

RECOMMENDATIONS:

***Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner**

Nichole Bernier, Author of *The Unfinished Work of Elizabeth D.*

The first time I read Wallace Stegner's *Crossing to Safety*, I was in my late twenties and hungry for insight into what made for a solid relationship, and what made it last. I loved my work at a travel magazine and I loved my independence, maybe a little too much, and had just ended a long relationship I knew wasn't healthy enough to cross into my thirties, let alone to any safety beyond.

Commitment was everywhere: friends marrying, parents celebrating their thirtieth anniversary, media cooing that Linda and Paul McCartney had never spent a night apart. But the notion of a happy claustrophobia—two independent people like Siamese twins, decade after decade, possibly even while growing in different directions—was something I eyed with skepticism. I felt like a child with her nose to the glass and a dawning awareness that the beautiful things inside may not taste as good as they looked.

How do people navigate growth and change in relationships over time? Do the years dull the edges of our flaws and soften our irritations, making us kinder, gentler versions of ourselves? These are the big-think questions at the heart of *Crossing to Safety*, an incisive portrayal of two couples, friends for decades. And his answer is a resounding no.

What struck me most, that first time reading the novel, was Stegner's proposition that character remains constant through life: we might become more pliable or more brittle over the years, but essentially, we are who we are—for better or for worse, for richer or poorer, and so on. There in his pages was the perky wife with just a whiff of control freak, doomed in the end by her own stubbornness. There was the solid, sensible other wife, enduring in her fortitude, right into infirmity. In my twenties, world as my oyster and luck changing daily, I was wide-eyed at the suggestion that we were shackled to our unchanging natures.

The opening of the first chapter plunks us down at what is technically the end of the story, both couples in their sixties. The four people are reunited at a family compound in Vermont, a place very dear to them, after many years apart. Someone is incapacitated, and someone else is dying. Then with authority and candor, the narrator sets us up find out how we came to be at this place:

There it was, there it is, the place where during the best time of our lives friendship had its home and happiness its headquarters...Whatever happened to the passion we all had to improve ourselves, live up to our potential, leave a mark on the world?... Instead, the world has left marks on us. We got older... I didn't know myself well, and still don't. But I did know, and know now, the few people I loved and trusted. My feeling for them is one part of me I have never quarreled with, even though my relations with them have more than once been abrasive.

And so, we cycle back. The story begins anew in 1937 showing the circumstances under which the four met and became friends. The men are pursuing tenure-track jobs in a midwestern English department, the wives are pregnant and optimistic. Larry, our first-person narrator, is an honest, sometimes wry voice of integrity and an astute judge of character, even as he takes knowing jabs at his own professional arrogance. The story is very much about social class—Sid and Charity Lang come from money, while Larry and Sally have to struggle for every rent payment and cup of tea—and also about talent and ambition. It is a recurring source of pain that Sid has the former but not the latter, and Charity never stops trying to drive it into him by the sheer force of her will. At the end of the novel we're back where we began, all four together for the shocking twist of goodbyes in Vermont. And we readers are left feeling as if we've lived an entire life, or four, and maybe even bits of our own.

I love Stegner's voice. His point of view, through Larry, never wavers, moving the story forward with periodic pauses to analyze the moment. It is clear-eyed hindsight sharpened with the wisdom of years. The great benefit of this structure—a voice coming back through time—is that it provides panoramic understanding. When Larry recounts an awkward dinner scene, he dangles the camera from above and lets us see what each

character was experiencing at the moment, based on what they may or may not have known at the time. When he's recounting fun they had in the old days—hoo hoo, ha ha—he's poking fun at their own enjoyment, the champagne bubblieness of youth with a naivete of what's to come.

Stegner is known for his environmental writing championing the west, fiction and nonfiction that influenced generations of conservationists and put him on the board of the Sierra Club. His twenty-eight books included thirteen novels, among them *Angle of Repose*, for which won the Pulitzer in 1972, and *The Spectator Bird*, which won a National Book Award. But it's *Crossing to Safety*—his last novel, published in 1987 when he was seventy-eight years old—that I read first, and will make him in my mind always a writer of relationships. Here is a man only ten years younger than Fitzgerald and Hemingway, but his writing isn't taken with extremes of masculinity and the romanticism of that writing era. Growing up with an abusive father and a stoic mother who died young, Stegner writes with a depth of love and appreciation for women. His characters are three-dimensional and opinionated, without coy flourishes or hollow romantic platitudes. An essay about his mother, written when he was in his eighties, is so heartwrenching it's as if she'd died only days before:

My name was the last word you spoke, your faith in me and love for me were your last thoughts. I could bear them no better than I could bear your death, and I went blindly out into the November darkness and walked for hours with my mind clenched like a fist... Your kind of love, once given, is never lost. You are alive and luminous in my head....You are at once a lasting presence and an unhealed wound.

Early in *Crossing to Safety*, Larry Morgan poses the question, "How do you make a book that anyone will read out of lives as quiet as these?" It's as if Stegner is asking that of himself. In a 1990 interview with *The Paris Review*, soon after the publication of *Crossing to Safety*, Stegner said:

There were problems in this book, partly because it's a very quiet book. Not much happens in it. It contains none of the things that seem to be essential for contemporary novels. Much goes on in the mind, in memory. I was doing something that I would have advised almost any student of mine not to do: I let nearly the whole book happen in one head, during the course of one day. There's a little bit of front-stage action during the day, but most of the book curls back and picks up the past. It's difficult to do this without being slow and tedious. I don't know if I succeeded or not.

Would such a book be published today? Quiet is a dirty word these days, a gentle kiss of death from agents and editors for novels that don't have enough whizz-bang and boom. But mention *Crossing to Safety* in any gathering of readers, and you'll get a knowing sigh of affection. Because it's just so damned knowing.

"*Crossing to Safety* is by no means a valentine," wrote the author Jane Smiley. "It is more the complex depiction, sometimes light but often dark, of the multiple compromises involved in three marriages—that of the Morgans, that of the Langs, and that between the Morgans and the Langs. Its materials are simple, but I can think of no other novel quite like it, because in fact, few marriages in novels are as permeable and yet as permanent."

The people are real, and the marriages are real. The characters have rich talents and bitter shortcomings, the true ingredients in marriage and friendship in the lives of unsung men and women everywhere. To read this book is to stand with your nose pressed to the glass, and know exactly how everything tastes.