



ALL THE LITTLE LIVE THINGS

*Timely and timeless . . . Will hold any reader to its last haunting page
—Garrison Keillor

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Wallace Stegner

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Joe Allston, the retired literary agent of Stegner's National Book Award-winning novel, **The Spectator Bird**, returns in this disquieting and keenly observed novel. Scarred by the senseless death of their son and baffled by the engulfing chaos of the 1960s, Allston and his wife, Ruth, have left the coast for a California retreat. And although their new home looks like Eden, it also has serpents: Jim Peck, a messianic exponent of drugs, yoga, and sex; and Marian Catlin, an attractive young woman whose otherworldly innocence is far more appealing—and far more dangerous.

All the Little Live Things Details

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From Reader Review All the Little Live Things for online ebook

Vic says

Some stories are pure entertainment. Some are built for other purposes, as with Wallace Stegner's, All The Live Little Things. There was not much that I found entertaining, but if I measure the story by it's impact on me, by it's provocative nature and wide open doorway to self-reflection, then it was a fabulous piece of writing.

My feelings about the book were hard won. I found the beginning slow going, the writing a bit dated and the whole experience laborious. I had trouble relating to the characters initially, but as the story began to take shape and the right nerve endings plucked, I found myself becoming increasingly drawn into the drama unfolding in this little pocket of semi-suburbia California circa the nineteen-sixties.

And why not? I lived through this tumultuous time and found it easy to enter into the mindset of the principal antagonist, twenty-three year old Jim Peck, whose running conflict with Joe Allston forms much of the heart of the story. At the same time, I am now the age of Joe Allston, the principal character and narrator. Not only did many of the outer details of Joe's life resemble my own, I found his inner process compelling, perceptive and amazingly similar to mine.

Written almost journalistically, I found myself not only fascinated, but inescapably drawn into Joe's experiences with both Peck and Marian, a young mother who has recently entered Joe's life. Two sides of same coin, Peck and Marian were representative of the challenges to the norms and mores of society that created so much upheaval and unrest for over a decade. Peck's view, based on hostility, dismissal and rejection of the status quo in contrast to Marian who saw love and acceptance as the cornerstones upon which happiness is achieved.

Most people who lived through that period in our history will have a reaction to Stegner's writing. It was as dramatic as it was traumatic, and like knowing exactly what you were doing at the moment President Kennedy was assassinated in nineteen sixty-three, most will know exactly where they were intellectually and emotionally as change forced its way into the conscience of America.

On a deeper and more personal level, this is a book written for men my age, written with an unflinching honesty and a willingness to own the darker side of our natures. Through Joe Allston, Stegner exposes the mind play, the endless rationalizations, the needing to believe we are right when so many others are wrong. He exposes our prejudices so easily accepted as knowledge earned in the school of life. At the same time he leaves the reader with the understanding, that in spite of everything, the mental restraints we place upon ourselves while seeking order out of chaos, we are still human. We feel and understand feelings. We are rational beings, but we are also wired to emotion. We can not stop ourselves from feeling. We can mask it, hide from it and try to deny it. We can spout the meaningless banalities, "It's all good," or "Everything's perfect," but feel we will; feel we must.

With Peck, Joe wrestles with feeling taken advantage of, disrespected, marginalized as a representative of a newly evolving social order. When Joe reacts with anger to how he is being treated it is suggested that he is overreacting, that his uncompromising and contracted emotional state is the problem and not the fact that he is being taken advantage of or that his having earned the right to respect, let alone the common courtesy we all deserve, is conspicuously absent. It is Joe who is forced into submission, forced to adopt a generosity he does not feel, forced to ignore the warning signs coming from his hard won knowledge of self, forced to

quell the disquiet, the unease born out of the moral turpitude that his invaded his carefully cultivated serenity.

Where Joe reacts to Peck with immediate suspicion, dislike and hostility, his reactions to Marian, although born out of the same emotional and intellectual system, are softened by his overwhelming affection for her. In both relationships Joe is forced to examine his convictions, his morals, his feelings and the most human desire to have control of our lives. In one instance Joe reacts as a man wronged, a man relentlessly taken advantage of, a man unjustifiably mistreated. In the other newly acquired relationship, Joe is challenged, yet allowed to react, and as a result finds himself opening his mind and expanding his views to accommodate another perspective.

As the story unfolded Wallace Stegner's writing was impossible not to admire. I wasn't sure about this book when I first started reading, yet urged on by a lifetime of self-reflection as well as journaling, I was determined to make it to the end. Bottom line: Not only did it become easier to continue, I found myself rewarded many times over.

Angie Palau says

If I complained that my last read lacked character development ("Foundation"), this book is the antidote. It is nearly ALL character development - peering inside the head of curmudgeonly old Joe Allston. He's not always likeable, but he's always entertaining in his crotchety, clever honesty.

It's a beautifully written, vividly descriptive tale - so much so that I can smell and taste and feel that summer in California in the 60s. I'm always amazed when authors can use words to paint a tangible picture; Stegner most certainly does that.

At the risk of seeming lazy, I don't want to go into the plot because it is small, really - not a complicated story line at all. What is challenging is the relationships and emotions... these people seem very real and even if I might not agree with some of the decisions the characters made, I understand where they came from. I KNOW these people now.

Erik Dabel says

Powerful, powerful book. A book that, when you finish, you can do nothing but sit back and contemplate what matters in life. No, that's not quite right. You contemplate why everything matters in life. The good and the bad, the controllable and uncontrollable, the mundane and the life ending. Every little thing, no matter how insignificant or utterly destructive, must happen the way it happens. To turn your head away would be to ignore life itself.

Jaline says

Once again, Wallace Stegner's beautiful, descriptive prose drew me in to this novel from the beginning. It was like a lovely walk in a forest, with streams, birds singing, and maybe a waterfall. Then, just when I was completely soothed into the atmosphere, it was like a rock fell from beside the waterfall and startled me into

a story. The story of Joe Allston and his wife, Ruth.

In their mid-60's and retired now, the Allstons left the East coast and are in California, in mourning. I chose the word 'mourning' rather than 'grieving', because their feelings were a combination of grief, regrets, disappointment, and guilt among others. Their son died and no matter how hard they had tried, they felt stuck in the deformed relationship they had experienced with their son.

A young man, Jim Pitt, comes along and wants to build a small camp at the bottom of their property. Is this a chance for redemption for both? Joe's back goes up when young Pitt's values and attitude clash with his own, but Ruth wants to give him a chance, so Joe reluctantly agrees.

A young couple named Marian and John move in to the next-door cabin with their 6 year old daughter, Debby. For Joe, Marian is the daughter he wished he could have had. Joe and Ruth become close to the couple and their daughter very quickly.

There are neighbourhood problems that crop up – a land development on the hill across from them. Another neighbour is having problems with their 16 year old daughter.

As these pains and pleasures blossom into the story one by one, the links to the past come through, sometimes like thorns, other times like bright green leaves. And then Marian becomes ill and the balance shifts once more.

This story is interesting, engaging, and magnificently moving. For me, it is Wallace Stegner's ability to mold and shape words, phrases, sentences, and paragraphs like a master sculptor that breathes life and energy and emotion into it.

I enjoyed experiencing the nuances and literary references that spiced these pages, but it was the story itself and how brilliantly it was written that made me feel everything so deeply. I recommend this read to anyone who enjoys high quality writing that goes down like the finest ambrosia.

Chris says

Stegner is a master craftsman. I have read *Crossing to Safety* and *Angel of Repose* and fell in love with his prose. This particular book came as a recommendation from a friend who lived during the turbulent era of the late 60s as a new professor on college campus in the Midwest. The book captures in the dialogue of the main characters the ideological tensions of that era. However, this is also a powerful book about human connection, sacrifice, self absorption, and significant loss as it explores the meaning of friendships and their ability to affect our lives. Stegner is a realist and does an amazing job of making human beings authentic creatures; even his narrator Joe Allston allows us a look into his own biases. Stegner captures nature and the landscape as an intimate in his writings. His vast knowledge of flora and fauna are at times breathtaking and he weaves his narrative with fascinating symbolism and reference to mythology and other great works of literature (including Dante in this instance). I found reading this book on a Kindle very advantageous since I was able to look up the numerous symbolic references that helped to add layers of meaning to what I was reading.

Thomas says

Beautiful and devastating.

Anna says

This one was hard to read because Stegner lets you know, in the first few pages, that it will be sad, and it's heavy on introspection. The narrator/main character is lovable and infuriating, funny but unwilling to bend or change. He figures things out the hard way. I wept through the final chapters.

Daniel Kerr says

I just finished the book 30 minutes ago and it ends up as quite a beating. I would call it overwrought and too sentimental in tone, and unconvincing in the pace of the development of Marian and Joe's relationship. The underlying philosophies at work I won't attempt to unpack at the moment but I don't see much hope in any of it. Probably not by coincidence, the author somewhat successfully creates in the reader what Allston experienced himself – the anticipation of pain and the experience of it as even more horrible than what could have been expected. The reader knows the book is going to end tragically, and it does, in fact more tragically I think than expected. The final sentence reads "I shall be richer all my life for this sorrow." The thing is, I don't as the reader, share his opinion. I don't feel much richer having read the book – just slightly weary in the resistance of dewy-eyed pathos.

On the bright side I did enjoy a good deal of the comic middle portion of the book, particularly in describing the bacchanalian Peck and his apostles. Stegner is a brilliant descriptive writer. I found his dry irony far more compelling than his maudlin seriousness.

S.E. Flynn says

One of the best insider-views of marriage I've read, from the point of view of a husband who is aware, awake, and lives with a strong connection to the values he has chosen to govern his life. What really strikes me is the authenticity of his relationship with his wife- sometimes he feels distant, sometimes close, but almost always she evokes a response or feeling in him with her commentary and observations. For me, it captures the wonderfully weird experience of being connected to another human being in one of the closest relationships possible, while still being wholly other, and having still upon that relationships which are special and unique in their own right within a host of surrounding players. Authentic, insightful, and a declaration of one man's values and how he has built his life upon them.

Sharon says

Wallace Stegner is one of my favorite authors, and this book just solidified that. It's beautifully written, the story is mesmerizing, for me. Stegner writes about people and everyday life so quietly stunningly that the reader is unaware of getting enmeshed in the story. Joe Allston and his wife, Ruth, retired to a small rural town in California after the death of their only child, a son -- an unruly young man who defies his educated parents in every way. The couple seeks peace.

Along comes Jim Peck on a motorcycle, seeking to "camp" in the bottom land of Allston's property. After Allston reluctantly agrees, Peck soon builds a tree house, complete with a rickety bridge that draws up into the tree, a shed, installs a mailbox, and commences to invite free-thinking young friends who trash the land. The cult existence of this lot of young people, includes alcohol, drugs, sex, and more and lures in two young local teenagers.

A neighbor of the Allstons is bent on development and begins bulldozing a nearby hill.

A younger couple with a small daughter and a baby on the way move in across from Allstons and the two families become close friends. The fragile wife, Marion beguiles Joe, and his wife as well, with her intelligence and sunny outlook, different from his own.

On the surface, it seems a companionable quiet life away from the city fray. Read the book to learn all the events that happen to this enclave of diverse people. If you haven't had the pleasure of reading Stegner and you enjoy literary fiction, I highly recommend this book.

Cheryl says

I always seem to reread this in rhythm or synchronicity with something in life. I actually listened to it, and I was addicted to Edward Herrmann's voice, it was a perfect complement to the narrator's personality, and I wonder again and again why this book is so powerful to me. Set in the 60's with a curmudgeonly charmer who has conservative views in the sleepwalking of his retirement. I don't identify with that, and I really actually don't identify with the most important female character, Marian, either. But I do believe in part of her belief in evolution towards a type of biological perfection or more hippieish, an evolution of soul or consciousness, if not towards perfection, then towards more than we can imagine now.

But this book is a conversation about what it means to live in the world and is still meaningful almost 50 years later. I think it has been a guiding light for me for over 20 years now, since I read it in college, even before I became a nurse. Whenever I am shocked by the triumph of evil over good, I think "*wherever you find the greatest good, you will find the greatest evil, because evil loves paradise as much as good.*" Whenever I am faced with loss or sorrow, I think, "*It is hard doctrine, but I was beginning to understand it then, and I have not repudiated it now: that love, not sin, costs us Eden. Love is a carrier of death - the only thing, in fact, that makes death significant.*" Or simply, "*I will be richer all my life for this sorrow.*"

Those three quotes walk with me every day, and in this rereading, paralleled a situation with another patient (the last time it was an unrestrained child with a traumatic brain injury) that we have been working hard to keep alive, this time, a very close parallel since she is a mother of a young child and will die or have a serious stroke if she does not continue a simple but time consuming regimen of blood thinners. For 8 months,

we have gone above and beyond what is reasonable to try to help her, and we are failing. For many reasons, she is non-compliant and we can't force her to do anything. I have not been willing to let her die, but it is out of my hands now, and it is hard to accept that and wait for the consequences.

But she is the anti-Marian; she has no concept of the preciousness of life and certainly no understanding of what it means to evolve. But what ties them together is their inability to see outside their own frames of reference. I can see both, just as I agree with Marian about some things, but I agree with Joe about others. However, there is no black and white when it comes to life, it is raw and unrestrained and messy and complex. There are no absolutes except the above quotes. No matter the sorrow, it will enrich your life if you learn from it; paradise attracts all of us, and the good and bad change from minute to minute; and love is what makes death powerful.

quotes:

The forces of blind life that work across this hilltop are as irresistible as she said they were, they work by a principle more potent than fission. But I can't look upon them as just life, impartial and eternal and in flux, an unceasing interchange of protein. And I can't find proofs of the crawl toward perfection that she believed in. Maybe what we call evil is only as she told me that first day we met, what conflicts with our interests; but maybe there are such realities as ignorance, selfishness, jealousy, malice, criminal carelessness, and maybe these things are evil no mater whose interests they serve or conflict with.

I have always said that the way to deal with the pain of other's is by sympathy, which is suffering with, and that the way to deal with one's own pain is to put one foot after the other. Yet I was never willing to suffer with others, and when my own pain hit me, I crawled into hole. Sympathy I have failed in, stoicism I have barely passed. But I have made straight A's in irony- that curse, that evasion, that armor, that way of staying safe while seeming wise. One thing I have learned hard, if indeed I have learned it now: it is a reduction of our humanity to hide from pain, our own or other's. to hide from anything. That was Marian's text. Be open, be available, be exposed, be skinless. Skinless? Dance around in your bones.

Marian's eyes absolutely blaze. To meet them is to have a shock of contact as if they were electrically charged. "Now you see? You wondered what was in whale's milk. Don't you know now? The same thing that's in a mushroom spore so small you need a microscope to see it, or in gophers, or poison oak, or anything else we try to pave under or grub out, or poison. There isn't good life and bad life, there's only life. Think of the force down there, just telling things to get born!"

"It is hard doctrine, but I was beginning to understand it then, and I have not repudiated it now: that love, not sin, costs us Eden. Love is a carrier of death - the only thing, in fact, that makes death significant."

"Isn't it complicated to be human, though?" she said. "Animals seem to give up their lives so naturally...And after all, I grew up, I married John, I had Debby. So knowing, being able to understand and forecast and even predict an approximate date, shouldn't make any difference. I guess consciousness makes individuals of us, and as individuals we lose the old acceptance..."

"The one thing," Marian said in a voice that went suddenly small and tight, "the thing I can hardly bear sometimes is that I won't ever see her grow up. She'll have to do it without whatever I could have given her."

"Time, too, time and everything that one could do in it, and the chance of wasting or losing or never even realizing it. It's so important to us because we see it so close. We're individuals, we're full of ourselves, and so we're bad historians. We get crazy and anxious because all of sudden there's so little time left to be loving and generous as we wish we'd always been and always intended to be...do you suppose I feel the shortness

of time because I want to experience everything and feel everything that the race has ever felt? Because there's so much to feel and I'm greedy?"

"Walk openly," Marian used to say. Love even the threat and the pain, feel yourself fully alive, cast a bold shadow, accept, accept. What we call evil is only a groping towards good, part of the trial and error by which we move toward the perfected consciousness...

Waiting is one of the forms of boredom, as it can be one of the shapes of fear. The thing you wait for compels you time after time toward the same feelings, which become only further repetitive elements in the sameness of the days. Here, even the weather enforces monotony. The mornings curve over, one like another, for a week, two weeks, three weeks, unchanging in temperature, light, color, humidity, or if changing, changing by predictable small gradations that amount to no changes at all. Never a tempest, thunderstorm, high wind; never a cumulus cloud, not at this season. Hardly a symptom to tell you summer is passing into autumn, unless it is the dense green of the tarweed that late in summer...in recollection, those weeks of waiting telescope for me as all dull time does.

God is kind? Life is good? Nature never did betray the heart that loved her? Why the reward she received for living intensely and generously and trying to die with dignity? Why the horror at the bridge her last clear sight of earth?...I do not accept, I am not reconciled. But one thing she did. She taught me the stupidity of the attempt to withdraw and be free of trouble and harm...

You can't retire from the treadmill, there is no way to step off. It is all treadmill.

She said, "You wondered what was in whale's milk. Now you know. Think of the force down there, just telling things to get born, just to be!"

I had had no answer for her then. Now I might have one. Yes, think of it, I might say. And think how random and indiscriminate it is, think how helplessly we must submit, think how impossible it is to control or direct it. Think how often beauty and delicacy and grace are choked out by weeds. Think how endless and dubious is the progress from weed to flower.

Even alive, she never convinced me with her advocacy of biological perfectionism. She never persuaded me to ignore, or look upon as merely hard pleasures, the evil that I felt in every blight and smut and pest in my garden- that I felt, for that matter, squatting like a toad on my own heart. Think of the force of life, yes, but think of the component of darkness in it. One of the things that's in whale's milk is the promise of pain and death.

And so? Admitting what is so obvious, what then? Would I wipe Marion Catlin out of my unperfected consciousness if I could? Would I forgo the pleasure of her company to escape the bleakness of her loss? Would I go back to my own formula, which was twilight sleep, to evade the pain she brought with her?

Not for a moment. And so even in the gnashing of my teeth, I acknowledge my conversion. It turns out to be for me as I once told her it would be for her daughter. I shall be richer all my life for this sorrow."

Laysee says

“All The Little Live Things” is a title that connotes for me sprightliness, energy, and the promise of goodness. It was none of these things. It was, in fact, a very painful book to read, and were it not for the beauty of Stegner’s prose, I might have given it up. It is not a book to read when one is feeling wretched and vulnerable.

Written in 1967, it preceded *The Spectator Bird* (1976), winner of the 1977 National Book Award, which continued the story of Joe and Ruth Allston who lost their son, Curtis, to a surfing accident. The novel began in a brooding manner with Joe, a bruised man, looking at the rain on a wintry evening. The opening chapter carried a bone-chilling sadness. Joe was stewing in the anguish of having lost Curtis and more recently, a close neighbor-friend (Marian Catlin) to cancer. Joe said this of himself, “I am a tea bag left too long in the cup, and my steepings grow darker and bitterer.” And darker and bitterer the novel progressed.

Enter Jim Peck, a hippie undergrad and self-made guru of Free Living 101 who camped out on Joe’s property. Joe’s irascibility was raised manifold. His antagonism toward Peck, borne in part by his unresolved conflicts with Curtis (who was about Peck’s age and equally reckless), was poignantly conveyed and almost unbearable to read.

Stegner very convincingly portrayed Joe as a cantankerous old man without the reader losing respect for him. The novel was rich with the loveliest prose when Joe described the gardens and the countryside. Yet, nature too was dominated by the lurking presence of the poison oak, which worked symbolically to underscore the sense of futility in the novel.

There is no consolation when the last page was turned. Joe admitted, “Burrowing among sunny flowers, I never lost the sense of the presence of evil.” One is left with a bleak apprehension of man’s inability to obliterate the “component of darkness” from “the force of life.” “All The Little Live Things” is not for everyone. It is definitely not recommended if you need a book to read while on vacation.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

Wallace Stegner was a very meditative writer. This, I think, is why some people have a hard time getting through his books. There's a lot of rumination on the part of the characters, while the plot sits on the back burner. With some authors this drives me crazy, but with Stegner I somehow have the patience to stay with the writing and savor it. I think it's because he articulated so many truths and feelings I've personally experienced. He handled difficult themes in such a soft way, with the perfect combination of intellect and heart.

All the Little Live Things and *The Spectator Bird* are companion novels about Joe Allston, a retired literary agent who has moved to California with his wife Ruth. It doesn't matter which book is read first. The two books complement each other and fill in the blanks as needed. The only characters that are constants are Joe and Ruth, and the painful memory of their son Curtis, whose life and death still haunts them. If you need to be strictly chronological, then read *All the Little Live Things* first.

Merilee says

While I have loved all of Stegner's novels I've read so far (Angle of Repose, Crossing to Safety, Spectator Bird), this one seems a little bit dated. In this companion to Spectator Bird, almost 70 Joe Allston rants and raves about the hippie barbarians doing their thing on a bit of his property in 1967 Los Altos Hills/Woodside. I kind of wish I had read this in 1967 when it was published, and I was still at Stanford, and Stegner was still in the nearby hills. I have no idea how autobiographical this is (I don't believe Stegner was ever a New York book agent) but it seems I read somewhere that Stegner was not a big fan of the "counter-culture". At my current age I can see his point. Still the writing is luminous as ever.

Nancy says

One of my favorite books of all time is Stegner's CROSSING TO SAFETY--it was a very profound story of the transformational potential of friendship. This book also explored that theme, but from such a painful perspective that I suffered as I read.

Stegner's writing is beautiful, but the anger and social prejudice expressed in this novel did not appeal to me. I believe that he was an English professor at Stanford in the late 60's when this book was written. I can only imagine that as he anticipated his 60th year, he must have felt very alienated from the Northern California liberal youth of that era. His students.

The anti-establishment characters in this novel are exposed so harshly by the narrator that it made me cringe. No spirit of romanticism for the fledgling Hippie movement expressed here! And, frankly, that venom spoiled the book for me.

The warmth and love expressed for another character--perceived as pure and generous---was juxtaposed too strongly against the mean-spirited attitude the narrator adapted to other characters.

Perhaps, this book was just too much a period piece that didn't wear well as society adapts and evolves.

John says

Much of the first half of the book is typical story setup: introduction of characters, setting the scene, and the like, which is fine, although it's dragged out here with the focus on squatter Jim Peck (technically, he has Joe's grudging permission to stay on the property). As the hippie-ish young man makes himself gradually into a more permanent fixture, than just pitching tent, Joe's level of resentment grows ... as did my fatigue. Second half of the story contains flashbacks to Joe's past, that help explain his strong feelings, as well as another storyline about a neighbor, until the Final Conflict, where all goes horribly wrong. It's no spoiler to say that Peck is quite manipulative, although perhaps a slight one in mentioning that Joe's mistrust proves grounded in the end.

Stegner could write ... and how! Unfortunately, the story's grim tone marches on throughout, his heavy-handed warning about the societal changes that the 60's will bring seeming dated, and largely disproved. Edward Hermann does a knockout job with the narration, as though the book were written back then with him specifically in mind for the job.

Melanie says

So, so good. Read my review here

8/2/2017 re-read - How funny, it looks like I was reading this book at almost the exact same time of year two years ago. If you asked me to name my very favorite book, I would quickly respond *All the Little Live Things*. There's just so much to this novel - themes of what it means to live, vulnerability, relationships, freedom, grief, death, aging. The story is so rich, in terms of theme, imagery, the quality of the prose. I hate to gush too much because I don't want to oversell it, but for me, this book has a depth that I want to keep plumbing.

Sherri says

Slow-moving and sentimental, but I loved it anyway because of Stegner's writing. The story plods along at times, but then Stegner slips in something so beautifully written and true that it pulls you up short. His books always give me a lot to think about, and this one was no different.

The book tries to grapple with the horrible, random and unfair things that can happen in a life that also contains intense beauty and joy. He (and his characters) consider the choice we all have to retreat and hide because of the horrible things that can and do happen, or to live unrestrained in our love for each other and for life.

I do think that Stegner has some pet philosophical arguments/beliefs that probably gave birth to the story. There are times when the story feels like nothing more than a chance to make his case for these ideas, which means there are times when it feels a little over-wrought and preachy. I didn't mind because Edward Herrmann narrated the audio version I listened to, and I can listen to him read just about anything.

Marita says

Joe Allston, retired literary agent, settles with his wife Ruth in a peaceful country home in California. Soon two people arrive who will upset his equilibrium for very different reasons.

The first of these is **Jim Peck**, a young hippy whom Joe discovers on his property. Egged on by Ruth he reluctantly allows Jim to camp there. It isn't long before Jim has a thriving community of acolytes. He is the bane of Joe's life, but Joe hesitates to evict him from the property for a number of reasons. This is how Joe perceives Jim:

"Teetering, tiptoeing his padded boots to balance the cycle (surely the feet inside those boots were cloven), he sat and looked at us. He was young, no more than twenty-two or -three. His hair was long and tousled, even matted where the helmet, now hung on a handlebar, had crushed it down. It crawled over his collar, and was pushed forward on his forehead, hiding his horns. His brown eyes, extraordinarily large and bright, gleamed out of that excess of hair, and his teeth, badly spaced, the eyeteeth long and pointed, were bared in a hanging, watchful, half-crazy grin. His coveralls and his shaggy head were splashed with green and gold as the leaves of the bay tree above him moved in the wind. He creaked like a saddle when he shifted, and he gave off an odor like a neglected gym locker."

"Who could persuade him that the Folk who lived simple lives and sang simple songs were also the people

who discriminated, segregated, lynched, fought with switchblades, vulgarized everything they touched, saved for a rainy day, bought on credit, were suckers for slogans, loved gadgets, waved the flag, were sentimental about Mother, knew no folksongs, hated beards, and demanded the dismissal of school superintendents who permitted The Catcher in the Rye to appear on high-school reading lists?"

One of the reasons for Joe's antipathy is that his own deceased son had had similar anti-establishment inclinations, and Jim's presence touches a very raw nerve.

The other person who upsets Joe's apple cart is **Marian Catlin**, an absolutely charming young woman who has moved into the next door property with her husband. Before long both Ruth and Joe adore Marian. This affection will result in much heartache. This heartache, together with the bewilderment, anger and guilt over his son's senseless death, builds to a crescendo of pain for Joe as he considers where he might have gone wrong as a parent. At times Joe descends into the bleak and bitter.

Once again I was captivated by the beauty of Stegner's prose. Whether it is a long lyrical description of nature, an angry outburst or a witty one-liner as Joe ruminates on life, love and death, Stegner's prose is brilliant.

I was also struck by the many **contrasts** in the novel:

#Joe represents the Establishment; Jim represents anti-establishment.

#Joe and Ruth live in a beautiful spot, but there are various elements of ugliness around them with regard to neighbours.

#Their garden is full of singing birds, but then one hears the sound of a shotgun and dead pigeons come fluttering to the ground to the cacophonic sound of barking dogs.

#The garden has beautiful flowers, but there are wasps and tarantulas about.

#Joe is plagued by gophers destroying his garden, and as he goes after a gopher he kills a King snake in the process, which very visibly has the gopher in its stomach and Joe realises that he has actually killed an ally. There are snakes in Joe's paradise - both physically and metaphorically.

#Marian has a love for all the little live things, and she prefers to have the indigenous over the exotic in her garden. Ruth cultivates roses as well as other flowers.

#Joe and Ruth have contrasting personalities, and they compliment each other perfectly.

And once again I cannot resist sharing some **quotes**:

"Sympathy I have failed in, stoicism I have barely passed. But I have made straight A in irony—that curse, that evasion, that armor, that way of staying safe while seeming wise."

"Better a country fox with a hemorrhoid than a city fox with a pile. Aesop must have said it."

"Lyrical is the word. Dawns with choirs of meadow larks, noons celebrated by our mockingbird friends, afternoons that go down in veils of blue to the sweet sad Tennysonian intonings of mourning doves."

"Think how often beauty and delicacy and grace are choked out by weeds."

"Yet he spoke some of my opinions, in his incomparably crackbrained way, and I was uneasily aware that in putting him down I was pinning myself."

"These people are so hell-bent to be individuals that they don't even exist except as gangs..."

"He is dangerous, too, and all the more so because, as I now recognize, he has no more malice than he has sense, and has besides a considerable dedication to beliefs that he unquestionably considers virtuous.

Dangerousness is not necessarily a function of malicious intent.”

“Could I stand to see humane feelings and noble ideals come half-baked from that oven? I doubted it.”

“It’s the beginning of wisdom when you recognize that the best you can do is choose which rules you want to live by, and it’s persistent and aggravated imbecility to pretend you can live without any.”

“Well, so the more he changed the more he was the same thing.”

“There is no way to step off the treadmill. It is all treadmill.”

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This novel is the prequel to The Spectator Bird. Wallace Stegner

<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Feisty Harriet says

Listening to Edward Herrmann read Stegner aloud has got to be one of the most delightful things in literature. This story follows Joe and his wife Ruth for about 6 months; they are retired and making a new life in rural Northern California and trying to fit in (or not) with various neighbor-characters. But, that's not really what the book is about. Driving an exciting, twisting plot line is not Stegner's style, but he is a master at delving into humanity and all our facets and bringing the good and the ugly, the beautific and the selfish, up to the surface. This is beautifully written, and Herrmann voicing Joe is perfection.
