



Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs

Wallace Stegner, T.H. Watkins (Afterword)

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Nominated for a National Book Critics Circle award, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* gathers together Wallace Stegner's most important and memorable writings on the American West: its landscapes, diverse history, and shifting identity; its beauty, fragility, and power. With subjects ranging from the writer's own "migrant childhood" to the need to protect what remains of the great western wilderness (which Stegner dubs "the geography of hope") to poignant profiles of western writers such as John Steinbeck and Norman Maclean, this collection is a riveting testament to the power of place. At the same time it communicates vividly the sensibility and range of this most gifted of American writers, historians, and environmentalists.

Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs Details

Date : Published April 9th 2002 by Modern Library (first published 1992)

ISBN : 9780375759321

Author : Wallace Stegner , T.H. Watkins (Afterword)

Format : Paperback 234 pages

Genre : Writing, Essays, Nonfiction, Environment, Nature, Autobiography, Memoir, History, Westerns, Language, Travel, Literature, American



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From Reader Review Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs for online ebook

Stacie says

Really 4.5 stars. This was my first venture into Stegner and I am so glad I picked it up!

It is a collection of essays he wrote regarding growing up, living and writing in the West. When I started it I didn't have the intention of reading it all the way through, but to pick it up and read an essay once in a while. However, once I got started I didn't really want to stop.

The first section made me want to go out into the wilderness and go camping, hiking and fishing. The second half made me want to research the history of the areas from land ownership to water ownership...by the end of the second section I was devising ways that I could teach this to future students. The third section just added to my TBR list, as he talked about the different writers from the west.

His writing is inspiring...not only in his prose style, but his passion for what he is writing about. He makes me love where I live all the more.

David says

I don't think I was well suited to this one. It's technically proficient, but I saw little that interested me. The ecology seemed obvious, and he romanticized the West similar to how he accused others of doing. He decried what others were doing without acknowledging that he was just advocating a smaller scale of the same thing. Frankly, it sounded a bit too "get off my lawn" and seemed as if he wanted newcomers to leave him alone in his paradise. The piece on his mom was probably the best, but seemed pretty cliche. The pieces on the authors were almost all for work unknown to me. That can often work, but he didn't manage to interest me or convey enough of a sense that I cared. The one I knew, I already wasn't fond of. That's probably a sign, but one late on coming. All in all, it's put together well but I found little reason to be reading.

Heather says

I will pretty much read anything and everything Wallace Stegner writes. This is a lovely book of essays that made me think about the West, water, and Mormonism in a totally different way. The only reason it doesn't get 5 stars is because his message gets a little old. The West, it's sacred, it doesn't have a lot of water, our current treatment of the land isn't sustainable, we get it. Still, some lovely, lovely essays that should be read in a hammock in the backyard, or on the shores of a river while waiting for fish to catch. Unfortunately, I don't have a hammock and I'm not particularly fond of fishing, so I read it in bed. Oh well.

Richard says

To read a collection of essays, I find I have to put my mind to it. It helps that the book was borrowed and I wanted to return it. But I originally found Stegner in a used bookstore in Fremont, Seattle some years back and wanted to read something of his.

The essays were about his upbringing, the West, the pragmatic spirituality of the land, water rights and the development of the West, environmentalism, and writers of the West, writers like Wendell Berry and Aldo Leopold (Sand County Almanac) -- both on my bookshelves and influential on my thinking since around the age of 20. The book really brought to my attention that there had been a West/East divide at one time and lack of acceptance in the NY publishing world of "Western" literature. At the end I skipped a few pages when he talked about an author I thought I might never read, but all in all, I give it a thumbs-up.

Now having read this book, I will go back to another book of essays by a Western writer, Edward Abbey -- The Serpents of Paradise -- to continue reading in the genre.

And, for balance, I just ordered a used copy of a book that came up on a quick Google of "Wallace Stegner essays" -- Why I Can't Read Wallace Stegner, and Other Essays: A Tribal Voice by Elizabeth Cook-Lynn.

K says

This collection of essays starts out as strongly as any book I've read in a while. The Introduction and then the opening section of essays are so sharp and so moving that you feel like a new door is opening to your understanding of America. Really. My lifetime overlapped with Wallace Stegner for probably 35 years, and I've lived in the same country, sometimes within miles of where he lived. And yet, his experience is so different, so intense, so lonely (at times) and filled with awe of nature (at other times) that it's hard for me to believe we inhabited the same space and era. His writing just makes you want to live in a cabin in Montana or eastern Oregon, or whatever, if those open places still exist.

Unfortunately, the book doesn't quite sustain that high level throughout. Each essay is really good, but there's a lot of repetition as he moves into his commentaries about the West and how it shaped its people. Over and over, we read about its dryness, about the long distances you can see in the crisp air. About how people have to live in relatively low density because there isn't a lot of water to sustain them, and this low density means that they don't develop communities in the way that Europeans or East Coast Americans have done. Those are very interesting observations, but I didn't need to read them 5 or 6 times, often with the exact same phrasing. And I'm not even sure those observations are true, as interesting as they are. Are cities in the West really less of a community than those in the East? I have no idea, and I'd like it if Stegner had quoted some actual research that might prove or disprove his provocative idea.

Nonetheless, his comments are prescient in a lot of ways. His discussions of the waste of water, the harm of industrial farming, the indifference of huge swaths of our citizens and politicians to the environment -- those statements are as relevant today (or more so) than when he wrote them 30 and 40 years ago. It makes me angry that his words weren't heeded in those days by enough people to address the types of problems we're still having. And when you think about our current leader, President Trump, you know it's only getting worse, as even something as mild as designations of wildlife areas are being overturned. As Stegner would say, what's the need for coal mining or oil drilling that would bring a negligible amount of fossil fuel to the surface, in exchange for ruining an irreplaceable desert?

In the final section, Stegner writes about writers. All of these essays are illuminating, and in some cases about authors I'm not familiar with. There's again too much repetition, as Stegner laments over and over that "Western" writers are written off as cliched hacks telling cowboy tales. But that doesn't mar his treatment of

writers from Willa Cather to Henry David Thoreau to Norman McLean to Wendell Berry and Walter Clark (not heard of those last two). And along the way, he makes some interesting and funny observations, such as how he thinks that Cowboy Poetry, which is a "thing" unto itself, probably is mostly written by non-Cowboys, but occasionally by a guy with such deep calluses that he can't make a fist. And he writes about the environmentalist sensibilities of people such as Thoreau, decades ahead of his time, or how McLean "broke every rule" of writing short stories, and yet it worked. Stegner was a rule-breaker too, and it worked for him.

So, for a good introduction to the West, the "real" West, not the fake cowboy West. this is a great place to start. And then go pick up more of Stegner's amazing works. You'll never think of the West in the same way after reading his stuff.

Northpapers says

My father is Australian, my mother is from St. Louis, I grew up in the Philippines, I went to a few years of college in Chicago before running out of money and dropping out, and I currently live in Atlanta among immigrants and refugees. So when I read Wendell Berry's essays on a sense of place, his ideals evoked a real hunger in me to feel placed, but his example would have been absurd for me to try and follow.

Stegner, who taught Wendell Berry at Stanford, read all of his work seriously, and corresponded with the Kentucky farmer, seems to share my admiration for Berry and my difficulty with the idea of an inherited place, or a fixed piece of land or town that passed from one generation to the next. Which is why Stegner's ideas about story and place sat so wonderfully with me.

He's a thinker and writer who grew up roaming, without the kind of academic or cultural base that would lend itself to his intellectual pursuits. But he took his legacy as it was, grew into his identity as a thinker and storyteller, then met his own history and region with clarity and grace. I feel like the tension that Berry introduced has been resolved somewhat in Stegner's work. That made this collection of essays, compiled late in Stegner's career, remarkably satisfying to read.

Of course, outside of my own longing for a sense of place, there is much here to admire. Stegner's prose is beautiful, evenhanded, and understated, but he manages to slide in these rich, resonant ideas as he looks at his life, the American West, and the literature that has marked the way for him.

Dan says

Yes, the power of place. I've lived in the west all my life, but I fell in love with the west when I read this book. Stegner is ... I got nothing. Just read this book if you are a westerner or wish to understand one. I had all these feelings about the west, Utah in particular. Stegner helped me articulate them.

First Reading July 2005

Second Reading April 2013

Barbara says

Also suggested by a friend from college. I hadn't ever read anything by Stegner. There are some gaps in even my books. I will read more by him. He writes very well for starters and he writes very well about the Southwest. Where I lived for some time. He captures what the life is like there, the geography and the differences from the East. And how the East was trying to replicate what the East was like in the West. And so forth. Some of his essays are better than others and sometimes I get bogged down in the conservation stuff. My favorite essays are the letter he writes to his mother, the one about George R. Stewart and America. And the Names of America and what naming does. Not doing justice to his words. But it is very good. He writes evocatively, ooh big word, about the West and what Western literature as in the Southwest is like. Very interesting. Would read more of his stuff. Liked it a lot.

Bobbi says

If you're a fan of Wallace Stegner or simply love living or visiting the West, this is the book for you. Stegner's beautiful words bring with them a sense of the beauty, the desolation, the destruction, and the fragility of the West.

The book is divided into three parts. The first is a personal note from Stegner, not only to the West that he loves but to his mother as well. If you've read his semi-autobiography, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, you'll know what trials she went through with her more than difficult husband and how she kept the family going as they moved from place to place.

The next part is not only a beautiful description of the West, but how fragile the environment is and how easy it is to destroy those places we love best. Stegner was a conservationist to the core and his arguments are dead on.

Finally, Stegner chooses some of his favorite (and mine) authors of Western fiction and gives each his due; Steinbeck, Stewart, Doig, Clark and Berry. Odd that he didn't include A.B. Guthrie, one of the great Western writers, although he does mention Guthrie's *The Big Sky*.

One could read this book over and over and fine something new each time.

Will Weaver says

Wallace Stegner (1909-1993) was a novelist and writer of the West. He's an old dead white guy, true, but his writing is very much alive, and deserves a look--especially if you are a would-be writer.

Background: Stegner was born in Iowa, but started the creative writing program at Stanford University in the early 1960's, one of the first such writing workshops in the country. The Stegner Fellowship at Stanford is one of the most sought-after prizes for young writers. If that is a sure legacy for Stegner, the writing found in the *BLUEBIRD SINGS* essay collection has continued relevancy for at least two reasons.

First, you can learn a lot about writing. Look closely at his sentences, his voice, his passion for the subject matter whatever it might be (his mother, desert mountain hikes, rural Saskatchewan). If any of us could find our way to write with his smooth-flowing, richly detailed style, then publication is sure to follow.

Second, his conservationist, environmentalist vision of the West—the beauty and fragility of its aridity—is even more relevant today. The use (or misuse) of resources, the struggle to protect the land, could not be more timely not to say beautifully presented.

The BLUEBIRD collection consists of short essays. Each one is a different subject. Every one is worth your time both as a reader and a writer.

Rachel says

I really loved this thoughtful collection of essays on living and writing in the West. Written in 1990, I wonder what Stegner would think now about the rate at which we exchange information. I particularly loved his essay on Sense of Place:

“The deep ecologists warn us not to be anthropocentric, but I know no way to look at the world, settled or wild, except through my own human eyes. I know that is wasn't created especially for my use, and I share the guilt for what members of my species, especially the migratory ones, have done to it. But I am the only instrument that I have access to by which I can enjoy the world and try to understand it. So I must believe that, at least to human perception, a place is not a place until people have been born in it, have grown up in it, have lived in it, known it, died in it--have both experienced and shaped it, as individuals, families, neighborhoods, and communities, over more than one generation. Some are born in their place, some find it, some realize after long searching that the place they left is the one they have been searching for. But whatever their relation to it, it is made a place only by slow accrual, like a coral reef.”

Elinor says

Wallace Stegner is just such a brilliant writer, and such a thoughtful man. This wide-ranging collection of essays about the west rings true on many levels for those of us who live here. It is the personal essays that I liked the most -- his tribute to his long-dead mother, for example. I'm always surprised when people haven't heard of this incredible guy. He died in 1993. What a loss that was to literature, the west, and the world.

Sunni says

What's not to like about Wallace Stegner? He's a brilliant writer, an activist, a great teacher and mentor, and a literary gem of the West. This collection of essays examines our relationship with the natural world, the rise of the environmental movement, commentary on other great writers, and, my personal favorite, a letter to his mother "much too late," written when he was an old man. That an old man can still look back at his life and admire his mother with such tenderness and honesty says he is humble and clear-sighted. I've read this collection on and off since I was a teenager, but it is this letter to his mother that I go back to most, especially now that I am a mother and need to remember what matters most in the world, and the people that I have a lasting affect on. It's one of the most moving pieces of writing I've ever read.

John says

This is Stegner's final book and is an excellent collection of essays about life, the West, writers and writing. What he says about literature and good writing comes close to expressing what I feel about good writing and reading. He wants writers to write from their own experiences and write in their own way and not be bound by someone else's concept of method. "What literature is supposed to be...at its best is a bolt of lightning from me to you, a flash of recognition and feeling within the context of a shared culture."

One chapter "Letter, Much Too Late" is a moving and poignant letter Stegner wrote to his mother when he was nearly eighty and she had been deceased for 55 years. In other chapters he revels in the achievements and books of contemporary authors and gives a brief critique of several of these books. In yet another he writes about the West from a conservationist viewpoint and asserts that "we simply need wild country for reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures and as part of the geography of hope."

Stegner came from a dysfunctional background with his father constantly moving the family from one broken promise to another. His determination for education and his mother's love – she died when he was a graduate student, his father committed suicide a short time later -- allowed him to break free from this troubled existence. Learning was his only way out and he applied himself so successfully that he sometimes is referred to as the "Dean of Western Writers" although that title is a bit limiting.

Stegner writes with clarity, grace and amazing insight of our humanness, half in despair but yet in true hope.

Sherry (sethurner) says

Wallace Stegner is one of my favorite writers, whether writing fiction or nonfiction. I purchased this book to read on a long train trip home from Seattle to Wisconsin, and it turned out to be perfect for that trip through the high plains. This slim volume is a collection of essays covering a variety of subjects, his life, the geology and ecology of the West, analysis of his own writing and of other writers who wrote in or about the West. His writing is always clear, intelligent and straight forward. The third section "Witnesses" in particular interested me because he discusses writers such as John Steinbeck, Walter Van Tillberg Clark, George Stewart and Norman Maclean.
