



Wallace Stegner | Notebook

The Spectator Bird (Paperback) (BR)

Crossing to Safety (Paperback) (BR)

Angle of Repose (Hardcover) (BR)

Angle of Repose (Paperback) (BR)

Opened this notebook on 010924. Currently reading *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, the title of which has thrown me off ... until I started reading. Bill Porter called it one of his favorites among one of his favorite author's work: "I am so pleased you're reading this Stegner novel and hope you enjoy it as much as I did." (Via text)

Photo below from [A.O. Scott's appreciation of Stegner](#) as one of the key influencers of writing about the American West.

Recapitulation (1979). Hardcover.

Recommended by Bill Porter on 021824. Completed 022424.

From Bill | I just finished reading Stegner's Recapitulation, which you know is a novel based on Bruce Mason's return to Salt Lake City 45 years after he left in desperation and disgrace following his father's murder/suicide. The ostensible purpose is for the burial of his aunt—his father's sister and Bruce's last relative. He could have arranged for the funeral without returning – he had no feelings for this aunt and indeed saw her as his longtime financial burden. It becomes clear that the visit is to confront his lingering memories of adolescence in Salt Lake City. It is an insightful story about the validity and fluidity of memory. It is also about how family, fears, hopes, friendships, failures, triumphs and adolescent dreams inform who we are and what we become. At the core are Bruce's recollections of his father (Bo) and coming to grips with the enduring hatred he felt for Bo. In the last chapter — at the burial of his aunt — Bruce says, "He felt like the puzzled son of a feckless father—boomer, schemer, self-deceiver, bootlegger, eventually murderer and suicide always burden, always enigma, always the harsh judge who must be appeased." Yet despite these feelings, Bruce reached in his return a form of reconciliation he had apparently sought for decades. It's typical Stegner — lyrical, thoughtful, a story that invokes one's own experiences and feelings and a tale that stays with you. I think you will find it worthwhile!

Notes

| ... he was used to waking with jobs on his mind. Mornings had always been his best time, his day-organizing time. His friends used to be amused at his little black book, in which he jotted down appointments, reminders, obligations, shopping lists, which, as soon as each item was taken care of, he inked out so blackly that they could not be read. He was a man, then said, indifferent to where he had been, interested only in where he was going. (237)

| Sight of his sweater and box beside his bed suggested to him that if he didn't have things to do, he could again be seduced into messing around in the past like a scavenger in a dump. For a man uninterested in where he had been, the broken newsreel his mind had played through the night was as disconcerting as a failed lie detector test. He got into the shower and washed it all away." (238) "Recapitulation" (definition): an act or instance of [summarizing](#) and [restating](#) the main points of something: "his recapitulation of the argument."

| And Joe? What about him? Was he going to call from the hotel? He knew he was not, almost before he asked himself the question. He had known all the time that he would not. However much Joe had meant, however warm and loyal it had been of Joe to try to reach through to him, it wouldn't do, it would only be a frustration and a disappointment. Whoever had lasted in Bruce Mason, it was not the young man who had once been best friend to

Joe Mulder, any more than it was the one who had traced his heart over

Nola Gordon. They would have nothing in common but that adolescence with its games and its love affairs and its sun-myth conviction of power and growth. (277)

Bill Porter's follow-up on 022424:

But here are two quick observations. I found Stegner's portrayal of Bruce's reluctance to reach out to Joe to ring true. I see in my own life failures like this—an unwillingness at times to keep alive meaningful friendships. So too, I find believable Bruce's failure to confront Bo about his father's many shortcomings—the things that so negatively affected their family's life. I think Stegner recognizes in his protagonist that it's much easier to espouse principles that one should follow than to live them! Stegner's exploration of human nature seems pretty accurate to me, and I like that he offers us a mirror into our lives.

Me: Agree on both counts. Joe Mulder is the "Waiting for Godot" character in this novel. I'm dying to meet him again, to see what he's like, if he's the same giving, welcoming character at this age as he was that day and afterwards on the tennis courts.

Bo's principles, as you call them, remind me of Stegner's The Spectator Bird: Bo is a watcher much more than a doer. He thinks of what he should or could have said and rarely reports what he did say or do. Remember that he complemented his smaller-than-normal with a threatening demeanor and language: "I will rip your head off," his way of warning away those who might threaten him.

The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Wallace Stegner (1943). Paperback.

Started 123123. Completed 010924.

Recommended by Bill Porter: "I found the story fascinating. My interest was enhanced after I learned that it was closely based on his own peripatetic childhood due to a ne'er-do-well father."

My response to Bill once I finished the book on 010924: "A.O. Scott makes this comment about Wallace Stegner's fiction: 'Wars and presidential administrations pass almost without mention, perhaps because, even in the post-frontier West, local matters of settlement and subsistence were likely to feel more pressing.' And it's so true. Finished *Big Rock* yesterday, and though I feel it was about 100 pp too long, it was emotionally eviscerating. He's a master at depicting a marriage in all of its complexity."

"Until finally they stopped, the horses blowing, the boy white and tearful and still, the father dangerous with unexpended wrath." (202) The second blow-up between Bo and Bruce, this time over failure for the car to start, ruining a promised 4th of July picnic with festivities 50 miles away. This is a big book, almost 600 pages.

[A.O. Scott](#): "Bo Mason, who turns up again in a cluster of short stories published in the 1950s, and then in [Recapitulation](#) (1979), a slender sequel to *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, is Stegner's greatest creation. And vice versa, to the extent that Bo is George Stegner. *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is the story of Wallace Stegner's childhood, during which he bounced around various Western spots — including Seattle, Salt Lake City and Montana as well as Eastend, Saskatchewan — propelled by his parents' rocky union and his father's seismic restlessness. Bo is the bad guy in these stories, a habitual braggart and a serial failure destined for a fate more tawdry than tragic, but like many literary villains he also has a vividness, an energy that makes him a source of intense fascination."

By Ch 8 (435), we see Bruce as a law student who wants to write the story of his family. It's almost as though he's summarizing what we've read to set up what's to come. Some great lines: "I ain't got enough stren'th left to pull my tongue out of the sugar barrel " (125)

"Until finally they stopped, the horses blowing, the boy white and tearful and still, the father dangerous with unexpended wrath." (202)

"Her mother might have stayed and borne it and made some kind of triumph out of it, but when you were 18 you didn't know what you knew when you were 32, and because you were 18 and proud and blind and full of high notions you ran away like a coward and called it the only decent thing to do." (234)

"You had to stay in a place to make it a home. A home had to be believed in every day, every month, every year for a long time, till it was worn like an old shoeing fitted the comfortable curvatures of your life." (236)

"She didn't want much. Yet it seemed to her sometimes as if life had conspired to keep from her exactly that one thing that she desired, and as if her husband and her children, who were the single indispensable part of her day-dreams, should be the ones to destroy what she had been working for." (324)

When they see Socks' carcass by the side of the road, Elsa reflects:
"Wherever you go, Elsa was thinking, whenever you move and go away, you leave a death behind." (332)

Later, true of Chet. But Elsa wants to return to Salt Lake City and Chet's grave. Laura asks, "What does [your father] do, Chet? You never told me anything about your family." (395)

Bruce calls the way they live "psycho-isolation." (429) "Chet, she said [to herself], why did you let it hit you so hard? You were strong enough to bear burdens and strains and fatigue. Why weren't you strong enough to bear shame?" (429)

"He was always becoming something, always changing, always continuous and moving, like the wiggly line on a machine used to measure earthquake shocks. He was always what he was in the beginning, but never quite exactly what he was; he moved along a line dictated by his heritage and environment, but he was subject to every sort of variation within the narrow limits of his capabilities." (432)

Finally, Harry "Bo" Mason shoots his last girlfriend and then himself. "He had a knack for versifying and story-telling ... all of that coming to its climax with a neat and workmanlike job of murder and suicide." (556) "He was a man who never knew himself, who was never satisfied, who was born disliking the present and believing in the future...." (560) "As it was, he saw near at hand two people who had wronged and betrayed and disgraced him, and as his last act he killed them both." (561) "Harry Mason lived with the woman who was my mother, and whom I honor for her kindness and gentleness and courage and wisdom. But I tell you at his funeral, and in spite of the hatred I have had for him for many years, that he was more talented and more versatile and more energetic than she. Refine her qualities and you would get saintliness, but never greatness. His qualities were the raw material for a notable man. Though I have hated him, and though I neither honor nor respect him now, I can not deny him that." (562)

Crossing to Safety, Wallace Stegner. Paperback.

Rereading start 061323. Completed 062023. Previous readings in June 2020, then September of 2022. Sid and Charity Lang; Sally and Larry Morgan. "I didn't know myself well, and still don't. But I did know, and know now, the few people I loved and trusted. My feeling for them is one part of me I have never quarreled with, even though my relations with them have more than once been abrasive." (12) Chapter 6 (61-95) is his recreating, using what he's been told and a heavy dose of imagination, the fateful meeting Sid had with Charity's family

Marvelous. Italy trip: 240 and ff. **"There it was, there it is, the place where during the best time of our lives friendship had its home and happiness its headquarters."** (6)

Though I have been busy, perhaps overbusy, all my life, it seems to me now that I have accomplished little that matters, that the books have never come up to what was in my head, and that the rewards — the comfortable income, the public notice, the literary prizes, and the honorary degrees — have been tinsel, not what a grown man should be content with." (11)

"And so, by circuitous and unpredictable routes, we converge toward mid-continent and meet in Madison, and are at once drawn together, braided and plaited into a friendship. It is a relationship that has no formal shape, there are no rules or obligations or bonds as in marriage or the family, it is held together by neither law nor property nor blood, there is no glue in it but mutual liking. It is therefore rare." (96) |

"As for repaying," she said to me in rebuke, "friends don't have to repay anything. **Friendship is the most selfish thing there is.**" (140) "Though I had worked among people who traveled constantly, dispersing America throughout the postwar world, we had not been able to travel ourselves." (254)

"If we could have foreseen the future during those good days in Madison where all this began, we might not have had the nerve to venture into it. I find myself wondering whatever happened to the people, friends and otherwise, with whom we started out. Whatever happened to poor Mr. Hagler, who had only his salary? Whatever happened to Marvin and Wanda Ehrlich, and the Abbots, and the Stones? How much would they understand, from their own experience, of what has happened to *us*? / I hope they have done more than survive. I hope they have found ways to impose some sort of order on their chaos. I hope they have found enough pleasure along the way so that they don't want it ended, as Sid may right now be trying to persuade himself he does." (326)

The Spectator Bird
Angle of Repose
Mormon Country

