

# “A Careful Rectangle”: The Spiritual Journey of

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Wallace Stegner, Utah’s favorite literary son, has become many things to many people: beatified and almost canonized by the environmentalists, adored as one of the West’s finest fiction writers, and, on the other hand, wrongly vilified as a racist by a recent essayist (Cook-Lynn 29–40 *passim*). No matter from what perspective one views the man and his work, most would agree with Jackson J. Benson: “By giving so much of himself, risking so much of himself, he bound his readers to him, and it is this quality, above all, that will lead to a wider recognition of his greatness of spirit” (421).

All of Stegner’s novels, from *Remembering Laughter*, written and published in 1937, when he was teaching at the University of Utah, to his last, *Crossing to Safety*, appearing in 1987, just six years before his death, in one way or another deal with the human spirit. Of course, Stegner was not a religious novelist in the same way as was his English contemporary Graham Greene, who in a number of novels treats the ambiguous impact of Roman Catholicism on individual souls. He did not see himself as a preacher in fiction. In his essay “The Law of Nature and the Dream of Man: Ruminations on the Art of Fiction” he wrote:

I have never been driven to thump what Mencken called the booboisie, or foam in rage at the middlebrows, or speak in thunder on this morning's headlines. Not in fiction. Fiction is too important to be abused that way. In fiction I think we should have no agenda except to try to be truthful. The shouters in thunder roar from their podiums and pulpits; I squeak from my corner. They speak to the deaf, but it takes good ears to hear me, for I want to be part of the common sound, a not-too-dominating element of the ambient noise. (222)

Yet Stegner did not hesitate to speak out in nonfiction on morality, as he did in his famous essay "Born a Square," published in 1964:

I am pretty sure that some part of our most advertised recent fiction is sick, out of its mind, and out of the moral world, worshipful of Moloch, in love with decay and death. Another part is simply the corrupt answer to a corrupt demand, which is in turn cynically promoted. I do not mean "dirty" words or forthright scenes, sexual or otherwise; I speak of a necrophiliac playing with despair, which is nothing to be played with. (180)

Although Stegner was involved little with organized religion after his boyhood in Saskatchewan (where he may have attended a Presbyterian Sunday School), in Salt Lake City he was a member of the Boy Scouts, first at a Latter-day Saint ward and later at an Episcopal parish. Having lived in Salt Lake City during his formative years and later having taught at the University of Utah, Stegner takes a very objective view of the Mormons. As he told Richard Etulain,

I suppose I have always made a distinction in my mind between the faith I can't accept and the people whom I like as well as anybody. Nevertheless, I'm sure that if I went to a door in Utah, I would get as warm a welcome as I would anywhere in the world. If I needed a crust of bread, it would probably be forthcoming. They'd probably sit me down and let me join a family home evening and we'd end with prayer. I'd be singing with the children before the evening was over. (Stegner and Etulain 117-18)

His two studies about the dominant religion in Utah, *Mormon Country* (1942) and *The Gathering of Zion: The Story of the Mormon Trail* (1964), have become classics. Finally, his discussions with Etulain, *Conversations with Wallace Stegner*, particularly Chapter 6, “On the Mormons,” are pertinent for understanding his attitudes toward religion. He also had a seriocomic experience with organized religion in 1934, when he took a part-time teaching job—teaching four classes!—at Augustana College, a Lutheran school in Rock Island, Illinois. As he informed Benson, “At Augustana I lived in the theological seminary among people training to be Lutheran preachers, and on Thursday evening, when my classes were over, I escaped to Iowa City for a three-day weekend of reading for my Ph.D. exams” (Benson 58). But he soon left Augustana, he explained to Etulain,

when a big fight broke out between the Evangelicals who had hired me and the Fundamentalists who thought dangerous latitudinarian standards were being followed. I was, in effect, being fired for being one, an atheist, two, an agnostic, three, an unbeliever in the principles of Christian higher education, and four, a non-believer in the Augsburg Confession. Since I didn’t see how I could be an atheist and agnostic at the same time, and had never read the Augsburg Confession, and had not had the principles of Christian higher education explained to me, I was a sitting duck. (13)

Still, in his fiction Stegner pays little attention to religion or religious people. Two rather shadowy clergymen deliver conventional sermons at the funerals of Bo Mason and Aunt Margaret. In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943) the minister who says “the few ritual words” over Bo, a man he does not know, is obviously ill at ease and speaks trite words of consolation (560), while in *Recapitulation* (1979) the “funeral parlor’s all-purpose preacher” in the rain-soaked Salt Lake City Cemetery describes Margaret in such “unfelt and not very appropriate words” that Bruce cannot recognize “the stubborn and demanding old woman” in them. The short, hasty service ends almost comically

as the pastor rushes through Psalm 23 during a cloudburst and then helps the hearse driver and an assistant as Aunt Margaret is “cranked into the ground, as if to get her to shelter before the deluge” (272–73). The only significant person of the cloth in Stegner’s fiction is Gus Lund, the social activist and missionary to the seamen in *Joe Hill* (1950). Lund befriends Hill at the Scandinavian Seamen’s Mission in San Pedro, California, exchanges letters with him, supports him during his murder trial and appeals, contributes to his defense fund, counsels him as he sits on death row in the old prison in what is now Sugar House Park in Salt Lake City, and witnesses his execution. Stegner describes him as a “John the Baptist with a hard mouth, a low-born Maccabeus, an inarticulate Paul, a dark Christ migrant for his gospel’s sake” (189).

Despite paying scant attention to clergymen, Stegner is nevertheless concerned with that aspect of human experience that transcends the physical. As James R. Hepworth notes in his essay “Wallace Stegner: The Quiet Revolutionary,” Stegner’s characters

do not challenge or defy the universe, much less despair of it. They do confront its mystery, suffer spiritual uncertainties and embarrassments, attempt reconciliations, and reconstruct values commonly forgotten, lost, or repudiated. They move by trial and error toward dubious ends, but then that is the law of nature. Their Dreams are all American dreams: not of something for nothing, but of a chance at life, safety, home, and belonging. Their questions arise from anguish and spiritual uncertainty, for they seek to impose order on their lives, to give themselves and others meaning, purpose, direction. (25–26)

At various times Stegner’s major characters share the feeling of Joe Allston as he tells Ruth at the end of “A Field Guide to Western Birds,” “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” (359), but they sometimes reach the kind of affirmation Leonard McDonald does in *A Shooting Star* (1961):

“I’ll tell you what I believe in. I believe in human love and human kindness and human responsibility, and that’s just about all I believe in. . . . The only revolution that interests me is one that will give more people more comprehension of their human possibilities and their human obligations.” (384–85)

Bruce Mason’s movement through the tortured experiences of his childhood and adolescence to a measured and mature acceptance of himself and his family history should be viewed as the spiritual journey in both *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Recapitulation*. As a young man and as a retiree, Bruce attempts to find meaning in and bring closure to his troubling memories of his family. These novels cover a period in the life of the Mason family from Christmas Eve, 1904, when Elsa takes the train from her Minnesota home to live with her uncle in Hardanger, North Dakota, to May 1977, when Bruce returns to Salt Lake City to bury his aunt, Margaret Webb, dead at eighty-six. Stegner traces Bruce’s difficult life from his birth through his retirement. Struggling first with his dysfunctional family and later with his memories of it, he is able at the end of *Recapitulation* to achieve a sort of spiritual peace that most of Stegner’s major characters do not. Or, to put it in terms of Stegner’s Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Mason seems to find an “angle of repose” in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* which Lyman Ward, Larry Morgan, Sid Lang, and Joe Allston are still seeking at the end of their stories.

In his youth, Bruce is caught between an opportunistic and abusive father who believed that there was

somewhere, if you knew where to find it, some place where money could be made like drawing water from a well, some Big Rock Candy Mountain where life was effortless and rich and unrestricted and full of adventure and action, where something could be had for nothing (Big 83)

and a mother who wants nothing more than the security of marriage, home, family, and friends: “But I know what I want. . . . I want a

place of my own where I can sit down and everything there is mine and everything I do means something" (57). Bruce struggles against the criminality of his father and his pack of cheap crooks; the boy sees his father's cruelty in the episodes of the rabbits, the Christmas package, and the sparrow, but most notably when Bo rubs the boy's face in his own feces. Bruce's antipathy is heightened when his mother dies of breast cancer and his father takes a mistress, kills her, and commits suicide in a Salt Lake hotel room. As he stands over his father's open coffin at the end of the funeral, he is desperate for spiritual peace:

he could feel no grief for his father, nor for his mother and brother whose graves were grassy beside the new raw hole at the cemetery. . . . His past was upon him, the feeling he had had two or three times that he bore his whole family's history in his own mind. (562-63)

He recalls that when Bo killed the gopher-gorged snake, "the feeling he had then was like the feeling he had now: it was a good thing to have been along and seen, a thing to be remembered and told about, a thing that he and his father shared" (563). As the novel ends, Bruce is still trying to find some sort of resolution:

Perhaps that was what it meant, all of it. It was good to have been along and to have shared it. There were things he had learned that could not be taken away from him. Perhaps it took several generations to make a man, perhaps it took several combinations and re-creations of his mother's gentleness and resilience, his father's enormous energy and appetite for the new, a subtle blending of masculine and feminine, selfish and selfless, stubborn and yielding, before a proper man could be fashioned.

He was the only one left to fulfill that contract and try to justify the labor and harshness and the mistakes of his parents' lives, and that responsibility was so clearly his, was so great an obligation, that it made unreal the sight of the motley collection of pallbearers staggering under the weight of his father's body, and the

back door of the hearse closing quietly upon the casket and the flowers. (563)

But during the forty to fifty years that pass between the two novels Bruce failed to find spiritual peace. There, for example, is no indication that he married or had children; instead he immersed himself in a diplomatic career. Indeed, his experience with Nola during his years at the University of Utah seems to have scarred him badly as far as women are concerned. His only emotional attachment occurred in Beirut, where in “the soft November Mediterranean sun he was talking to someone, someone female and sympathetic, who pursed the mouth he might later kiss, and half dropped the lids that he might later kiss shut, and said with pity and disbelief, ‘But you had to hitch-hike out of your childhood! You could so easily have been lost’” (*Recapitulation* 86).

Though *Recapitulation* moves on two levels—Bruce making arrangements for his aunt’s funeral and moving about the much-changed city of his youth, and Bruce reliving many of the experiences, most of them painful, that have made him what he is—the latter both overshadows and allows the completion of the former. Bruce notices changes that have taken place in downtown Salt Lake, remembers his experiences at East High School and the University of Utah, recalls his youthful love affair with Nola, reminisces about playing tennis and his work at Saltair, and touches in his memory on the troubles of his dysfunctional family. But all the while, he is a double person:

Inside him, moving with the same muscles and feeling with the same nerves and sweating through the same pores, went a thin brown youth, volatile, impulsive, never at rest, not so much a person as a possibility, or a bundle of possibilities, subject to enthusiasm and elation and exuberance and occasional great black moods, stubborn, capable of scheming but often astonished by consequences, a boy vulnerable to wonder, awe, worship, devotion, hatred, guilt, vanity, shame, ambition, dreams, treachery; a boy avid for acceptance and distinction, secretive and a blabbermouth, life-crazy and hence girl-crazy, a show-off who could be

withered by a contemptuous word or look, a creature overflowing with brash self-confidence one minute and oppressed by its own worthlessness the next; a vessel of primary sensations undiluted by experience, wisdom, or fatigue. (Recapitulation 19)

Most of all, Bruce thinks of his relationship with his two closest friends, Jack Bailey and Joe Mulder, who once represented different moral directions for the young Bruce. Bailey was a failed Mormon missionary sent home for immoral behavior, a young man who alternately fascinated and repelled Bruce with spicy stories of superhuman sexual prowess and supposed knowledge of sex. Looking back at the game of strip poker he played at Alta with Bailey, Nola, and Muriel, and thinking of the difference between 1930 and 1977, “Mason tries to remind himself that this is Utah, 1930, long before *Playboy*, skin flicks, and the porno revolution made the female body as exciting as a meat market and sex as momentous as blowing your nose” (217–18). Looking back, Bruce sees Bailey as having been “unpleasant and troubling. . . . Personal grievance? Injured vanity? Or was he troubled by Bailey, because, hateful as he once was, he demonstrated the attractiveness of amorality and self-indulgence and irresponsibility?” (81). Joe Mulder, on the other hand, represented all that Mason did not have in his own home. The “respectable sobriety of the Mulders” gave him a model for the good life:

Everything they represented—the family, community, responsibility, good citizenship, ethics—drew him as milking time draws a barn cat. From the time when Joe first brought him home after a tennis match, all through the years when he worked in J. J.’s [Joe’s father] as handyman, delivery boy and salesman, J. J. had to be respected as what Bruce thought a father should be, and his home as what a real home was. . . . Jack Mormons, the Mulders did not tithe, or go to meeting, but they kept the strenuous Mormon sense of stewardship. Having talents, one improved them. Having money or position, one tried to use it for the public good. Once

Bruce had caught on to those attitudes, he had only one way to go. (108-09)

Thus, his recollection of his past helps Bruce at last find the peace which he has spent a lifetime looking for. Having left Salt Lake City behind him at the end of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and having made sense of his life in his movement through past and present in *Recapitulation*, Bruce finally arrives at a kind of spiritual peace. In the cemetery, he orders markers for both his aunt and his father and decides not to call Joe Mulder. As he drives back to the Hotel Utah, having both laid to rest the last member of his family and exorcised the ghosts and traumas of his past, he can now blacken out another of those rectangles in the daybook he uses to remind himself of things to be done:

As he drove down to the hotel and turned his car over to the youth in the glass office he was busy in his head with one final check-off. Around Bruce Mason, as he once was, around the thin brown hyperactive youth who had so long usurped space in his mind and been a pretender to his feelings, he drew a careful rectangle, and all the way on the elevator to pack his bag he was inking it out. (278)

Bruce will not return again to Salt Lake City and his past. He has found spiritual peace. No longer will he have to draw and fill "a careful rectangle." Of course, Bruce Mason is not alone in Stegner's diction, for he often draws characters who are spiritually adrift in a world of values they neither understand nor share. The careful reader sees that Bruce's struggle during his spiritual journey parallels those of Joe Allston in *All the Little Live Things* (1967) and *The Spectator Bird* (1976), two generations of Wards in *Angle of Repose* (1971), Sabrina Castro in *A Shooting Star* (1961), and the Langs and the Morgans in *Crossing to Safety*. Overtly religious Stegner may not have been, but concerned with spiritual comfort he definitely was.

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