

Critical Paper on Crossing to Safety Time for Wallace Stegner: High Time

By Patricia Moore Smith and Kent Smith

Even though Wallace Stegner has been hailed as the "Dean of American Literature," we would propose that his life's work might earn him a place among the ranks of the best American authors.

Let's consider together our chosen novel *Crossing to Safety*, which represents the culmination of his work as his last novel.

The concept of Time has been the focus of many of Stegner's writings. The title, *Crossing to Safety*, takes its meaning from his friend Robert Frost's poem, "I Could Give All to Time." This opening epigraph from Frost's poem sets the stage for his novel's story:

*I could give all to time except – except
What I myself have held. But why declare
The things forbidden that while the Customs slept
I have crossed to Safety with? For I am There
And what I would not part with I have kept.*

Stegner's novel extols the virtues of not parting with what one would smuggle to the other side. Most notably, these include memories (both heartwarming and difficult); the company, quiet loyalty, and solace of true friends; and the sustaining power of marital love. Channeling Robert Frost, Stegner creates a novel infused with poetry's quiet grace, subtle insights, and portrayals of nature.

Stegner chronicles the journey of "Crossing to Safety" with a focus on time, making masterful use of flashback techniques. He stated that many of his novels are indeed "about Time. . .about people who live through time." Each page of this novel glows with details that progress with a gratitude for the time that we are given.

The novel is narrated in the first-person voice of Larry Morgan, a creative writing professor and novelist. He mirrors many autobiographical aspects of Wallace Stegner's own life.

Crossing to Safety moves back and forth in the middle of the 20th Century, from 1937 to 1972. The reader is given a series of flash-backs that occur over the course of a single day late in Morgan's life when Larry and his polio-crippled wife Sally return, after many years, to the Lang family compound in Vermont, summoned to return for a farewell picnic arranged by Charity Lang, who is dying from cancer.

The opening chapter immerses us in the natural beauty of Vermont in the early morning:

No one is up in the Lang compound. No lights through the trees, no smell of kindling smoke in the air. I go out the spongy woods path past the woodshed and into the road, and there I meet the sky, faintly brightening in the east, and the morning star as steady as a lamp. Down under the hemlocks I thought it overcast, but out here I see the bowl of the sky pale and spotless.

My feet take me up...the narrow dirt road that climbs around the hill to the right. John Wrightman, whose cottage sits at the end of it, died fifteen years ago. He will not be up to protest my walking in his ruts.

As an aside, this passage reminded me of Robert Frost's poem *Stopping by the Woods on a Snowy Evening*... "He will not mind me stopping here to watch his woods fill up with snow..."

Stegner continues: "It is a road I have walked hundreds of times, a lovely lost tunnel through the trees, busy this morning with birds and little shy rustling things, my favorite road anywhere."

As his readers, we can remember our own favorite roads.

Stegner strolls on: "Dew has soaked everything. I could wash my hands in the ferns, and when I pick a leaf off a maple branch I get a shower on my head and shoulders. Through the hardwoods along the foot of the hill, through the belt of cedars where the ground is swampy with springs, through the spruce and

balsam of the steep pitch, I go alertly, feasting my eyes. I see coon tracks, an adult and two young, in the mud, and maturing grasses bent like croquet wickets with wet and spotted orange Amanitas...There are brown caves of shelter, mouse and hare country, under the wide skirts of spruce." (5)

Larry Morgan's memories cover the decades of a four-way friendship between these two couples: Larry and Sally Morgan, and Sid and Charity Lang. The latter couple are wealthy, have a large family and a strong sense of their place in the world, linked as they are to the Transcendentalist tradition of the Entitled American East Coast. By contrast, the Morgans are poor, from undistinguished, almost anonymous backgrounds with no intellectual or spiritual history behind them. The Morgans were young, struggling, and happy. "In a way, it is beautiful to be young and hard up. With the right wife, and I had her, deprivation became a game," (16) Larry Morgan says.

It is however the shared ideals of writing, literature as well as care and faith with those who count, that brings this unlikely alliance together and carries them through the years of reckoning and disappointment.

Initially set during the Depression and post-Depression years in the chilly town of Wisconsin, Madison, we see Larry Morgan struggle to find work in the liberal arts academy while he toils on his first novel in the tiny one-bedroom basement apartment. He does all he can to secure another year of teaching, as Sally is expecting a baby. Fortuitously, they meet Sid and Charity Lang, who immediately take to them and leaven their days with the occasional dinner party, recorded music, and crucial contacts. The apparently idyllic marriage of Sid and Charity, however, is fissured by Charity's hard-nosed realism about the necessity of Sid's getting tenure if they are to secure for themselves the niche she wants in the academic community. Sid, by contrast, independently wealthy, wants to retire from the hustle of academic careerism to write poetry. Charity is impatient with Sid's contemplative temperament: "Poetry ought to be a by-product of living, and you can't have a by-product unless you've had a product *first*. It's *immoral* not to get in the work and get your hands dirty" (85). And so the game is set for the two, mirroring fates of the two couples to play out: the poorer Morgan, having no particular expectations for tenure eventually gets it and becomes a successful novelist, while Lang, born to an East-Coast ease with College towns and their politics, spends his life grinding out uninspired academic articles and allowing his poetic talents to wither while he chases tenure to please his wife.

Charity is the novel's fulcrum. She is a strong "take-charge " woman whose sense of how things should be done extends to the orbit of all around her. Larry says of her, "With Charity it was organization, order, action, assistance to the uncertain and direction to the wavering." On the other hand, Charity is portrayed as essential to Sid's solidity as a person, the backbone and driving force behind their shared life. And for their part, as the years pass, the Morgan's luck is fractured by illness and disability as Sally battles polio, which cripples her body, but not her spirit.

Stegner set himself a difficult task when he set out to write this novel. In the voice of his narrator, he offers the reader a reflection on the problem of writing about undramatic characters: "How do you make a book that anyone will read out of lives as quiet as these? Where are the things that novelists seize upon and readers expect? Where is the high life, the conspicuous waste, the violence, the kinky sex, the death wish?...Where are speed, noise, ugliness, everything that makes us who we are and recognize ourselves in fiction?" (231).

Stegner's success with this novel lies in the absence of sensational subject matter. The novel examines the question of what elements seem to have made the couples' lives not only worth living, but happy and almost fulfilled.

The universal, timeless question Morgan poses to himself and us is: why are we who we are? In response to this query, Stegner reveals, in his novel, quiet lives with a sense of the mystery of character and an ethic of love, family, friendship and marriage. The pain and suffering undergone by each couple, in different ways, serve to strengthen the couples' bonds to their spouses as well as to each other. Stegner's alterego narrator Larry Morgan recognizes that the affliction of a loved one (his wife Sally) can be a rueful blessing that has made her more than she was; "it has let her give me more than she would ever have been able to give me healthy; it has taught me at least the alphabet of gratitude." (326) He also develops the capacity to care for Sally, in return.

The result is a steady hymn to life lived not to a formula, but at times as a "desperate improvisation" with "every detail of that long improvisation [having] tightened the bonds that hold us together" (325).

Tempus fugit. So I would like to close with a letter that further reveals Stegner's graceful, gentle appreciation of nature and simple pleasures. He

concludes with his novel's characters' watch words, revealing their indomitable human spirit.

Wallace Stegner wrote in his twilight years to T. H. Watkins from Greensboro, VT, Sept 5, 1989:

Now that Labor Day has passed and the hordes of weekenders have departed, silence begins to fall on these woods, and as silence falls, little flames of red and yellow begin to lick up out of the green. A couple of cold nights like last night and we will be living in the middle of something like the Yellowstone fires--all happily unfought....We walk a couple of gentle miles a day, and I have built a railing on the porch of my workshack/thinkhouse so that I won't fall off and break something, and I write little ruminations and introductions and feel autumnal but not bad. They might have killed us, but they ain't whupped us.