

Crossing to Safety

Wallace Earle Stegner



Author Background

- Birth—February 18, 1909
- Where—Lake Mills, Iowa
- Death—April 13, 1993
- Where—Santa Fe, New Mexico
- Education—B.A., University of Utah; Ph. D., State University of Iowa
- Awards—Pulitzer Prize, 1972; National Book Award for, 1977

Some call Wallace Stegner "The Dean of Western Writers." He was born in Lake Mills, Iowa and grew up in Great Falls, Montana, Salt Lake City, Utah and southern Saskatchewan, which he wrote about in his autobiography *Wolf Willow*. Stegner says he "lived in twenty places in eight states and Canada." While living in Utah, he joined a Boy Scout troop at a Mormon church (though he was not Mormon but Presbyterian himself) and earned the Eagle Scout award.

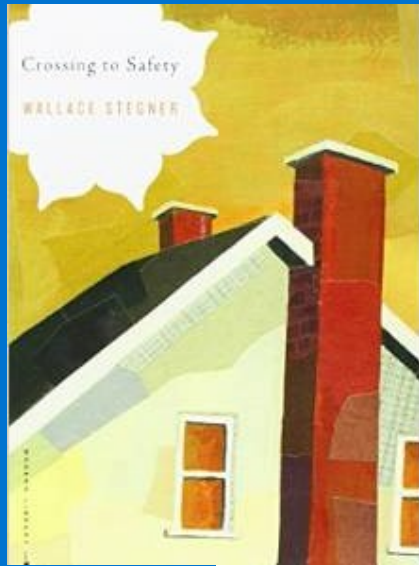
He received his B.A. at the University of Utah in 1930. He taught at the University of Wisconsin and Harvard University, and then he settled in at Stanford University, where he founded the creative writing program. His students included Sandra Day O'Connor, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Thomas McGuane, Ken Kesey, Gordon Lish, Ernest Gaines, and Larry McMurtry.

He served as a special assistant to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. He was elected to the Sierra Club board of directors for a term that lasted 1964—1966. He also moved into a house in nearby Los Altos Hills and became one of the town's most prominent residents.

Stegner's novel *Angle of Repose* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1972, and was directly based on the letters of Mary Hallock Foote (later published as the memoir *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West*). Stegner's use of uncredited passages taken directly from Foote's letters caused a minor controversy. Stegner also won the National Book Award for *The Spectator Bird* in 1977. In the late 1980s, he refused a National Medal from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1992 because he believed the NEA had become too politicized. *Crossing to Safety* was published in 1987.

He died in Santa Fe, New Mexico, while visiting the city to give a lecture. His death was the result of injuries suffered in an automobile accident on March 28, 1993. He is the father of nature writer Page Stegner.

(From Wikipedia.)



Crossing to Safety

Wallace Earle Stegner

Book Summary

Crossing to Safety

Wallace Stegner, 1987

Random House

368 pp.

ISBN-13: 9780375759314

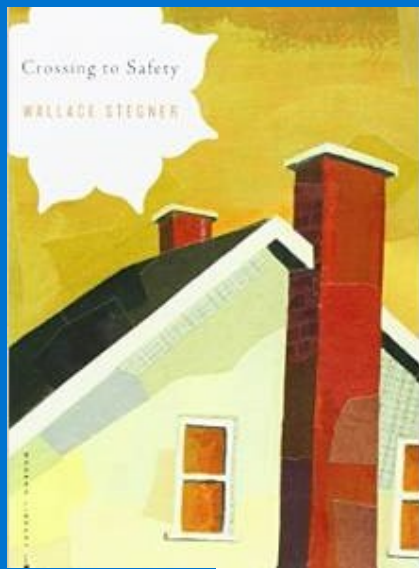
The story, as related by the aged Larry Morgan, is one of marriage and of friendship. At its centre are two couples: the Morgans, Larry and his angelic wife Sally; and the Langs, the weak but charming Sid, and the vibrant and impossibly bossy Charity. It is Charity who starts the friendship and who then dictates much of what ensues. Rich and confident as the Langs are not, she almost literally sweeps them off their feet. As Larry says: "We straggled into Madison, western orphans, and the Langs adopted us into their numerous, rich, powerful, reassuring tribe." In a virtuoso scene – one of many – the Morgans find themselves basking in the Langs' golden light while another, less fortunate couple can only glare in envy from the sidelines. Thus is a life-long friendship born.

But it's a friendship not entirely of equals. While Charity makes the running in her marriage and between the couples, Larry gains success as a writer of which Sid can only dream. Told in flashback through a series of incidents, we journey with them into the problems that beset their lives: the physical challenges that Larry's wife, Sally, faces, and the threads that weave themselves thickly through the Langs' relationship.

As the novel progresses, the ebullience and unwavering determination that made Charity so initially attractive take on a darkening tinge. In two more stand-out scenes – one where she makes her husband unpack a whole expedition's worth of supplies in order to find the tea he knows is there, and another where a badly injured man will not do her bidding – the nightmare that such a forceful character can impose on those she loves unfolds. Even her making her husband do something as trivial as the washing up is given menace by our growing understanding of what is wrong. And in the final pages of the book, as the dimensions of Charity's last web are etched, we stand, like Larry, as witness to a woman who will continue to control even unto death.

Wallace Stegner, whose descriptions of landscape and nature are wondrous, is equally at home with character. Long after the book is done, Charity will stick in memory: recognisable and strange, lovable and detestable, and both of these in almost equal measure. A book of great maturity, this one, and not to be missed.

(from The Independent)



Crossing to Safety

Wallace Earle Stegner

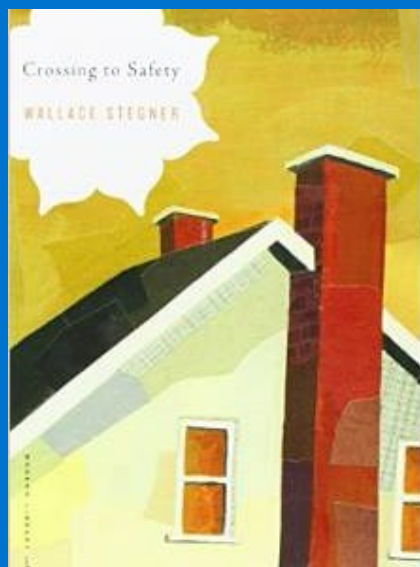
Discussion Questions

1. Given the difference between their upbringings (social class), what is the basis of friendship between these two couples? What does each couple gain from the friendship? Is it an equal or unequal relationship?
2. Talk about the nature of the two marriages, how they differ. The Langs' marriage seems to be the one most under the microscope here, the most complicated of the two marriages.
3. Then there's Charity—clearly the most complex character of the four. Do you like her, despise her? What drives her?
4. What are Charity's expectations of Sid? Does she desire academic status? Does she want him to realize his full potential or live up to his best self? What does she want from him?
5. Why does Sid stay with Charity? What do you think will happen to him after she dies? Will he choose to go on without her?
6. Stegner is very much a nature writer, using the natural beauty of Vermont as a sort of back drop to his human drama. In what way might he be making a comparison between the immutable natural world and mutable human world?

(Questions by LitLovers)

1. What is the significance of the title "Crossing to Safety"?
2. Compare and contrast the Langs' and Morgans' marriages.
3. How is Sid like Sally?
4. How is Charity like Larry?
5. Compare and contrast three generations of Ellis women: Emily, Charity, and Hallie.
6. How does polio change Sally's character?
7. How does Sally's polio change Larry's character?
8. What is the most important setting in the story? Why is it the most important?

(Questions from Bookrags)



Crossing to Safety

Wallace Earle Stegner

Reviews

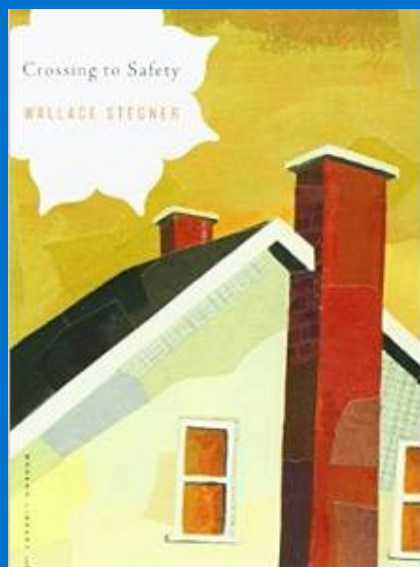
Crossing to Safety was Stegner's last novel, published in 1987, when he was seventy-eight years old. It is the story of a long adult friendship between two couples, the Langs and the Morgans, who meet in Madison, Wisconsin in the late 1930s and who remain best friends even as their circumstances diverge over the course of the next four or five decades. Like *Angle of Repose*, it takes as one of its central subjects the nature of long-term marriage, but instead of exploring a single marriage in the nineteenth-century mould, as *Angle of Repose* does, it explores two marriages in the twentieth-century mould, one without money and one with money. The Langs - Sid and Charity - personify old money and new. She is the daughter of generations of self-sufficient and well-educated New Englanders; he is the son of industrial entrepreneurs from Pittsburgh. The Morgans, Larry and Sally, personify self-help. Larry, who is from Arizona, loses both his parents in an accident when he is still a teenager and must get ahead on his own. He does so with single-minded, and touchy, pride. Sally's family are Greek immigrants. *Crossing to Safety* thus subtly and almost surreptitiously, takes up issues of class and conformity while purporting merely to report upon, and in some sense to eulogize, a valued personal relationship. Stegner's talent for meticulous discussion of many subjects at once, which is so evident in *Angle of Repose*, is equally evident in *Crossing to Safety*.

The novel's antagonists are Larry Morgan, who narrates, and Charity Lang, who reveals herself almost at once to be the headstrong and opinionated but open-handed power in the other couple. It is clear early in the novel that Charity rubs Larry the wrong way, and that probably the two of them would never be friends without Sid, whose intelligence and manly grace Larry is drawn to, and Sally, whom Larry dearly loves, and who loves Charity. Over the years, Larry witnesses the Langs' marriage, and especially Charity's habit of dominating her husband, with considerable disapproval; the implication on the other side is that Charity recognizes that Larry is not her ally, but she elects to ignore that fact. With him as her audience, she gives her natural self-will just a bit more rein, and makes her manner just a bit more defiant. *Crossing to Safety* is by no means a valentine from the Morgans to the Langs, it is more the complex depiction, sometimes light but often dark, of the multiple compromises involved in three marriages—that of the Morgans, that of the Langs, and that between the Morgans and the Langs. Its materials are simple, but I can think of no other novel quite like it, because, in fact, few marriages in novels are as permeable and yet as permanent as those of the Morgans and the Langs.

In this sense, too, that the relationship between men and women is constantly shifting and therefore constantly in question, *Crossing to Safety* is paradigmatically American. Stegner was only ten years younger than Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, but at least in his late novels he dispensed with both Hemingway's fantasy of solitary masculinity and Fitzgerald's fantasy of romance. Charity and Sally are active women with authentic aspirations, even while they have ostensibly traditional roles in their marriages (neither have careers of their own). Charity is so energetic and ambitious that she must expand her role. At first she wants lots of children, but then even lots of children aren't enough to fulfil her - she goes on to build her family a compound, to micromanage her children's and husband's lives, and to take on a larger social role in her community. Sid, by contrast, is happy reading, teaching, and puttering about, and Charity becomes chronically dissatisfied with his lack of ambition.

Sally, who begins as Larry's equal and companion, contracts polio (as a result of a wilderness expedition that Larry thinks Charity mismanages) and requires constant care. The Morgans' marriage, and Larry's march toward professional and economic success, end up being shaped by what become perennial questions of dependence and independence, exactly the issues that Larry, who seeks self reliance above all things, and Sally, who has skills and talents that do not get realized, are most sensitive to.

Stegner, of course, is best known for his exact delineations of the landscape of the American West, but *Crossing to Safety* takes place in the East, at the northern New England summer compound of the Langs, where Larry and Sally are welcome and familiar but a little out of place. Stegner brings to this setting his astute talent for simultaneously depicting the broad landscape and the exquisite natural detail. Almost effortlessly, he places the Langs and the Morgans on their dark green, humid, and northern stage, where the light is always filtered through the trees and the grass is green throughout the short summer, where wildness is more subtle than it is in the west, but no less alluring and, in some ways (as on the camping trip the two couples take), no less dangerous.



Crossing to Safety

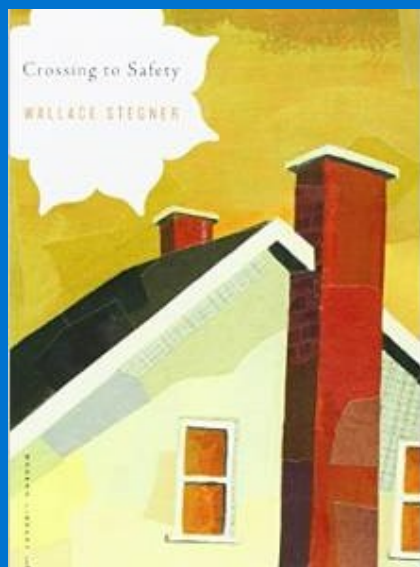
Wallace Earle Stegner

Reviews (continued)

One of the best things about *Crossing to Safety* is that it is a bulletin from a very unusual place for the novel - old age. Many, if not most traditional novels, end when the protagonist finds his or her vocation, or his or her spouse. Even Henry James, who wrote his last novel in his sixties and in his fussy narrative voice as well as in his photographs seems to define late maturity, never truly tackles the actuality of having made a life decades in the past, and then experiencing its results and ramifications as it comes to a close. Novels are usually about beginnings. But Stegner, who died at eighty-four as the result of an automobile accident, and who was vital, healthy and productive his whole life, grew more and more interested in the ills and limitations of old age. His protagonist in *Angle of Repose*, Lyman Ward, reflects upon not only his researches into the early period of his grandparents' marriage, but also on what he remembers of their old age. He suffers from a debilitating medical condition that has left him an amputee, confined to a wheelchair, dependent on a hired nurse and his son for every daily service. The effect of his condition on Ward's moods and general outlook form the frame for his narrative of his grandmother's adventurous life. The occasion that initiates *Crossing to Safety* is a reunion of the Langs and the Morgans that Charity plans in order to mark, or perhaps, to ritually celebrate her imminent death from cancer. The first chapter of the novel focuses on the difficulties, for the Morgans, of visiting the Langs' rustic compound - Larry's sense of his age and of his wife's infirmity are carefully described. The two of them and Charity and Sid as they are in old age, are explicitly contrasted with who they had been when they first met. As he sits on the porch of his cottage, he thinks that their original plan had been to "Leave a mark on the world. Instead, the world has left marks on us. We got older. Life chastened us . . ." (p. 12), but he remembers vividly how they began: "This English instructor [Sid] in his Balkan or whatever it was shirt, standing by his beautiful wife and crushing the hands of his guest, was by Michelangelo out of Carrara, a giant evoked from the rock . . ." (p. 33). With their money, beauty and style, the Langs once made the Morgans feel themselves valued, and even "elected". After a party during which it became clear that the Langs seemed warmly drawn to the Morgans, Larry recalls, "I felt guilty and triumphant. There we were, still in the warmth and light and grace of that room, while those who didn't belong, those who hated and envied, those who were offensive to Athena, went out into the chilly darkness." (p. 44). Charity remains a goddess, and Sid remains a god, but their world fills up with ungrateful and rebellious subjects - children, grandchildren, in-laws. Simultaneously, Larry fulfils his promise by successfully publishing his work and winning grants and prizes. Through his success and Sally's fortitude, they seem to achieve a sense of peace that eludes the Langs, while the Langs continue to luxuriate in a sense of ease that eludes the Morgans. The fates of the Langs and the Morgans are not the theme of the novel, but rather the idiosyncratic stages by which they all arrived at this spot in the woods, on this day in 1971. As this day unfolds, that is, as Larry narrates both what is happening and what he is reminded of, it turns out that Charity simply cannot, even for the sake of her husband and children, relinquish control over her circumstances, thereby calling into question all the various notions of love that the novel has depicted.

Inevitably, a novel about marriage and old age must question and probe the nature of love and the nature of vocation and Stegner's simple materials and very meticulous style allow him to do so without seeming grandiose or overbearing. He focuses on something ordinary that most people are familiar with - two couples, four people, who have divergent, specific and fairly ordinary lives, but who remain faithful to one another and to their original aspirations. He discovers that the grand, though hazy, ideas that they envisioned in youth have not worked out. They expected above all "to contribute", and in fact they do contribute, but in retrospect their contributions feel like so much "tinsel", as Larry puts it, compromised in Larry's mind by the contingent and self-centered circumstances that shaped them. What remains real and valuable is their sense of connection to one another and to their offspring; their original ideas have not been fulfilled, but they have been superseded by reality. In this sense, any novel written from the perspective of old age, but especially one written by a stylist as precise and eloquent as Wallace Stegner, is the ultimate "realist" novel because it not only takes the materials of the world as its subject, as other realist novels do, it explores the end of fantasy and even of idealism.

Penguin (Excerpt)



Crossing to Safety

Wallace Earle Stegner

Reviews (continued)

Adding to a distinguished body of work that already has earned him a Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award and on the 50th anniversary of the publication of his first novel, Stegner's new book is an eloquent, wise and immensely moving narrative. It is a meditation on the idealism and spirit of youth, when the world is full of promise, and on the blows and compromises life inevitably inflicts. Two couples meet during the Depression years in Madison, Wis., and become devoted friends despite vast differences in upbringing and social status. Hard work, hope and the will to succeed as a writer motivate the penurious narrator Larry Morgan and his wife Sally as he begins a term teaching at the university. Equally excited by their opportunities are Sid Lang, another junior man in the English department, and his wife Charity. They are fortune's children, favored with intelligence, breeding and money. Taken into the Langs' nourishing and generous embrace, the Morgans have many reasons for gratitude over the years, especially when Sally is afflicted with polio and the Langs provide financial as well as moral support. During visits at the Langs' summer home on Battell Pond in Vermont and later sharing a year in Florence, the couples feel that they are "four in Eden." Yet the Morgans observe the stresses in their friends' marriage as headstrong, insufferably well-organized Charity tries to bully the passive Sid into a more aggressive mold. Charity is one of the most vivid characters in fiction; if she is arrogant, she is also kindhearted, enthusiastic, stalwart and brave—an ardent liver of life. Her incandescent personality is both the dominant force and the source of strain in the enduring friendship Stegner conveys with brilliant artistry. He is also superb at expressing a sense of place, and his intelligent voice makes cogent observations on American society in the decades of his setting. But most importantly, he speaks to us of universal questions, reflecting on "the miserable failure of the law of nature to conform to the dream of man." In doing so, he has created a believable human drama the dimensions of which reach out beyond the story's end and resonate in the reader's heart.

Publishers Weekly

Stegner takes a long look back—at four decades of a foursome's life—in a novel that at moments is beguiling, though at others it labors for its theme. Larry Morgan and his wife Sally are young westerners who, one day in Depression-poor 1937, arrive in Madison, Wisconsin, where Larry is to take a one-year teaching post at the University of Wisconsin. Their lives are charmed and transformed when they become friends with Charity and Sid Lang, rich easterners whom the star-struck Morgans take to be the epitome of privilege, grace, and culture. A bosom friendship is formed between the two couples that is to last a lifetime, although that lifetime itself isn't to turn out as ideally as hoped. Success as a writer comes early to Larry Morgan, but his wife Sally is stricken by polio and made permanently a cripple. The elegant Sid Lang, meanwhile, is fired from his post at Madison, with the result that he and Charity (with children) are forced into retreat in the family's Kennedy-esque estate at Battell Pond, Vermont. There they wait out the years of WW II, and there it becomes increasingly clear (in the best sections of the book, which are rich, sure in tone, and reminiscent of, say, the reverberant delicacies of *The Good Soldier*) that the good Sid is in reality a weak and intellectually hapless man, and that wife Charity is in fact ruthlessly class-driven and relentlessly domineering. The novel ends in 1972, with a macabre reunion of the four friends in Vermont, as Charity orchestrates her own death (of cancer), compelling the others, in their variously crippled or exhausted states, to behave in the ways she sees as order-affirming and proper. Widely ambitious, the novel brings vividly to life certain quintessential moments and ideas—the idealistic moment between the Depression and WW II; the poetry-and-backpack rigor of the old New England intelligentsia. But Stegner clings to his theme of undying friendship beyond the point where his material keeps it alive, leading him to an often visibly artificial and conventionalized effort to push things along to their end. In all, less moving as a whole piece than highly remarkable for the fine penetration and achievement of some of its moments.

Kirkus Reviews