



Collected Stories

Wallace Stegner, Lynn Stegner (Introduction)

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In a literary career spanning more than fifty years, Wallace Stegner created a remarkable record of the history and culture of twentieth-century America. Each of the thirty-one stories contained in this volume embody some of the best virtues and values to be found in contemporary fiction, demonstrating why the author is acclaimed as one of America's master storytellers.

The traveler --
Buglesong --
Beyond the glass mountain --
The berry patch --
The women on the wall --
Balance his, swing yours --
Saw gang --
Goin' to town --
The view from the balcony --
Volcano --
Two rivers --
Hostage --
In the twilight --
Butcher bird --
The double corner --
The colt --
The Chink --
Chip off the old block --
The sweetness of the twisted apples --
The blue-winged teal --
Pop goes the alley cat --
Maiden in a tower --
Impasse --
The volunteer --
A field guide to the western birds --
Something spurious from the Mindanao Deep --
Genesis --
The wolfer --
Carrion spring --
He who spits at the sky --
The city of the living.

Collected Stories Details

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From Reader Review Collected Stories for online ebook

Kurt says

Thirty-one stories by one of my favorite writers. Not a bad one in the bunch. Wonderful writing by a master.

The Traveler: The car of a traveling salesman breaks down on a very cold night in a remote area. After unsuccessful attempts to restart his car and to keep warm by a fire, he finally starts walking. A mile or so down the road he comes to a farmhouse. No one answers the door, but a young boy finally emerges from a nearby shed. The boy explains that his grandfather has recently become comatose, so he is hitching up the sleigh to go for help. The boy has no parents, lives with his grandfather in a house that has no phone. The salesman offers to ride the sleigh to go for help while the boy tends to his grandfather.

Buglesong: A boy lives in a rural setting where he is the champion gopher trapper. He always saves or specially traps one live gopher to feed to his captive weasel. His mother worries about her son's education and encourages him to read a book of poetry, which he takes along on his rounds to read while he waits. The poetry is like music to the boy. It almost transports him to another place – specifically, the Bearpaw Mountains which he can see in the distance and where he dreams of going to.

Beyond the Glass Mountain: A successful young man returns to his college town several years after graduation. He feels a great sense of nostalgia being there and reflects on his memories – contrasting the carefree and energetic days of his youth with the fleeting and mundane passage of time as he has aged. He has returned to the town to visit one of his old friends who still lives there. The friend is an alcoholic, married, with one child. The purpose of the visit is to inform his friend of his wife's infidelity and to encourage him to leave her and his troublesome life behind. After visiting for a very short while with the couple, he concludes that he cannot carry out his original plan. He leaves, but not before he recognizes that his friend is well aware of the situation he is in.

The Berry Patch: A man on leave during WWII goes to a wild berry patch with his wife. They pick berries and talk about their life and how their recent separation has impacted them. They feel a certain security that their relationship will survive the upcoming trials.

The Women on the Wall: From the window near his desk a writer notices several women who daily congregate to await the mailman. He realizes that they are all wives of servicemen who are overseas. He determines to get to know them and their stories. He is received coldly and suspiciously by them, but he persists. In the following days one woman receives word that her husband has been killed. Then one day he witnesses a vicious fight between two of them. They both immediately cease fighting upon hearing that the mailman has arrived.

Balance His, Swing Yours: A man visiting a resort is irritated at a pompous, intruding Englishman, especially when he begins bragging about his tennis expertise. When the man challenges the Englishman to a match, the Englishman begins making excuses, but the man counters each excuse, and eventually the match begins. The man thrashes the Englishman, to the delight of a couple of young men the man had earlier befriended. Later, however, at the bar, the man feels somewhat unwelcome, out of place, and friendless.

Saw Gang: A 15-year-old boy works at a lumber mill with several other young men, all older than he. He is amazed at how hard and how eagerly they work, and he assumes it is because they all respect and feel indebted to the mills owner who works alongside them and who furnishes them with decent breaks and

meals. The boy realizes that he is probably last in the pecking order at the mill.

Goin' to Town: A young farm boy is nearly overcome with excitement and anticipation because of his family's plans to go into town on the 4th of July to see the parade and participate in the festivities. However, when the time comes to finally depart, the old car will simply not start. The father goes to near heroic measures to try to start it – all to no avail. The boy is extremely disappointed, but eventually he accepts it.

The View from the Balcony: A group of mostly married college students all live somewhat communally in a building with a large common area and a balcony high above the ground which affords them a beautiful view of the surrounding area. One of the graduate students there gets cold feet and chokes during his final presentation. The “community” comes to his and his wife's aid. A party is thrown which involves a fairly free flow of alcohol. Two faculty members arrive at the party to encourage the despondent grad student. One of them actually picks a fight with a different student and seems intent on throwing him over the balcony before the fight is stopped by the other party goers. When the party finally ends, the other faculty member is unable to locate his wife. He suspects that she has run off with someone, so he goes looking for her in the riverine area below the balcony.

Volcano: An American visits Paricutin, the site of a volcano that suddenly rose out of a Mexican cornfield and completely played out its active phase in a mere few years. The author describes the desolation and eeriness as dust and ash blanket the area. The American observes the stubborn persistence of some of the inhabitants who attempt to remain and live their lives there.

Two Rivers: A continuation of the story Goin' To Town. The next morning the young boy learns that the car has been fixed and they will be going to the mountains. He is elated. As they travel he recalls vague memories of being in some mountains as a very small child, of falling and squishing blackberries in his hand, and of getting washed off in a river that is part warm and part cold. His dad thinks it's all the boy's wild imagination, but his mom realizes that he is actually remembering a specific trip they took to the mountains in Washington. She wonders why their memories are all so different from each others'.

Hostage: A young boy is held by police for a long time (days?) while he is interrogated by a detective and an insurance agent about how a fire started that destroyed the family (conveniently insured) shed. The boy insists that barn swallows attacked him and made him drop his candle when he was sent to the shed on a chore. Eventually, his mom shows up and confesses that she and her husband (the boy's step-dad) planned the whole thing knowing that the swallows would do what they did, but when the candle failed to ignite the shed, the step-dad went out and completed the job.

In the Twilight: A young boy hates the pig he is required to feed and care for and is excited for the scheduled butchering day. When it arrives he and his brother watch as their father shoots the pig between the eyes with a .22. The bullet fails to kill the pig, and it frantically runs and thrashes about until the dad can finally plug it a second time. This spectacle sickens the boy, he faints and is escorted into the house. When he returns to the butchering scene he is ridiculed by his brother and the other boys who have showed up. The dad shows the boys how to blow up the bladder like a bouncy ball, which the boys then kick and play with. The boy sickens again and vows that he will eat none of the pig's meat, but later in a kind of ritual the boy kicks the bladder-ball with all his might and triumphs in his victory over his sentimental emotions.

Butcher Bird: A rural family travels a few miles to visit their new closest neighbor, a British man and his American wife. The visiting family has different reactions to this new family. The woman is very impressed with the Brit's manners and politeness while the man is completely put off by everything about him, and he especially resents the way his wife seems to adore the Brit and his knowledge. The woman wants to attempt

to plant some willow trees at their homestead as suggested by the Brit, but her husband rejects the idea out of hand. The couple's young son is disturbed by his parents' fighting, but he is overjoyed at the .22 rifle the Brit gifted to him.

The Double Corner: A couple with twin young boys bring the father's senile old mother home to live with them. The man is already quite convinced that things would be better for both his mother and for his family if she were in some form of nursing home. The wife, however, feels otherwise and makes every effort to care for the old woman and help her feel at home. When the old woman kills her cat by stashing it in her suitcase in order to hide it from her imaginary enemies, the mother finally recognizes the hopelessness and even the danger of keeping the old woman in her home.

The Colt: A colt is born with deformities in its front legs. The young boy who cares for the horses wants to utilize braces to nurse the colt to health despite his father's insistence that it is highly unlikely to be successful. After several weeks of dedicated care the colt showed little or no improvement. When the time comes for the family to move to their homestead for the summer, a family friend agrees to buy the colt from the boy for three dollars with the stipulation that he will faithfully care for the colt, and sell it back to the boy when the family returns – if the colt has healed. On the way to the homestead the family first drives to the dump to deliver keys to the caretaker. As they drive through the dump they see the skinned carcass of the colt – recognizable by its distinctive hoof patterns.

The Chink: A boy gets caught up in mob mentality with his friends on Halloween night and tip over the outhouse of a Chinese store owner who had earlier rebuked some of the kids. Because they had heard a whimper from inside the outhouse, they assumed it was the store owner, so they nailed the door shut. Later, the boy, feeling bad about what had happened, goes back and pries the door open to find the store owner's brother, with whom he was quite friendly, inside and unconscious. The boy summons the man's brother for help at the same time that he begins feeling very ill (this occurs during the great Spanish flu epidemic of 1918). He goes home and lies in a feverish semi-conscious state for over a week. When he finally recovers he learns that his Chinese friend is dead.

Chip off the Old Block: A 12-year-old boy is left home alone when his entire family is stricken with the Spanish flu in fall of 1918. He safeguards his dad's supply of medicinal whiskey from thieves and does a good job of holding down the fort. He even uses some of his spare time to write an adventurous short story. He hears of townsfolk dying from the epidemic and he worries about his family. One day he hears the sounds of celebration from the town. It's November 11. The war is over. He invites neighbors to his house to celebrate. The whiskey is passed around. During the festivities the boy's family arrives – they have been released from the hospital, all have survived. The father is angry and disappointed at the boy for being so wasteful with the hard-earned whiskey, but eventually and with the help of the boy's mother, he comes around to realize what a good boy he has been.

The Sweetness of the Twisted Apples: An artist and his wife travel through rural Vermont looking for landscapes to paint. They encounter a nearly abandoned farm area where a very few hangers-on still live. They visit for a short while with a woman and her waif-like adult daughter who tell them about the road ahead which becomes impassable due to overgrowth not far ahead. The girl and her mom repeatedly refer to the past in terms of when the girl was "goin' out." Leaving the two women the couple drives ahead and find a beautiful scene to paint with a large orchard of old untended apple trees. While the man paints, the woman explores and then begins to gather apples to take home because, despite their stunted size, they taste wonderful. While hauling apples, the woman is surprised to see the farm girl there. The two of them talk a little. The woman asks the girl about what it is like to live in such a seemingly haunted place. The girl responds that it isn't haunted, and that she used to come up to this area all the time when she was "goin' out."

The Blue-Winged Teal: A man returns to his father's bar carrying several ducks he has just recently shot. His father and the low-life employees are impressed and plan a feast for the next day. The man dislikes his father for a variety of reasons and intends to tell him that he is leaving him. The feast goes well and the man eventually tells his dad his feelings in a cordial way.

Pop Goes the Alley Cat: A photographer accompanies a social worker to some poverty-stricken neighborhood to get some pictures for an upcoming article. A black youth from the area also accompanies them. When the young man is sent in the woman's car on an errand he fails to return and the photographer realizes that one of his cameras is missing. He assumes the young man took it and feels disdain for him. The social worker and the photographer discuss the merits of forgiveness and kindness and if or when we should give up on someone.

Maiden in a Tower: A man returns to Salt Lake City to see to the funeral arrangements of his aunt. The funeral home just happens to be in the same building in which he courted a vivacious young woman more than 25 years earlier. He cares almost nothing about his aunt, but is determined to see the place of his sexual coming of age. The undertaker permits him to visit the room in a tower where a particularly memorable experience took place, even though the corpse of a woman is laid out in the room. The man nostalgically reminisces about the past and wonders what became of the woman.

Impasse: A couple vacations in Europe with their grown, but angry and ill-mannered, daughter who seems to want to argue and fight about everything. The father recognizes that his daughter is unattractive and has limited potential when it comes to achieving her goals, especially social goals. The girl obviously knows this fact too.

The Volunteer: An intelligent and hard-working young boy volunteers to build a model Roman camp structure for his teacher. His father has turned the family house into a speakeasy where customers come to drink and socialize without fear of the law. The boy and his mother really hate what goes on in the house.

A Field Guide to the Western Birds: A writer goes to a party which a friend of his is throwing in order to showcase a talented piano player she has discovered. The writer despises the arrogant and self-centered manner of the musician, and he is less than impressed by his musical abilities as well.

Something Spurious from the Mindanao Deep: A journalist in the Philippines observes that his friend is being manipulated by a woman who wants him to commit to her. The woman goes so far as to take a lethal dosage of pills in order to get his attention.

Genesis: A newly-hired cowboy from England struggles to fit in and cope with the rigors of cattle driving in Saskatchewan during the freezing fall and winter. The group is forced to seek shelter several miles distant during a terribly cold and windy snowstorm in which the Englishman saves the life of one of the other cowhands.

The Wolfer: A Canadian Mountie tracks the wolf trapper from the previous story (Genesis) because he fears the trapper may be lost and stranded on the bitter cold plains. He finds the man's dead hound – shot through the head in what he speculates was an accident of mistaken identity – but he never finds the trapper, who is never seen or heard of again.

Carrión Spring: In the Spring following the terrible winter of 1905 the wife (Molly) of the foreman (Ray) from the story Genesis has determined to leave the wild prairie for her home and parents, but Ray is staying regardless, and he wishes she would too. They set off in the wagon together and pass several stinking masses

of winter-killed cattle. They encounter the son of the wolfer who is busy digging out a den of coyote mom and pups. Ray stops to help, and together they slaughter the mother coyote and one of the two pups. Molly rescues the second pup and insists on saving and raising it. As Ray and Molly talk while taking in the beautiful expanse of the prairie Molly eventually decides that she could stay.

He Who Spits at the Sky: A journalist photographer goes to a wealthy lawyer's house where a party is being held celebrating the release of some Mexicans who evidently were unjustly imprisoned. The journalist witnesses one of the Mexicans violently assault his girlfriend, now in need of quick medical attention. The Mexican and celebrating lawyers, in order to protect their cause against possible bad publicity, insist that the girl was injured in a fall. The journalist, who actually saw it, insists otherwise, and points out that one other person witnessed it also – one of the other former prisoners, who subsequently lies for his own self interest.

The City of the Living: A divorced man tends his sick son in Egypt. The boy's typhoid is life-threatening and the man is very anxious and worried, especially when he notices that despite his dedicated administering of antibiotics, the fever persists. When the fever finally drops and the boy is obviously on the road to recovery the man rejoices. Later he ponders the efficacy of various forms of prayers – especially his own subtle personal prayers compared to the more public prayers of the millions of Muslims in the area.

Mollie says

Though these were well-crafted short essays, they simply don't do Stegner justice. Yes, the magnificent prose is there and he still describes places and moments with such clarity that you can see them in your mind's eye. But the abbreviated length of these essays does not allow for what Stegner does best - rich, complex character and story development with vivid historic and period detail. Read his novels instead.

Heather C. says

I really like Wallace Stegner (even though I haven't ever made it all the way through *Angle of Repose*...) These stories are terrific, and run the gamut from farm boys to country club tennis. I think good short stories are more fulfilling than novels, and each one of these leaves you with a different taste. His writing is sharp, and I kept finding myself, at the end of each story, thinking, "Wow, that was great writing!" Thanks for the Christmas present, Carly!

Rachel says

Collected Stories of Wallace Stegner is a large collection of short stories that largely concentrate on the American West in the first half of the 20th century. I've read a couple of Wallace Stegner's novels—*Angle of Repose*, and *Crossing to Safety*, which I really responded to, and knew that with this collection I'd be settling in for a few weeks' appreciative and thoughtful reading. I was also interested by the note at the beginning that let me know that some of this material made it into novels later on, so I was happy, too, to be getting a taste of his other books. I wasn't prepared for the harshness to many of these stories, and at times I found it very difficult to pick up the book again. It is hard to read these kinds of things, over and over, and it occurs to me that it is one thing to read a story like this in a magazine, and another some long time after, and quite another to read them one after another in succession without a break. If I had known it would be like

this, I would, I think, not have read them this way. So yet again I find myself grateful for not knowing ahead of time what I was in for.

I love how the people talk. So many of them talk like people I know, or people in family stories I've heard. My dad grew up in Montana, and I grew up in the Bay Area of northern California, and I like hearing about places like these, and others I'm not so familiar with. I like the new words I learn, especially the ones I gradually get a feel for, and I like knowing how people work. It's amazing how little you ever know about the jobs you don't do, and no matter how many times we have the small conversation about what we do, it never comes out as clearly as it does in these stories. These are people I remember, in the end, and the relationships between wives and husbands, and fathers and sons are real ones, and it's amazing to me how Stegner seems to be on everyone's side without ever moving from one position to another. It's wonderful how substantial the stories are—like some kind of rich ore he's got, where he only has to point out a vein or two, and he lets you find the rest.

Donna Kusuda says

These stories really draw you in quickly and the characters are so compelling. Stegner appreciation for nature and the West is obvious. Stegner is really the master story teller. I loved every page. If I had one book to take only one a deserted island this collection of stories would probably be the one book I'd take. Will probably start over and read it again soon.

Jerry Brabenec says

This collection of stories ranges across the world and much of the twentieth century. The cowboy stories alone are so rich in natural detail, living characters, and compelling plot and action. A paragraph description of a greenhorn cowboy thrown from his horse into the path of a stampeding bull is like a Remington sculpture. A rancher and his wife travel by wagon through the aftermath of a catastrophic winter on the way to the railroad flag stop as she ponders whether she will ever return. This is writing that makes me feel excited about discovering great American literature. I discovered Stegner the first time I looked into a Little Free Library here in Ann Arbor.

Scott says

As with any collection, I enjoyed some stories more than others, but Stegner's prose is always a joy to read. If I were to read this book again in a year or two, I suspect that different stories would speak to me the second time.

Karen says

I don't think there is anyone better at using metaphor to capture the essence of emotion or experience. There was at least one time in each story when I caught my breath, stopped and reread a phrase that was stunning. For example, in the story *Impasse*, Stegner speaks in the voice of a father describing his college-aged

daughter..."With Margaret along, conversation was too dangerous. She terrorized them; she was like a rodeo cowboy waiting at the gate, ready to burst out on any bewildered steer of opinion that showed in the arena. If you said anything, affirmed anything, denied anything, liked or disliked anything, you grew horns for her to throw you with."

In his forward to the collection, Stegner says that a short story is a young writer's form, that the novel has swallowed potential stories and that his first agent said that a short-story writer lives on its principal, using up beginnings and endings." Principal well spent.

Christian says

Wallace Stegner is a master of the word, but his real gift is his piercing insight into his characters. Every one of them feels realized, even in these short stories.

Sadly, I only finished about half of these before the library asked for it back.

Larry says

This was my first full fledged immersion into this author's work (after a failed attempt at reading one of his novels), and I was immediately impressed with the skill set he brings to the page. Wendell Berry's and Alice Munro's level of word craft came to mind at first, but it soon became clear this author was not offering any of Berry's sense of humor, and, by the end, it became obvious it would never be offered. The story settings were often reminiscent of Ivan Doig's work, but ultimately I found what I have read from Kent Haruf came closest to what I read here. There was also a rather jarring splash of John Updike in the mix. Amidst the entire collection, at least three different sets of stories are connected. In one case, the second story in its set comes spaced well after the first, and I was a bit startled to realize it took up immediately after the earlier one. This separation in the full collection is particularly odd when, later in the collection, three stories in a row are from a new set, but not obviously following immediately in narrative time. All this is probably a bit inconsequential when laid against the author's overall tone in his stories. I was constantly reminded of a story I had been told (perhaps erroneously, because I can't find confirmation of it now), in which Andrew Carnegie supposedly told his daughter, "Life would be so much easier for you once you realize life is hard." This story collection repeatedly points out various folks in various situations and settings, struggling hard and often not even achieving "two steps forward and one step back" status. Unfortunately, it was never clear to me whether the author just thought life was hard or if he was ultimately pointing out that he wondered if it was all worth it. The good news is he writes so well, you feel obligated to hear him out, regardless.

Mark says

Pure genius. A longer review is up at www.cloquetriverpress.com.

Peace.

Mark

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Wally Stegner...sigh...my literary crush.

There are 31 stories in this collection, written over a period of about 50 years. Naturally, the subject matter and quality varies. Stegner himself chose the stories for inclusion, as well as their arrangement in the collection. He clearly knew his best writing, because the better stories are in the first 1/2 to 2/3 of the book.

In the Foreword, Stegner says about the stories:

"I lived them, either as a participant or spectator or auditor, before I made fictions of them...and because the world and I were changing at an ever accelerating rate, some stories reflect events, social attitudes, and even diction that now seem dated."

Yes! This is what makes the collection worth reading. It covers so many time periods and lifestyles that are forever gone, preserved in literary amber by one who actually lived through those bygone eras.

The stories cover a variety of historical topics: the 1918 influenza epidemic, WWII wives waiting for letters from their soldier husbands, ranching life on the plains of Saskatchewan, and Prohibition days in Salt Lake City. All from someone who was there.

I think the most perfect story in the collection is "Double Corner." It showcases Stegner's talent for creating a powerful sense of place, as well as his ability to express the beautiful and heartbreakingly impulses that make us human. If you read no other stories in this book, at least read this one.

"Double Corner" is about a little family of California fruit growers who try to take on the task of caring for the husband's mother rather than placing her in an old folks' home. But the mother has dementia, and all their love and good intentions may not be enough to keep her safe and keep themselves from falling apart. Stegner lets us see how difficult it is for everyone when a loved one is losing mental faculties, and how frightening life becomes for the one with dementia.

"Grandma's mind was a terrified little animal trembling in a dark hole while danger walked outside."

I also really liked "Volcano," a very short piece that takes place in Mexico. It's an excellent example of writing to *show* rather than just *tell*.

Donald says

Most brilliant collection of short stories. Stegner has a way of describing a scene that puts the reader right into the story. In the first story, The Traveler, you feel the snow, the cold, and the darkness. The Colt will break your heart. In The City of the Living, you ache for the father's concern over his ill son.

Christine says

Although Angle of Repose is my favorite book of all time, I just reread this story collection and realize that Wallace Stegner is my favorite author. Even though these stories take place from the 1930s to the 1970s, the themes he touches upon are current. His ability to settings puts me right into the time and place. Such a

fabulous writer.

latner3 says

"The tears just came up slowly the way a spring fills, and hung, and brimmed over, and the first ones ran down my face and splashed warm on the back of my hand."
