

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor Interview Wallace Stegner Documentary

Interviewer-John Howe

Justice O'Connor let's start out by talking about Wallace Stegner. He's reported to be your favorite author, tell me if that's true and why.

Justice O'Connor:

Wallace Stegner for a long time has been my favorite American author. Probably because he grew up in the West of the United States, he wrote about the West, he defined it in ways that no other prominent author has defined it and I could relate to the things that he said and thought about the West. In addition, I took a class from him when I was an undergraduate student at Stanford, a creative writing class. That was a great experience to be able to do that. I majored in Economics, a pretty dry subject but I was privileged to take a few classes as an undergraduate student in other fields and one that I very much wanted to take was a class from Wallace Stegner. I don't think I was a star in that class actually. What he did was to have the students in the class, which wasn't large, write something each week and he preferred that we write things connected to our own personal experiences. Those papers would then be shared with other members in the class and people would read them and make critical comments about them, as would he, and we would proceed in that fashion hoping to learn by doing. I became a student at Stanford in 1946, starting in the fall of that year. Now that was at the immediate end of World War II and many of the students at Stanford in those days were young men who had served in the military during World War II, they then had the GI Bill, they were coming back and many of them had life and death experiences during that war and they wanted to come back, they wanted to study something, get a degree, get married, get out in the real

world and start making a living. My classmates in the Creative Writing class were primarily young men who had served in the military; some of them had life and death experiences in the war. I thought that what they had to write about was much more meaningful than what I had to write about, which was growing up on a cattle ranch in Arizona and New Mexico, in a remote area. But anyway, that was the class and I was privileged to have it from an author that I admired so much.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do you see any parallels between Stegner's background growing up on a small homestead in Eastend Canada and your background on the Lazy B?

Justice O'Connor:

There are parallels in some of what Stegner experienced as a youngster. He grew up part of the time in a little town in Saskatchewan in Canada and later he spent time I think in Salt Lake City and in an area in Montana and I lived on the Lazy B Ranch in a remote area. It was in the old Gadsden Purchase area that we made from Mexico in southern Arizona and southern New Mexico. The ranch was in those states, the house was physically in Arizona but it was very remote and Wallace Stegner used to describe what life was like in a semi-arid western region where the sky was open and endless and you watched the clouds and where water – every drop of it mattered. And certainly in my youth what we thought about every single day was water. Where were we going to get it? When would it rain? Were those clouds forming on the horizon going to shape up and provide a little rain? And that is what we hoped for and prayed for and lived for because without enough rain to produce the grass we couldn't grow the cattle and we couldn't pay the debts we had to pay and it was an existence that was very much dependent on nature. That was what Wallace Stegner experienced and what he wrote about so poignantly, I thought. He knew the great spaces of the West where the sky came down to meet the horizon and where at night you'd look up at the sky and it was so clear, there was no pollution

of course, and you felt like you could actually reach up and touch some of the stars in the Milky Way that were overhead. It was incredible. So I did feel that we shared some of the same experiences of being in a remote area. He was in a little tiny town and we weren't in any town but we had to go to town once a week to get groceries and the mail and supplies.

Interviewer-John Howe

What kind of teacher was he at Stanford in your class?

Justice O'Connor:

I don't know how to answer that. His technique in the Creative Writing class was not to tell us what to write but to require us to write something each week based on our own life experiences and then just share it with other class members and with him and he hoped to teach us in that way. I don't know how effective it was, I've never written fiction. I've had to do a lot of writing in my life but it's been writing opinions, court opinions, not history and not fiction so it's hard for me to assess that. I enjoyed the class but it's hard for me to say what kind of a teacher he was. I took no other writing classes from anyone else.

Interviewer-John Howe

How would you describe him as a person? How would you describe his character and his demeanor at least in the way that you knew him?

Justice O'Connor:

I knew him only in the position of a student in a class that he was teaching. He was an attractive man. He didn't seem to have particular care for his appearance; he was casual in his appearances before the class. He was hardly someone to come in a coat and tie. His appearance was casual. He was very direct. He wanted us to do as I described, write something and then he would

comment on it. That's what I saw of him and so what I know about him I know more from the things I've read than from my experiences in class.

Interviewer-John Howe

Describe Stanford of that era. What was Stanford like during your time there?

Justice O'Connor:

It was like other fine universities in 1946. It was full of students who had served, men who had served in the military during World War II and they were very serious students, they were back (many of them) from life changing experiences in the military and they were serious about being students. They weren't frivolous. They weren't the young people you would see today. They were not young men of my age at all, they were older and so the atmosphere around the school probably was a little more serious than it might be before or after that era.

Interviewer-John Howe

Describe some of your favorite books by Wallace Stegner and why they are your favorites. For example, your Supreme Court office reportedly had a number of Stegner books, talk about that a little bit and why you like them.

Justice O'Connor:

I really like everything that I've read that he wrote and I haven't read all of what he wrote. I think the first one I read was *Angle of Repose*. I just thought he captured people so well and he wrote in ways that had people talking to each other and yet shaped their characters and got you into the story and got you interested. He was very impressive, I thought, in his writing. I read a book called, (I think) *Wolf Willow* which was based more on his experiences in Saskatchewan and I thought they were very poignant, some of the things that happened there where he did deal with the arid nature of the region and the harsh weather conditions and what it did when you were living out away from

town. I thought it was a marvelous book. So all the things that I read that he wrote I enjoyed and maybe in my retirement years I'll be able to fill in gaps and read more of his works.

Interviewer-John Howe

Wallace Stegner writes about a very realistic West as apposed to a mythic West. What's your opinion of the West that he wrote about and why does it mean so much to you?

Justice O'Connor:

Wallace Stegner wrote about the West particularly focusing on (at least in some of the writing) on very remote regions, life in very tiny little towns or out away from town all together and he wrote about Utah. He lived for a time in Salt Lake City. Stegner and his family were not Mormons but the Mormon people living in the Salt Lake City area accepted him in their community and made him part of their sport teams and recreational programs and he felt very comfortable in Salt Lake City. He went to the University of Utah and got his education there and felt very comfortable. He later wrote about some of the history of the West. About John Wesley Powell, he wrote about some of the history of the Mormons in Utah and so much of what he wrote about reflected the region and its geography, its history, its people and he did it well and that's the life that I understand and know about that meant so much to me growing up. The West and its more arid regions and people trying to eke out a living from the land, the plants, the animals, the sky, the life in that region – I thought he captured it. It spoke to me.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think Wallace Stegner's writing influence has been on you?

Justice O'Connor:

Oh that's hard to say. He reflected in his writing some of the experiences that I observed myself and so in a sense he recognized what I had recognized but not in the beautiful language that he used.

Interviewer-John Howe

How would you describe the legacy of Wallace Stegner?

Justice O'Connor:

Wallace Stegner in his writing, he defined the West. Now there is a Center of Western Studies at the University of Colorado. There is going to be a Center for Western Studies at Stanford where Wallace Stegner taught for some years and lived. Wallace Stegner at the end of his life was very disillusioned with how the West had allowed development to overtake its natural beauties and its natural bounty in favor of development. He became rather bitter over that, I think, certainly in the bay area around Stanford he did and I can understand that. But he defined what came before.

Interviewer-John Howe

Stegner has a quote "there's something about living in big empty space where people are few and distant under a great sky" that you have quoted. What does that quote mean to you?

Justice O'Connor:

In my own writing about the court and about growing up on a ranch in Arizona and New Mexico, one of the quotes that I used was from Stegner. He said "there is something about living in big empty space where people are few and distant under a great sky that steadily tells you not only who you are but what you are" and I thought that he captured something in that statement because what I remember most about living out on the Lazy B Ranch, where I grew up was the great sky and how we watched it both day and night and hoped and prayed for

rain and how it made you feel very small to be out there in that huge area under that enormous sky. It's not like being in New York City where what you see around you are the tall buildings, you never see the sky and all its glory, you see buildings and it's quite the reverse out in the West in remote areas where what you see is this enormous heaven and what a small place mankind has in that space. But you hope that what you see also lets you exist and be yourself despite the small speck that you are in the overall scheme of things.