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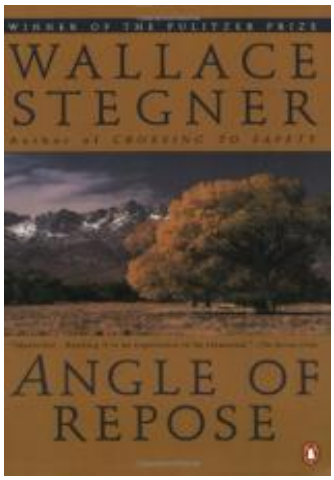
Angle of Repose

by Wallace Stegner



About the Book

Wallace Stegner has said of his epic novel, "It's perfectly clear that if every writer is born to write one story, that's my story." It is a testament to the power of Stegner's prose and vision that **Angle of Repose**, winner of the 1972 Pulitzer Prize for fiction, can be appreciated as America's story as well. Based on the correspondence of the little-known 19th century writer, Mary Hallock Foote, the novel's heroes represent opposing but equally strong strains of the American ideal. Susan Burling Ward is refined, educated, and strong-willed. Her husband, Oliver, is a handsome adventurer of cruder habits, who brings a pistol when he comes courting, yet who is humbled in the presence of Susan's sophistication. As we follow Susan on her first journey across the young country?"not to join a new society but to endure it"?we experience the West through the eyes of a true easterner, horrified at the lack of culture, the quickly fabricated cities, the dust, dirt and heat. Susan eventually finds herself able to appreciate the raw beauty of her new surroundings, and is even successful in building comfortable homes for her family. Yet throughout her married life she defines herself through her east coast roots, debating Oliver's worthiness as a husband and provider, and assessing what she has given up in exchange for a life of adventure and uncertainty.

In Susan and Oliver's numerous disappointments and incidents of misfortune we find Stegner exposing the myth of America's west as a land of golden opportunity and fear less cowboys. It is a theme we find in many of his novels, along with a passionate appreciation of the western landscape. Indeed, Stegner's most magnificent writing can be found in his descriptions of the mountain peaks, deep canyons, winding ravines, and vast stretches of plain and prairie. The terrain becomes a character in its own right, deserving of fear and respect, forcing its will on the people who carve their homes out of its resistant rock and soil. But we must not label Stegner merely a regional writer. To do so would overlook his technical brilliance, which shines through in this novel in his choice of narrator: retired historian Lyman Ward, whose degenerative bone disease has confined him to a wheelchair and left him unable to move his head from side to side. Lyman's literal tunnel vision elucidates the figurative?as an historian he looks to the past, and as a disillusioned husband and father, he finds solace in it. But, as he discovers in the course of researching his grandmother's biography, even he cannot escape the present and some measure of self-examination.

Without Lyman's narrative input, Susan Burling Ward's story would have flattened into epic melodrama; his perspective broadens the novel's scope, and enables us to draw parallels between Susan's life and his own, between her century and ours. Although the term 'angle of repose' refers to a resting point, Stegner's novel, if nothing else, helps us recognize America as a nation in constant flux, engaged in incessant struggle between east and west, between young and old, between myth and reality, between reaching for one's dreams, and settling for less. Angle of Repose was written during a time of tremendous political and social upheaval in America, and Lyman's frequent reflections on the era create much of the tension in the novel. Yet some twenty years after its publication the character's personal histories continue to be relevant and edifying. They are America's stories, part of her past and present?undoubtedly part of her future.

Discussion Guide

1. What do you think of Stegner's narrative technique, i.e., his use of a contemporary historian to tell Susan Ward's story? Is Lyman Ward a reliable narrator? How would this novel be different if Lyman's own story were excluded?

2. Stegner's narrator is confined to a wheelchair and partially paralyzed. He cannot move his head to either side, and thus can only look straight ahead. How does Stegner use these limitations to shape Lyman's role as a narrator and biographer? What is Stegner saying about the past and future?

3. How much of Susan Ward's destiny was determined by the era in which she lived and the limitations that era placed on a woman's freedom? Do you think of her as a woman ahead of her time?

4. Throughout the novel, Susan is torn between her old life on the east coast and her new one on the west. To each of her western homes she strives to bring a sense of gentility and comfort, even in the most rudimentary of circumstances. Her cabin in Leadville, for instance, becomes a magnet for the town's cultural elite despite the cramped quarters. Are the efforts futile or worthwhile? Do you applaud her attempts at civilizing the West or is she merely unable to accept another way of life for what it is? Is there a fundamental difference between America's two coasts today?

5. Stegner eliminates any concrete evidence of Susan's infidelity with Frank Sargent, leaving Lyman the task of piecing together the events that led up to Agnes's death. Why are these details left deliberately obscure? Does this heighten or mitigate the effects of Agnes's death on the story? Is Lyman being fair to Susan in his depiction of these events?

6. Susan often wonders if she made the right decision in marrying Oliver. Would someone like Thomas Hudson have brought her more happiness? What do you imagine Susan's life would have been like if she had stayed in the East? How did her years in the West shape her character?

7. Why does the novel end with Susan's return to Idaho? Why is it significant that the details of her life in the house in Grass Valley are given to us through the present only?

8. Do you think Lyman identifies more with his grandmother or his grandfather? How do the various aspects of his present situation?i.e., age, physical disability, marriage, career?compare and contrast to those of his grandparents?

9. The geologic term 'angle of repose', defines the angle of the slope at which debris will cease rolling downhill and settle in one place, as in a landslide. Why do you think Stegner chose this term for the title of his novel? By the end of the novel, has Lyman reached his own angle of repose? How does he change over the course of the summer in which this novel takes place?

10. Stegner's novels are known for their strong sense of place. What role does the terrain in the West play in Angle of Repose? Would you consider the land to be a 'character' in the novel? Can you describe this character in human terms?

11. The story of America's western expansion has been told in myriad ways, but often with the same details: danger and hardships, brave but crude pioneers, and get-rich-quick schemes peddled by untrustworthy scam artists. How do Susan and Oliver's experiences compare and contrast with these myths of the American West? How is each a hero in his or her own right? How are they different from the stereotypical western hero?

12. Angle of Repose was written in 1971, during a period of great upheaval in America's social and political culture. How does Stegner's novel reflect the issues that were prevalent at the time of his writing? What are the parallels, if any, between Susan Ward's story and that of Shelly Hawkes? How does each woman represent her own era? Is either story as relevant today?

Author Bio

Wallace Earle Stegner (February 18, 1909 ? April 13, 1993) was an American historian, novelist, short story writer, and environmentalist, often called "The Dean of Western Writers". He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972 and the U.S. National Book Award in 1977.

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