

Book review: *Collected Stories of Wallace Stegner*, by Wallace Stegner (Random House)

*San Francisco Chronicle Review of Books*

By Sarah Pollock

As is true with Wallace Stegner's novels, these stories cover the wide sweep of his life, from a homesteading childhood on the southern Saskatchewan prairie, to his youth in Salt Lake City, to adult life in suburban Northern California, where he settled in the Los Altos hills forty years ago. The result is an overlaying of characters and settings, sometimes with different names and details, but all etched clearly against a powerful landscape.

Many of the characters in these 31 stories are familiar, since Stegner later used similar versions as chapters in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, *Recapitulation*, and *Wolf Willow*. But part of the richness of this collection lies in its familiarity; it is possible, upon reading these stories, to gain a sense of the writer at work. Here we see characters and plots explored and tested, we see how the accretion of stories about Bruce and his parents led Stegner to write *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. We even get to read some stories that never made it into the novel, and consider why they might not have fit.

Stegner, who won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972 for *The Angle of Repose* and received the National Book Award in 1976 for *Spectator Bird*, has written 25 books, both fiction and non-fiction, in his half-century career. He also founded the creative writing program at Stanford University in 1946, where he taught students who would later become many of this century's top writers.

As a writer, he is deeply concerned with the relationship between landscape and identity. The West is depicted as "the brink," and the landscape is virtually a character, especially in the Saskatchewan stories, where it is a large, looming presence. Even in passing descriptions Stegner uses his sense of geography to powerful effect, as in "The Women on the Wall," a story about war wives waiting on the California coast. "The tides leaned in all the way from Iwo and Okinawa," and the Japan Current, "swinging in a great circle up under the Aleutians and back down the American coast, might as easily bear the mingled blood or the floating relics of a loved one lost as it could bear the glass balls of Japanese net-floats that it sometimes washed ashore."

Stegner's picture of the West is raw. The stories are threaded with the savagery that is companion to life on the frontier. Bruce, the boy of the stories that later would become *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, gets a certain pleasure out of watching his captive weasel devour a gopher tossed into its cage, wetting his lips as he listens to the "wild, agonized, despairing squeal" as the gopher faces its executioner. The image is all the more disturbing because of the violence the boy is subjected to by his father. Victim becomes victimizer. In another story, Bruce's sympathy for a sow about to be butchered turns to "a queer, violent hatred" when the rough scene makes him vomit and his shame at his own soft feelings turns him brutal.

Stegner eloquently depicts the deep-seated despair of a child whose parents are cruel, especially in the character of young Bruce, who can't match his father's machismo. In other stories the alienation is that of a perennial outsider, as with the first-time cowboy trying to keep up with old hands in a blizzard-plagued round-up, or an unhip tennis player who wants to identify with the bronzed youths of the court, but must acknowledge his likeness to the "impossible little Englishman" with whom no one wants to associate.

At the same time, there are hints of the novelist who will decades later write the meditative book, *Crossing to Safety*. This is a writer who is capable of making epiphanies out of the quietest experiences of love, as when the young husband home from war in "The Berry Patch" is fulfilled simply by the abundance of berries and the sun dappling the brown skin of his wife's throat as the wind bends the tops of the maples.

The stories in this collection were first published in the '30s, '40s and '50s, after which Stegner began putting his fiction into novels. Unfortunately, Stegner has chosen to let the stories fall as they were published. He writes that he thought the plan would better mark the traveler's route, but in such a large collection it is jarring to leap from homesteaders on the Saskatchewan plains, to retirees in suburban Northern California, to social workers in the Los Angeles barrio, and back again several times. The book would be more cohesive if all the Bruce stories were gathered in one place, all the Los Angeles stories were placed together, and so on. It also would be helpful if the stories were dated.

Nonetheless, the book is a welcome addition to the in-print works by this pillar of American literature. In the forward, Stegner asserts that short story writing is a young writer's form, "made for discoveries and nuances and epiphanies and superbly adapted for trial syntheses." One may disagree that such material is the purview of young writers only, but certainly the stories gathered here consistently engage, surprise and illuminate.

*Published 25 March 1990*