafted story . . . brimming with wisdom" by Howard Frank Mosher in *The Washington Post Book World*, *Crossing to Safety* has, since its publication in 1987, established itself as one of the greatest and most cherished American novels of the twentieth century. Tracing the lives, loves, and aspirations of two couples who move between Vermont and Wisconsin, it is a work of quiet majesty, deep compassion, and powerful insight into the alchemy of friendship and marriage. (*From the publisher.*)

Some call Wallace Stegner "The Dean of Western Writers." He was born in Lake Mills, Iowa and grew up in Great Falls, Montana, Salt Lake City, Utah and southern Saskatchewan, which he wrote about in his autobiography *Wolf Willow*. Stegner says he "lived in twenty places in eight states and Canada". While living in Utah, he joined a Boy Scout troop at a Mormon church (though he was not Mormon but Presbyterian himself) and earned the Eagle Scout award.

He received his B.A. at the University of Utah in 1930. He taught at the University of Wisconsin and Harvard University, and then he settled in at Stanford University, where he

founded the creative writing program. His students included Sandra Day O'Connor, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Thomas McGuane, Ken Kesey, Gordon Lish, Ernest Gaines, and Larry McMurtry.

He served as a special assistant to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. He was elected to the Sierra Club board of directors for a term that lasted 1964—1966. He also moved into a house in nearby Los Altos Hills and became one of the town's most prominent residents.

Stegner's novel *Angle of Repose* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1972, and was directly based on the letters of Mary Hallock Foote (later published as the memoir *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*). Stegner's use of uncredited passages taken directly from Foote's letters caused a minor controversy. Stegner also won the National Book Award for *The Spectator Bird* in 1977. In the late 1980s, he refused a National Medal from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1992 because he believed the NEA had become too politicized. He died in Santa Fe, New Mexico, while visiting the city to give a lecture. His death was the result of injuries suffered in an automobile accident on March 28, 1993. He is the father of nature writer Page Stegner. (From Wikipedia.)

### **Critics Say . . .**

Stegner isn't a household name, though he should be. He had a long and prolific career, writing more than 30 books: novels, story collections, and non-fiction.

Adding to a distinguished body of work that already has earned him a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award and on the 50th anniversary of the publication of his first novel, Stegner's new book is an eloquent, wise and immensely moving narrative. It is a meditation on the idealism and spirit of youth, when the world is full of promise, and on the blows and compromises life inevitably inflicts. Two couples meet during the Depression years in Madison, Wis., and become devoted friends despite vast differences in upbringing and social status. Hard work, hope and the will to succeed as a writer motivate the penurious narrator Larry Morgan and his wife Sally as he begins a term teaching at the university. Equally excited by their opportunities are Sid Lang, another junior man in the English department, and his wife Charity. They are fortune's children, favored with intelligence, breeding and money. Taken into the Langs' nourishing and generous embrace, the Morgans have many reasons for gratitude over the years, especially when Sally is afflicted with polio and the Langs provide financial as well as moral support. During visits at the Langs' summer home on Battell Pond in Vermont and later sharing a year in Florence, the couples feel that they are "four in Eden." Yet the Morgans observe the stresses in their friends' marriage as headstrong, insufferably well-organized Charity tries to bully the passive Sid into a more aggressive mold. Charity is one of the most vivid characters in fiction; if she is arrogant, she is also kindhearted, enthusiastic, stalwart and brave—an ardent liver of life. Her incandescent personality is both the dominant force and the source of strain in the enduring friendship Stegner conveys with brilliant artistry. He is also superb at expressing a sense of place, and his intelligent voice makes cogent observations on American society in the decades of his setting. But most importantly, he speaks to us of universal questions, reflecting on "the miserable failure of the law of nature to conform to the dream of man." In doing so, he has created a believable human drama the dimensions of which reach out beyond the story's end and resonate in the reader's heart.

*Publishers Weekly*

Stegner published his first novel 50 years ago. Since then he has won both a Pulitzer Prize (for *Angle of Repose*, 1971) and the National Book Award (for *The Spectator Bird*, 1976). His latest effort, an exploration into the mysteries of friendship, deserves similar accolades. With a quiet but strong hand, he traces the bond that develops between Charity and Sid Lang and Sally and Larry Morgan from their first meeting in 1937 through their eventual separation to their final get-together in 1972 when Charity is dying of cancer and is determined "to do it right," no matter what anyone else thinks. It seems only appropriate that Charity bring them together since she has been the driving force behind the relationship. As we discover now, her bull-headedness has had its price. This is a wonderfully rich, warm, and affecting book. Highly recommended. David W. Henderson, Eckerd Coll. Lib., St. Petersburg, Fla.

*Library Journal*

## Discussion Questions

1. Given the difference between their upbringings (social class), what is the basis of friendship between these two couples? What does each couple gain from the friendship? Is it an equal or unequal relationship?
2. Talk about the nature of the two marriages, how they differ. The Langs' marriage seems to be the one most under the microscope here, the most complicated of the two marriages.
3. Then there's Charity—clearly the most complex character of the four. Do you like her, despise her? What drives her?
4. What are Charity's expectations of Sid? Does she desire academic status? Does she want him to realize his full potential or live up to his best self? What does she want from him?
5. Why does Sid stay with Charity? What do you think will happen to him after she dies? Will he choose to go on without her?
6. Stegner is very much a nature writer, using the natural beauty of Vermont as a sort of backdrop to his human drama. In what way might he be making a comparison between the immutable natural world and mutable human world?

*(Questions by LitLovers. Please feel free to use them, online or off, with attribution. Thanks.)*

## Discussion Questions Source: Madison Public Library

1. How has Madison changed since the 1930s? Was Stegner's Madison recognizable to you? If not, do you attribute that to the passage of time or the role of the city in the characters' lives? If so, did you find yourself focused on our town's streets and landmarks to the detriment of plot and character, or

was it an enhancement?

2. Have you ever had friends as generous as Sid and Charity Lang? How did Stegner write the pairs of characters so that we would believe Larry and Sally could accept the Langs repeated gifts without inducing shame and guilt?
3. Discuss the role of wives in the book. Have wives, especially faculty wives, changed since the 1930s?
4. Larry ruminates on the basis of their friendship with the Langs when they flatter him on his writing, asking on page 18: "Do we respond only to people who seem to find us interesting?" and "Can I think of anyone in my whole life whom I have liked without his first showing signs of liking me?" How do you respond to Larry's questions?
5. How did you react to Charity's personality? Did you see her as controlling? Did you like her?
6. Stegner is a known environmentalist. Did his descriptions of Battell Pond and its environs show that? What feelings were evoked by his descriptions of their summers there?
7. Compare the ways each of the women dealt with their illness. Did either Charity or Sally change their personal style as a result of their illness? Is that as you would've expected?
8. Larry explains his idea of novelists on page 194: "They invent only plots they can resolve. They ask the questions they can answer." How does this inform the richness of these characters and their plights? Do you believe Larry? Is that really Stegner talking? Why or why not?

## **About the Author**

**Wallace Earle Stegner** (February 18, 1909 – April 13, 1993) was an [American historian](#), [novelist](#), [short story](#) writer, and [environmentalist](#), often called "The Dean of Western Writers".<sup>[1]</sup> He won the [Pulitzer Prize for Fiction](#) in 1972.

## **Life**

Stegner was born in [Lake Mills, Iowa](#), and grew up in [Great Falls, Montana](#), [Salt Lake City, Utah](#), and southern [Saskatchewan](#), which he wrote about in his autobiography *Wolf Willow*. Stegner says he "lived in twenty places in eight states and Canada".<sup>[2]</sup> While living in Utah, he joined a [Boy Scout](#) troop at a [Mormon](#) church (although he himself was a [Presbyterian](#)) and earned the [Eagle Scout](#) award. He received a [B.A.](#) at the [University of Utah](#) in 1930. He also studied at the [Iowa Writers' Workshop](#) at the [University of Iowa](#), where he received a [master's degree](#) in 1932 and a [doctorate](#) in 1935.<sup>[3]</sup>

"In 1934, Stegner married Mary Stuart Page. For 59 years they shared a 'personal literary partnership of singular facility,' wrote [Arthur Schlesinger Jr.](#)", reports a short biography on the [San Francisco Public Library](#) Web site by James Hepworth.<sup>[4]</sup>

A son, [Page Stegner](#), is a [nature writer](#) and professor emeritus at [University of California, Santa Cruz](#). Page is married to Lynn Stegner, a novelist.<sup>[5][6]</sup> Page edited the 2008 *Collected Letters of Wallace Stegner*.<sup>[7]</sup>

Stegner died in [Santa Fe, New Mexico](#), on April 13, 1993, from injuries suffered in an automobile accident on March 28, 1993.<sup>[8]</sup>

## Career

Stegner taught at the [University of Wisconsin](#) and [Harvard University](#). Eventually he settled at [Stanford University](#), where he founded the creative writing program. His students included [Sandra Day O'Connor](#), [Edward Abbey](#), [Wendell Berry](#), [Simin Daneshvar](#), [George V. Higgins](#), [Thomas McGuane](#), [Robert Stone](#), [Ken Kesey](#), [Gordon Lish](#), [Ernest Gaines](#), and [Larry McMurtry](#). He served as a special assistant to [Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall](#) and was elected to the [Sierra Club](#)'s board of directors for a term that lasted 1964–1966. He also moved into a house in nearby [Los Altos Hills](#) and became one of the town's most prominent residents.

Stegner's novel *Angle of Repose* won the [Pulitzer Prize for Fiction](#) in 1972, and was directly based on the letters of [Mary Hallock Foote](#) (later published as the memoir *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*). Stegner's use of uncredited passages taken directly from Foote's letters caused a continuing controversy.<sup>[9][10]</sup> Stegner also won the [National Book Award](#) for *The Spectator Bird* in 1977. In the late 1980s, he refused a National Medal from the [National Endowment for the Arts](#) because he believed the NEA had become too politicized.

Stegner's non-fiction works include *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: John Wesley Powell and the Second Opening of the West* (1954), a biography of [John Wesley Powell](#), who was the first man to explore the [Colorado River](#) through [the Grand Canyon](#) and later served as a government scientist and advocate of [water conservation](#) in the [American West](#). Stegner wrote the forward and edited "This Is Dinosaur," with photographs by [Philip Hyde](#), a [Sierra Club](#) book that was used in the campaign to prevent dams in [Dinosaur National Monument](#) and helped launch the modern environmental movement. A substantial number of his works are set in and around [Greensboro, Vermont](#), where he lived part-time. Some of his character representations (particularly in *Second Growth*) were sufficiently unflattering that residents took offense, and he did not visit Greensboro for several years after its publication.

## Legacy

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of Stegner's birth, [Timothy Egan](#) reflected in *The New York Times* on the writer's legacy, including his perhaps troubled relationship with the newspaper itself. Over 100 readers including [Jane Smiley](#) offered comments on the subject.<sup>[11]</sup>

One commenter to *The Times*, Stephen Trimble, a 2008–2009 Wallace Stegner Fellow at the [University of Utah's Tanner](#) Humanities Center, drew attention to the broader [Utah](#) birthday tribute to Stegner through leading conversations about Stegner's work in communities across Utah.<sup>[12]</sup> Gov. [Jon Huntsman](#)'s declaration of February 18, 2009 as Wallace Stegner Day highlighted Stegner as "one of Utah's most prominent citizens...a legendary voice for Utah and the West as an author, educator, and conservationist...[who was] raised and educated in Salt Lake City and [at] the University of Utah, [and] possess[ed] a lifelong love of Utah's landscapes, people, and culture."<sup>[13]</sup> See more on the Utah [centennial](#) tributes at [www.stegner100.com](http://www.stegner100.com).

The [Stegner Fellowship](#) program at [Stanford University](#) is a two-year creative writing fellowship. The house Stegner lived in from ages 7 to 12 in [Eastend, Saskatchewan, Canada](#) was restored by the Eastend Arts Council in 1990 and established as a Residence for Artists.<sup>[14]</sup> In 2003, [indie rock](#) trio [Mambo Sons](#) released the Stegner-influenced song "Little Live Thing / Cross to Safety" written by Scott Lawson and [Tom Guerra](#), which resulted in an invitation for Lawson to serve as Artist-in-Residency for March 2009.

## Bibliography

### Novels

- *Remembering Laughter* (1937)
- *The Potter's House* (1938)
- *On a Darkling Plain* (1940)
- *Fire and Ice* (1941)
- [The Big Rock Candy Mountain](#) (autobiographical) (1943)
- *Second Growth* (1947)
- *The Preacher And the Slave* aka [Joe Hill: A Biographical Novel](#) (1950)
- *A Shooting Star* (1961)
- *All the Little Live Things* (1967)
- [Angle of Repose](#) (1971) - [Pulitzer Prize](#)
- [The Spectator Bird](#) (1976) - [National Book Award](#)
- *Recapitulation* (1979)
- *Crossing to Safety* (1987)

### Collections

- *The Women On the Wall* (1950)
- *The City of the Living: And Other Stories* (1957)
- *Writer's Art: A Collection of Short Stories* (1972)
- [The American West as Living Space](#) (1987)<sup>[15]</sup>

- *Collected Stories of Wallace Stegner* (1990)
- *Late Harvest: Rural American Writing* (1996) (with [Bobbie Ann Mason](#))

## Chapbooks

- *Genesis: A Story from Wolf Willow* (1994)

## Nonfiction

- *Mormon Country* (1942)
- *One Nation* (Stegner and the editors of [Look](#) magazine) (1945), [Houghton Mifflin](#)
- *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian: [John Wesley Powell](#) and the Second Opening of the West* (1954)
- *Wolf Willow: A History, a Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier* ([autobiography](#)) (1955)
- *Wilderness Letter* (1960), "helped win passage of the [Wilderness Act](#) in 1964," per Utah Gov. Huntsman in 2009.<sup>[16]</sup> See also [Timeline of environmental events](#). Full text of letter at [The Wilderness Society Web site](#). Retrieved 2-24-09.
- *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (1964)
- *Teaching the Short Story* (1966)
- *The Sound of Mountain Water* (1969)
- [Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil](#) (1971)
- *Writer in America* (1982)
- *Conversations With Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature* (1983)
- *This Is Dinosaur: Echo Park Country And Its Magic Rivers* (1985)
- *American Places* (1985)
- *On the Teaching of Creative Writing* (1988)
- *The Uneasy Chair: A Biography of Bernard Devoto* (1989)
- *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs, 'Living and writing in the west'*, (autobiographical) (1992)

## Short Stories

- ["Bugle Song"](#) (1938)
- ["Chip Off the Old Block"](#) (1942)
- ["Hostage"](#) (1943)

## Awards

- 1937 [Little Brown](#) Prize for *Remembering Laughter*
- 1945 [Houghton-Mifflin](#) Life-in-America Award and the [Anisfield-Wolf Book Award](#) for *One Nation*<sup>[17]</sup>
- 1950-1951 [Rockefeller fellowship](#) to teach writers in the Far East<sup>[17]</sup>
- 1953 [Wenner-Gren Foundation](#) grant<sup>[17]</sup>
- 1956 [Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences](#) fellowship<sup>[17]</sup>
- 1967 [Commonwealth Club Medal](#) for *All the Little Live Things*

- 1972 [Pulitzer Prize for Fiction](#) for *Angle of Repose*
- 1976 [Commonwealth Club Medal](#) for *The Spectator Bird*
- 1977 [National Book Award](#) for *The Spectator Bird*
- 1980 [Los Angeles Times Kirsch award](#) for lifetime achievement
- 1990 [Center USA West award](#) for his body of work
- 1991 [California Arts Council](#) award for his body of work
- 1992 [National Endowment for the Arts](#) (refused)

Plus: Three [O. Henry Awards](#), twice a [Guggenheim Fellow](#) (1949 and 1959<sup>[17]</sup>), Senior Fellow of the National Institute of Humanities, member of National Institute and [American Academy of Arts and Letters](#), member [National Academy of Arts](#) and Sciences.

The *Encyclopedia of World Biography* reports that the Little Brown prize was for "\$2500, which at that time was a fortune. The book became a literary and financial success and helped gain Stegner [the] position ... at Harvard."<sup>[17]</sup>

## Notes

1. <sup>^</sup> Evelyn Boswell (2006-10-05). "[New Stegner professor to hit the ground running](#)". Montana State University News Service. <http://www.montana.edu/cpa/news/nwview.php?article=4110>. Retrieved 2007-09-09.
2. <sup>^</sup> Stegner, Wallace, "Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs" *Random House*, 1992, back cover.
3. <sup>^</sup> William H. Honan, "[Wallace Stegner Is Dead at 84; Pulitzer Prize-Winning Author.](#)" *New York Times*, April 15, 1993.
4. <sup>^</sup> [Wallace Stegner Biography](#). by James R. Hepworth *The Quiet Revolutionary*. Retrieved 2-24-09.
5. <sup>^</sup> "[Lynn Stegner Interview: Wallace Stegner Documentary](#)" John Howe, interviewer; [KUED-TV](#), n.d. Retrieved 2-19-09
6. <sup>^</sup> [Biography: Lynn Stegner University of Nebraska Press](#). Retrieved 2-19-09.
7. <sup>^</sup> "[The power of his pen - The Selected Letters of Wallace Stegner](#)" Review by Susan Salter Reynolds, *LA Times*, Nov. 18, 2007. Retrieved 3-12-09.
8. <sup>^</sup> "[Wallace Stegner Is Dead At 84; Pulitzer-Prize Winning Author.](#)" Honan, William H., *New York Times*, 15 April 1993, sec. B, p. 8. Link retrieved 2-19-09.
9. <sup>^</sup> [Mary Ellen Williams Walsh](#), 'Angle of Repose and the Writings of Mary Hallock Foote: A Source Study,' in *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*, edited by [Anthony Arthur](#), G. K. Hall & Co., 1982, pp. 184-209.
10. <sup>^</sup> "[A Classic, or A Fraud? Plagiarism allegations aimed at Stegner's Angle of Repose won't be put to rest](#)" by [Philip L. Fradkin](#), *Los Angeles Times*, 3 February 2008, sec. M, p. 8. Link upgraded 2-19-09.
11. <sup>^</sup> "[Stegner's Complaint](#)" by Timothy Egan, "Outpost" blog, *The New York Times*, Feb. 18, 2009 10:00 pm. Retrieved 2-19-09.
12. <sup>^</sup> [http://isotope.usu.edu/pages/issues/issue\\_7.1/trimble.html](http://isotope.usu.edu/pages/issues/issue_7.1/trimble.html) Retrieved 12-1-09.
13. <sup>^</sup> [stegner100.com](#) Stegner Centennial Utah Web site. Retrieved 2-24-09.
14. <sup>^</sup> [Stegner House Web site](#). Retrieved 2-24-09.
15. <sup>^</sup> Derives from a series of three [William W. Cook](#) Lectures delivered at the Law School of the [University of Michigan](#) in Ann Arbor on October 28,29 an 30, 1986. ISBN: 0-472-06375-8
16. <sup>^</sup> [stegner100.com](#) Stegner Centennial Utah Web site. Retrieved 2-24-09.



17. <sup>^</sup> [a b c d e f](#) "[Wallace Stegner](#)" Encyclopedia of World Biography. [Thomson Gale](#). 2004. Retrieved 2-24-09.

## References

- Topping, Gary. *Utah Historians and the Reconstruction of Western History*. 2003, [University of Oklahoma](#) Press, [Norman, Oklahoma](#). [ISBN 0-8061-3561-1](#)

## Further Reading

- 1982 *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*, edited by [Anthony Arthur](#), G. K. Hall & Co.
- 1983 *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature*, Wallace Stegner and [Richard Etulain](#), University of Utah Press, Salt Lake City
- 1984 *Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work* by [Jackson J. Benson](#)
- 1991 "A Perspective on Wallace Stegner" by Patricia Rowe Willrich ([Virginia Quarterly Review](#), Spring 1991, pp. 240–259)
- 1998 *Stealing Glances: Three Interviews with Wallace Stegner* by James R. Hepworth (Albuquerque: [University of New Mexico](#) Press, # ASIN: B0014JC0I6)
- 2007 "Wallace Stegner's Formative Years in Saskatchewan and Montana" by [Philip Fradkin](#) ("[Montana The Magazine of Western History](#)," Winter 2007, Vol. 57, No. 4, pages 3-19)
- 2007 "A Residual Frontier Town: Wallace Stegner's Salt Lake City," by Robert C. Steensma ("[Montana The Magazine of Western History](#)," Winter 2007, Vol. 57, No. 4, pages 20-23)
- 2007 *Wallace Stegner's Salt Lake City* by Robert C. Steensma, 224 p., University of Utah Press, [ISBN 0-87480-898-7](#), [ISBN 978-0-87480-898-8](#).
- 2008 *Wallace Stegner and the American West* by Philip L. Fradkin
- 2008 *The Selected Letters of Wallace Stegner* Page Stegner, ed., 480 p., [Counterpoint LLC](#)/Shoemaker & Hoard (publ.), [ISBN 1-58243-446-8](#), [ISBN 978-1-58243-446-9](#).