

Thomas McGuane Interview Wallace Stegner Documentary

Interviewer-John Howe

How do you evaluate Wallace Stegner as a novelist and a writer of nonfiction?
What do you think his legacy is?

Thomas McGuane

I think the core of it will be *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* because that was where he articulated his environmental views most accurately. I mean, he used Powell and his sort of watershed theories of development in the West as an idealistic model for what should happen--what didn't happen and what should have happened, and what we should be retreating to, so I think that that will be seen as his most important contribution. I think he was a worthy, adequate, conventional novelist, certainly no artistic ground breaker, and like most western novelists, kind of a historian/novelist. If you categorized the official cannon of western literature in terms of the novel, you could call it historical fiction and not miss most of it. I know Stegner thought that the backward-looking period really needed to come to an end, and he was right about that, but there's no sign that it really has. It could be, in the critical sense, an attempt to create a usable past, and I think that he had some success at that. *Angle of Repose* was certainly his best novel and I think that's pretty much the way I see him. I think he's much more important as a nonfiction writer than as a novelist.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me about Stanford during your time there. What was Stanford like in your time?

Thomas McGuane

Well, Stanford was the most opulent campus in the world. I think it was a very beautiful place, and it was especially beautiful to me as I had never been to California before and that kind of lavish, natural world was still pretty intact in the middle '60s, and 40 years ago, before the digital age and before all of the orchards and the peninsula were chopped down to make way for the subdivisions, it was a very beautiful place, and Stegner was a revered institution there. I was very lucky to have been picked, you know, for that program, so I was kind of... I was a young, hopeful writer happy to have the endorsement, and happy to meet other young writers. The world I'd come from was not rich with literary types, so meeting all of the brilliant, young people that were around there was pretty exciting.

Interviewer-John Howe

The Creative Writing Program at Stanford developed some of America's best known writers. Why do you think that happened there?

Thomas McGuane

Well... I mean, the least common denominator would be that it offered a year of a living wage when you were a developing writer. That was a pretty exciting prospect. I can remember thinking that if I didn't get a fellowship of some kind I was really going to have to change direction. I certainly couldn't support myself by my writing. And there were not that many writing programs then. Iowa was sort of the pioneering program. I think the University of Montana was getting off of the ground, but the sort of gold standard of writing programs was Stanford, and if you won the Stegner Fellowship, you're certainly going to have your manuscript looked at more closely when you send it to New York, and there were other things that gave it a kind of added excitement and value, and drew... I think everybody who had high hopes or high expectations for their work probably applied to Stanford, and there were you know... I know of several Pulitzer Prize winners who were turned down by that fellowship, so it was not a

clean sweep of all of the talent in the room, but it was a great place to go if you could get there.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me a little bit about *The Sporting Club*. How did it come about, and how did that relate from the Stegner Fellowship?

Thomas McGuane

When I was a Stegner fellow, I was mostly working on a book that came out second--*The Bushwhacked Piano*, and Stegner had an editor pal named Bill Decker, who was sort of a cowboy novelist, who was then an editor at Dial Press, and I worked for a long time with Bill Decker trying to get *The Bushwhacked Piano* in acceptable form, and after most of that year, E.L. Doctorow, the novelist, who was then the head of Dial Press, sort of stepped in and rejected the book, so then I went off to some place--Bolinas, California I think for a while. I thought that *The Bushwhacked Piano* was unpublishable, and in about six or eight weeks I wrote another book, and I assumed that it would also be unpublishable, and I left. I hitchhiked down to Mexico and I left the manuscript with Jim Harrison, a novelist friend of mine who I had grown up or gone to college with in Michigan, and Jim Harrison found a publisher for it. That publisher published *The Sporting Club*, then published *The Bushwhacked Piano*, and then I guess I was sort of off and running. *The Sporting Club* was a sort of a lucky book. It sold quite well. It sold to the movies. It was a kind of a minor best seller, and it was a pretty big best seller in other countries, particularly Japan, so I had not... I was 28 year old, something like that, and I had never really had a significant income. I was living in Montana by that time, and I suddenly had enough money to go buy a small place outside of Livingston, so that was a liberating event for me.

Interviewer-John Howe

How did the Stegner Fellowship work with *The Sporting Club*? Did it have any impact on it?

Thomas McGuane

I'm not sure that it did because it certainly had an impact on *The Bushwhacked Piano*, the second book, which was really the first book I wrote, so that's where that was most felt, and you should understand that Stegner only taught one semester that year, and Richard Scowcroft taught the other semester. Scowcroft was an outstanding writing teacher, and I can't really detail what impact he had on it, but he was a very close worker with his students and that made a big difference.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me about some of your contemporary other students at Stanford during your time there. Who were they and what kind of influence did they have on you?

Thomas McGuane

Well, we were all pretty close. Melinda Poppim, who is now an Episcopal priest, wrote a very good book about the desert. Later on Al Young, primarily a poet, as well as a fiction writer, is the Poet Laureate of California now. Jim Houston has written lots of California-based books. He's a real California regionalist--a very good writer. Peter Smart, the Australian, I don't know what he's doing. He has kind of fallen off the world a little bit. He's back in Australia. And then lingering around in those years, Ken Kesey was kind of in and out. He was in trouble with the law at that time and fighting with Stegner who, for the next 40 years, described him as uneducable, which he was not. He is a brilliant writer, but kind of a horse's ass. Let's see... McMurtry I think was kind of still in the

area. There was a kind of a bohemian neighborhood there. I forget... Ed McClanahan. Now surely he'll be on your interview list won't he? He should be. Ed McClanahan was teaching and writing his own book at the time. I'm trying to think of who else was there. I think that's it. Scott Turow, the mystery writer who actually funded the Scowcroft Fellowship came later. Those are the ones I remember. Bob Stone had just left. He was back and forth. Nobody really left after that thing. They liked Palo Alto so much they didn't want to go anywhere, so most people who came for the Stegner year were not gone quickly at the end of that year. They were around for sometimes several years.

Interviewer-John Howe

What kind of teacher was Wallace Stegner? How would you describe him?

Thomas McGuane

Well, I'm hard-put to describe him because he made it pretty clear that he didn't want to be doing it at all the year we were there, and he taught reluctantly. The only time I ever saw him really enthusiastic in class was when he was reading from his own work in progress. He believed that... this was the middle '60s in California, and he believed it was the end of the world. He actually said he thought it was the end of civilization, and you know we were kind of... we looked like all of the other kids in the middle '60s, and that really upset him, so we did not have the best of Stegner, and I don't have any knowledge what his teaching would have been like in a better era, but he was politically conflicted with the rest of the English Department, particularly with Albert Gerard, Ivor Winters. He was very much conflicted with my generation, and he felt that he was being neglected by the eastern literary establishment, and he was just not happy, so that turned up in his teaching, and it was... I would have to say to be perfectly honest, he was by far the worst teacher I ever had.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why do you think he was so conflicted with students? You mentioned Ken Kesey. Why do you think... either the atmosphere on campus evidently he didn't like, but why was he so conflicted?

Thomas McGuane

I asked him actually about that. Kesey had made some nasty remarks about Stegner in print. He described him as a sort of an academic glamour boy whose mind had been blown by 40 years of sophomore girls staring at him, and it was a terrible remark, and Kesey came around to see Stegner and offered a heart-felt apology which Stegner refused to accept, and so I said to him, I said, "Mr. Stegner, isn't it behind you now? I mean he has apologized and shouldn't have said it. He has apologized to everyone." And he said, "Doesn't matter, he said it." So that was that. Now I will say that Kesey had a great following of sycophants, and he would have... Kesey would have driven me crazy too, but he was a, you know Kesey was an unusual character. He did not come there on a creative writing scholarship, he came on a... he was a scholar. He was a Woodrow Wilson scholar--heavyweight champion of the Pacific Northwest, and the author of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* and some other great things. He was a very fine writer, but a kind of autistic child--kind of manic, and a lot of the things that he was promoting were things you shouldn't promote, so there's a real reason to not have been very happy about Kesey, but he couldn't seem to let it go. Stegner couldn't rise above it. He took it as being emblematic of a whole generation, and he kind of signed off on us.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why do you think he had such a problem with that generation? Describe the times at Stanford in the '60s and Stegner's reaction to it.

Thomas McGuane

Well you know he was a... I had a kind of double vision of it because I think he liked me, and I kind of liked him, you know and I stayed in his house, you know and we had a common interest in the natural world. We always had that to talk about. His passion for the West was very substantial, but it included only the natural world. He didn't want all of the crazy people that live in the West and all of that sort of thing, and that's why his discretionary time was not spent in the West, it was spent in Vermont you know. After the bloom was off the West, he was pretty much over it in my view. But these were very turbulent times and more turbulent in California than anywhere else. The antiwar movement was at full cry. There was a break in at the electrical engineering building at... by anti-war protesters on the campus. This is not to suggest that Stegner was in favor of the war, but it was just... it was a fairly chaotic atmosphere--rock and roll and the counter culture, the hippies--I mean it was a hard world for anybody to absorb, but in terms of... I think he just retreated and got angry and there we were the 20 something's sitting in the classroom waiting to... trying to... We were amazingly conventional-less writers. We must have been a sort of retro group because one of his... one of the things Stegner thought was that we were having vivid sex lives of some kind, and we really weren't. I mean nothing was going on, but I remember he compared us to--I think they're called belsarius (bilharzia) worms--which are these creatures that are born, live and die in the continual act of copulation. (laughs) I mean frankly I don't anybody who had extramarital sex in the whole group once. I mean we were so austere that when we learned that we were belsarius (bilharzia) worms, we were pretty disconcerted. I remember he made a trip to the Arctic when we were there and he came to class and he said... he flew over Belcher Island or one of those Islands up there and he said there was a huge pile of walruses all afraid to be out of contact and living in a big meat pile and he said, "It reminded me of you people." So he was thoroughly alienated by the time and the place.

Interviewer-John Howe

How would you compare his writing style to your own? What influence did he have on your writing?

Thomas McGuane

None, absolutely none. I'm not interested in regional literature or... I mean I don't think there's any such thing as Western literature or American literature or European literature. I think we all have the same problems, and I've just been reading the Chinese edition of the latest New Yorker and reading all of the stories set in China about--I don't know anything about China--but the stories are so familiar, the problems are so like mine or yours, that to try to divide the world up into these regional categories I think is a great mistake, but in that Stegner and I didn't agree. I mean, he thought there was such a thing as Western literature, and for him I think Western literature was the kind of the, what I call the wasp view of Western literature--Bernard DeVoto and A.B. Guthrie and that whole sort of standard cannon of Western writing, so I was always reading, you know, various avant-garde writers and Eastern European writers, and Russians and things like that, and not concentrating on this particular kind of regional thing, and so I don't think that we had much in common, but he's a very sharp reader. He had a great critical capacity. He had tremendous intellect, so it was always worth--whether you agreed with him or not--it was really worth going through text with him because he was a logician and he kind of understood what worked in narrative, and in that sense he was very useful, but the writers I admired were not the ones he admired, in fact he told me... I was reading Dostoevsky and he told me it was a waste of time and I said, "Why?" and he said, "Well, because Conrad did it better." I said, "Well can't I read both of them?" "Well if you want, but it's a waste of time." But in an odd way that kind of a teacher can kind of be helpful rather than one who's sort of accessibly politically correct in the critical encounter, because then you've got something to engage with or bounce off of, and I think in that sense

probably Stegner did me a lot of good because it made me kind of firm up my attitudes about what I did like, whereas if he'd simply given me the full sort of NPR approach I might have just drifted along not feeling challenged about the things I like, and I'm kind of grateful for that.

Interviewer-John Howe

Tell me about what kind of man Wallace Stegner was in your opinion.

Thomas McGuane

Stegner was an austere person. I think he had a very strong sense of justice and fairness, and probably the downside was that he was fighting so many windmills. He had so many, you know, kind of imaginary enemies. He wasn't really... He was quite right in feeling that he was not being fairly treated by the gate-keepers of the Eastern literary establishment, but the real overview that I think would have been applicable in his case would be to be patient and know that good work is eventually valued, and the gatekeepers sooner or later fall away, but I think he... the neglect bothered him more than it should have. But he was a very good, upright person, and at the same time a very intolerant person, and I think there's a lot in his biography that explains a lot of unresolved anger. But with his intellect and his sense of decorum, the anger was always kind of sublimated into surprising directions. I mean he's not the sort of person who would ever let down his hair and blow up. In fact in all of these kinds of testy things that we all went through with Stegner, I don't think anybody actually saw him overtly angry. He's also the kind of person that it's impossible to picture him dancing. It's impossible, for me anyway, to picture him drunk, and if I had to pick a word for him it might be... the word might be *control*--very self controlled.

Interviewer-John Howe

We were talking about Wallace Stegner's character. What kind of a man was Wallace Stegner?

Thomas McGuane

Stegner... I have an ambiguous picture of Stegner because there was a part of him that I was really fond of--just this kind of recondite, solid, upright guy with a very distinct set of standards, which were his own, a sense of fairness, loved the natural world, loved animals, hated to see... on that road up to his house when someone ran over a squirrel, and a kind of relentless formality. He had, as far as I could tell, no playful side whatsoever. There was no sense of bantering or fooling around or telling him a joke or just... that was not his game. You can't picture Stegner dancing. You can't picture Stegner drunk. You can't picture Stegner being consciously unfair about anything. But behind this kind of strong, distinctly Western, sort of persona, the anomaly was that he was so thin-skinned. You can't imagine John Wayne being thin-skinned, or any of the kinds of sort of characteristic iconic Western figures, which Stegner is one in many ways, being as touchy as he was. I think... but I do think, to the degree that he understood them, he had very lofty principles that he really tried to live up to, and in that sense when you're around Stegner, you're around a person of genuinely distinguished character. If you have reservations about inflexibility, they would apply to him, and very closed-minded about change. I think his world view was the world was going to hell in a hand basket, and anything that he didn't already know were signs of the world going to hell, but he could be so likable and thoughtful in so many ways--a very complex person. I'm sure that everybody who has written about him or has tried to deal with him has come aground on the issues of his complexity and the contradictions of character. I think that once he had a kind of a formal idea, he tried to cut things to fit it. That had to do with what I consider this sort of kabuki view of Western life. Who is a native? Who's not? Who's an insider? Who's not? It began to resemble a college fraternity in some ways, and it made it hard to understand the early days

of the West in which everybody was an outsider. He kind of tipped his hand a little bit in an essay he wrote called, "Born a Square" where you can see his truculence and prejudice pretty loud and clear, but maybe he in many ways was no more limited than everybody is in some ways by those things. It's just that his were very firmly established. He was very hard working. Richard Scowcroft, his 40 or 50 year confrere at Stanford, used to say that it always amazed him how productive Stegner was, and one of the ways that Stegner... one of the reasons he was so productive was he seemed to have no social life, and you all would know this better, but I never saw a sign of any kind that he had a friend or friends, and that maybe had been in service of his vision of the work that needed to be done. I mean he just worked. He was always at work on a book or at work on something or other, but no fraternizing for sure, and that's kind of the picture I have of him.

Interviewer-John Howe

What would you describe his greatest accomplishments being?

Thomas McGuane

I think that Stegner has produced a really enduring conservation vision... I was going to say for the West, but I think it's a universal one of what is now fashionably called sustainability--living with some respect, for the future of the planet, and he codified it in some of the great turns of phrase... a great capacity for language that he had, a great erudition on behalf of this cause, and I think that's what he'll be most remembered for.

Interviewer-John Howe

What do you think his greatest failures are?

Thomas McGuane

I think his greatest failure probably is in realizing life and reality are fairly chaotic, and that when you look at something--a semi-closed system like the West, you have to recognize that it's not just mountains, rivers, and trees, but it's also the people who live there and they're not the same people who lived there in 1910, and that it's... that somehow a vision of the West is going to have to incorporate recognition of change and coming change, and understand that it's filled with people that don't think like you do: backward people, ignorant people, violent people, disagreeable people, destructive people, as well as the good people, and that the answer to that is not to fly over the West and go to Vermont, but to stay there and fight it out for a complex vision of the future, so I think his vision in that sense was limited, and that's probably his biggest failure. But you have to pause at that against the very strong benchmark he made in articulating a conservation view for the West.

Interviewer-John Howe

You described Stegner's view of the West a little bit. Is Stegner's West a kind of a bleak place compared to say the more romanticized vision of the West that some writers have?

Thomas McGuane

I don't necessarily think it's... it's certainly not romantic, nor would I say that it's a bleak view of the West. I think he had a vivid, passionate appreciation of the West that was very powerful and very hard to pick apart. It was really based on the natural world. It's not particularly a vision of the humanized West, but I think it holds water, and I think it's plausible, given the... its built-in limitations. I mean it is... one of the things that used to... I remember sticking to my imagination, is that he did not consider California part of the West, and I don't know how you kind of trim around the parts of the West you like--you kind of nip off California, and you nip off Arizona, and you... I mean I think you've got to take the whole thing in one gulp or just stop trying to build a wall around it. But his

conservation... he was an environmentalist. That's what he's going to be known as. That's what his great future is, and it's a very powerful voice for the environment. I think it's permanent. I don't think it will ever quite be unheard.

Interviewer-John Howe

When you think of Wallace Stegner, how do you remember him?

Thomas McGuane

Well again, I go back to the same thing. I remember him with fondness when he was... feeling warm. The last time I saw him was in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I think that was the last time I saw him. I was down there to give a talk. I think he was there to give a talk. We accidentally bumped into each other in a restaurant. I had just published *Ninety Two in the Shade*. It was on the front page of the *New York Times* Sunday book review, and it was a finalist for the National Book Award, and I hadn't seen him really in a long time, so I walked in and I greeted him and he said, "I see you got famous. Why don't you have a beard?" But then we had a nice little meal and that was kind of how I remember him. I think I remember always trying to make him like me--that would be my most vivid memory, and sometimes he did, and sometimes he didn't. I remember somebody was talking to Larry McMurtry and he said, "I have no idea what Stegner thinks of me." He said, "I've often wondered." I think he... he would remind you of a person at war. You know if you met him in Belgium on the edge of the German outbreak and everybody's standing around wondering what in the hell they're going to do, and there's some guy that says, "You know this is war. This is grim!" You know Stegner could play that role pretty well.

Interviewer-John Howe

Do you have a favorite book of his and why?

Thomas McGuane

Beyond the Hundredth Meridian by far, and for reasons we've said a couple of times here, because I think he took Powell's vision of watersheds and water being the key to appropriate development of the West, and he raised it to a level of articulation that gave it kind of a scriptural value for people who are involved in the environmental movement, and I think he did that indelibly well.

Interviewer-John Howe

Why did Wallace Stegner have such a time with the Eastern critics?

Thomas McGuane

The Eastern critics have never been very welcoming to any kind of out of town literature, and for them the West begins probably at Lake Erie, around Buffalo. They have a very generalized idea about that. There's a famous remark that H. L. Mencken made about Willa Cather. He said, "I don't care what happens in Nebraska" and I think that has never quite gone away. The irony of the situation is overtime very few serious good novelists have come out of their world. It's always been Mississippians or Missourians and Iowans and people from elsewhere, but for some reason or another they have a brief period of time where they are the gatekeepers, and I think there's just a feeling that nothing really important happens outside of that Northeast corridor, and Stegner was kind of the victim of that, but the other thing that I think was startling to Stegner (would be startling to anyone) is that he was a very vaunted young novelist when he was living in the East, and when he moved West he said he felt like he'd just fallen off the edge of the flat earth. I mean he just vanished when he went out... when he went West, and that does happen. There's no question about it. I know that my first couple of books were set in the Midwest and Florida Keys and things like that. Forty years ago I moved to Montana. The tone changed very much in terms of my relationship with the critical world. They just have that

in mind. It's not permanent, because they can't control things permanently, but in the short-term because they control publishing, they control the major reviewing outlets. They're all in town. They all see each other. It's pretty hard on out of town writers, and you shouldn't take it seriously. It's always been that way, but Stegner was bothered by it, I think because that it happened to him in two ways, I mean when he moved West during his writing years he was surprised how much the interest in his work diminished.

Interviewer-John Howe

You talked about your favorite novel being *Angle of Repose*. Talk about that and why.

Thomas McGuane

Well I would say... I have two favorite novels of his--*Angle of Repose* which is I think the most developed of all his novels--the one which the resonance is... narrative resonance's are the broadest and the most coherent, but probably my emotional favorite is *Big Rock Candy Mountain* because I read it when I was young. I was swept away by the world it depicted. And for the very minor reason is that I bought it as one of the early trade paperbacks with the vivid cover back in the '50s. I remember looking at it and thinking, boy this looks just great, I bet it is great. I never heard of the author, never heard of the book before, but the title just seemed sort of exciting, and I read it and that was my first introduction to Stegner, so I don't know whether I think that's... It's certainly not his best book, but it's the one that hit me when I was vulnerable. But he was getting better and better. I think that some of the things that... sort of unsexy approaches he had to fiction, you know, where you have two academic couples, you know living through the years together or you have all of the little live things where the hero is a retired literary agent, I mean some of those choices seemed to me were kind of dull ideas, you know, and made his books seem a little bit platitudinous, but I think he rose above that in *Angle of Repose*.

