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Angle of Repose (Stegner)

Angle of Repose

Wallace Stegner, 1971
Penguin Group USA
392 pp.
ISBN-13: 9780141185477

Summary

Angle of Repose tells the story of Lyman Ward, a retired professor of history and author of books about the Western frontier, who returns to his ancestral home of Grass Valley, California, in the Sierra Nevada. Wheelchair-bound with a crippling bone disease and dependent on others for his every need, Ward is nonetheless embarking on a search of monumental proportions—to rediscover his grandmother, now long dead, who made her own journey to Grass Valley nearly a hundred years earlier. Like other great quests in literature, Lyman Ward's investigation leads him deep into the dark shadows of his own life.

More

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 fearless 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. (*From the publisher*.)

Author Bio

- Birth—February 18, 1909
- Where—Lake Mills, Iowa, USA
- Death—April 13, 1993
- Where—Sante Fe, New Mexico
- Education—B.A., University of Utah; Ph.,D., State University of Iowa.
- Awards—Pulitzer Prize for Angle of Repose, 1972; National Book Award for The Spectator Bird, 1977

Some call Wallace Stegner "The Dean of Western Writers." He was born in Lake Mills, Iowa and grew up in Great Falls, Montana, Salt Lake City, Utah and southern Saskatchewan, which he wrote about in his autobiography Wolf Willow. Stegner says he "lived in twenty places in eight states and Canada". While living in Utah, he joined a Boy Scout troop at a Mormon church (though he was not Mormon but Presbyterian himself) and earned the Eagle Scout award.

He received his B.A. at the University of Utah in 1930. He taught at the University of Wisconsin and Harvard University, and then he settled in at Stanford University,

where he founded the creative writing program. His students included Sandra Day O'Connor, Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Thomas McGuane, Ken Kesey, Gordon Lish, Ernest Gaines, and Larry McMurtry.

He served as a special assistant to Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall. He was elected to the Sierra Club board of directors for a term that lasted 1964—1966. He also moved into a house in nearby Los Altos Hills and became one of the town's most prominent residents.

Stegner's novel *Angle of Repose* won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1972, and was directly based on the letters of Mary Hallock Foote (later published as the memoir A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West). Stegner's use of uncredited passages taken directly from Foote's letters caused a minor controversy. Stegner also won the National Book Award for *The Spectator Bird* in 1977.

In the late 1980s, he refused a National Medal from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1992 because he believed the NEA had become too politicized. He died in Santa Fe, New Mexico, while visiting the city to give a lecture. His death was the result of injuries suffered in an automobile accident on March 28, 1993. He is the father of nature writer Page Stegner. (*From Wikipedia*)

Book Reviews

Angle of Repose is a disquisition on the high price paid for men of ability and women of taste for the opening and developing of the West. The financial rewards could be great, but the waste in spiritual resources, cultural disappointment and blasted hopes could be equally great.... Some of the chapters will surely put some readers in mind of the early Willa Cather.... They have the same tactile feel for the American West and they rehearse the struggles of those times.
Thomas Lask - New York Times

Masterful...Reading it is an experience to be treasured.
Boston Globe

Brilliant...Two stories, past and present, merge to produce what important fiction must: a sense of the enhancement of life.
Los Angeles Times

Discussion Questions

Background: The title is an engineering term for the angle at which soil finally settles after, for example, being dumped from a mine as tailings. It seems to describe the loose wandering of the Ward family as they try to carve a civilized existence in the west and, hopefully, return to the east as successes. The story is a series of Oliver's hopeful struggles on various mining, hydrology and construction engineering jobs, and Susan's adaptation and struggle to support him.

The book is given more complexity by having Lyman Ward narrate from his wheelchair a century after the fact. It is clear we are reading Lyman's interpretation of the story, a literary device that encourages readers to be more skeptical of what they are told. Some of the disappointments of his life, including his divorce, color his interpretation of his grandparent's story. Toward the end of the novel, he gives up on his original ambition for a complete biography of his grandmother. It is as if he picked up the disappointment from his ancestors or, perhaps, is drawn to focus more closely on his own mortality and what he can accomplish himself.

The novel is directly based on the letters of Mary Hallock Foote, later published as A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West. Stegner's use of substantial passages of Foote's actual letters as correspondence from his fictional character Susan Burling Ward caused controversy when it came to light. His use of the letters, however, gives the novel's locations—Leadville, New Almaden, Idaho, and Mexico—an authentic feel one doesn't usually find in westerns; the letters also give the Ward's struggles with the environment, shady businessmen, politicians and other dangers a human feel. In Lyman's interaction with (and rantings about) 1970s culture, we get yet another historical dimension to the story (Lyman's son teaches at Berkeley, and a counter culture daughter of a neighbor helps transcribe the tapes).

The novel is thickly populated with real, although minor, historical personages, giving further realism to the narrative. A "Who's Who" of American mining engineers of the late 1800s make their appearance, including Clarence King, Samuel Emmons, Henry Janin, and Rossiter Raymond (*From the publisher*.)

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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?
(*Questions issued by publisher*.)

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Mary Anna Hallock Foote

Contemporary Authors Online, 2002

Born: 1847 in Milton, New York, United States
Died: 1938 in Hingham, Massachusetts, United States
Nationality: American

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

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- *John Bodewin's Testimony,* Ticknor (Boston, MA), 1886.
- *The Last Assembly Ball, and The Fate of a Voice,* Houghton, Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1889.
- *The Chosen Valley,* Houghton, Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1892.
- *Coeur d'Alene,* Houghton, Mifflin (Boston, MA), 1894.
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ILLUSTRATOR

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- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Skeleton in Armor,* J. R. Osgood (Boston, MA), 1876.
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter,* J. R. Osgood (Boston, MA), 1876.
- Alfred Tennyson, *A Dream of Fair Women,* J. R. Osgood (Boston, MA), 1879.

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- Stephen C. Foster, *My Old Kentucky Home,* Ticknor (Boston, MA), 1888.
- Stephen C. Foster, *Old Plantation Melodies,* Ticknor (Boston, MA), 1890.

Contributor to *The Spinners' Book of Fiction,* Paul Elder (San Francisco, CA), 1907. Contributor to periodical publications, including *St. Nicholas Magazine, Scribner's Monthly, Century Magazine,* and *Colorado Magazine.*

Illustrator and author.

Family: Born November 19, 1847, near Milton, NY; died June 25, 1938, in Hingham, MA; daughter of Nathaniel and Ann Burling Hallock; married Arthur DeWint Foote (a mining engineer), 1876; children: one son. Education: Studied three years at the School of Design, Cooper Union, New York, NY. Religion: Quaker.

"Sidelights"

Illustrator and author Mary Anna Hallock Foote earned her reputation through her novels and short stories about the American West, as well as through her black-and-white, woodcut illustrations of Western life. Foote moved to the West as a nearly thirty-year-old professional with strong ties to the East, and her depictions of the West reveal her frustrations and eventual reconciliation with life on the frontier. Christine Bold wrote in *Twentieth-Century Western Writers* that "Her work merits recovery for a contemporary audience, as part of the largely forgotten story of women's responses to the West, specifically because the subtleties and ambivalence in her vision adumbrate some of the stronger criticism of modern western and women writers." Foote wrote as a woman who reluctantly followed her husband West, and struggled to integrate herself with this new landscape and culture. Her fiction and illustrations, which emphasized reconciliation and nurturing over violence, differ from work by western men.

Born on a Hudson River farm, Mary Hallock was the youngest child of devout Quakers. The extended family valued education and strong family ties, and many of Hallock's relatives were engaged in social causes such as women's suffrage and abolition. Hallock began drawing at a young age, encouraged especially by her sister, Bessie, who often sat as her model. Mary's parents encouraged her early interest in art, but were reluctant to send her to art school until Bessie persuaded them. Hallock left home to study for three years at the School of Design at Cooper Union, a New York City preparatory school. She mastered the demanding techniques of woodcut illustration under William James Linton and William Rimmer, and used this medium for most of her illustrating career.

Hallock's first professional commission was for four black-and-white drawings in A. D. Richardson's *Beyond the Mississippi* in 1867. By 1870, she was regularly publishing her work in magazines such as *St. Nicholas* and *Scribner's Monthly,* specializing in domestic scenes and rural landscapes inspired by her childhood. Though she moved home following her education, she traveled often to New York and Boston to meet with publishers and writers. Hallock took advantage of these trips to renew college friendships and to meet other artists, writers and intellectuals. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, especially charmed by Hallock's work, commissioned her to collaborate on a gift-book edition of his *The Hanging of the Crane* (1874) and to illustrate his *Skeleton in Armor* (1876). She also collaborated on John Greenleaf Whittier's *Hazel Blossoms* (1875) and *Mabel Martin: A Harvest Idyl* (1876). During one of her trips to New York, Hallock met a young mining engineer, Arthur DeWint Foote. He was headed for the West, and the two, after a long-distance courtship, married in 1876. Bound by contract, Hallock had to make wedding plans while completing her work for *Skeleton in Armor.* Then, Mary Hallock Foote followed her husband to a mining camp in New Almaden, California, fifty miles south of San Francisco.

California was as far from everything dear and familiar to Foote as she had ever been. She was disappointed with her new life in a redwood cabin at the mining camp, and spent most of her time alone. She took advantage of this solitude by drawing. Her maid, who had accompanied Foote west, posed as a model for Hester Prynne for an illustrated gift edition of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1876). This work earned critical praise, and William Dean Howells in the December 1877 *Atlantic Monthly* called Foote "the artist who perhaps unites more fine qualities than any other." Foote also sketched her surroundings, documenting the economic and social inequities between the mining engineers and the Chinese and Mexican laborers. After a year at New Almaden, Arthur Foote decided to try freelance engineer work. He and Mary moved to Santa Cruz, California, supported for a while by Mary's commission from *The Scarlet Letter* and by her Western drawings and articles published in *Scribner's Monthly.* In 1878 Foote returned with her young son to her family home in Milton. A year later she joined her husband in Leadville, Colorado. Her illustration work was in great demand during the 1870s, and she stabilized her family financially while Arthur job-hopped. Foote had been corresponding regularly with a close friend from Cooper Union, Helena deKay. Kay had married *Scribner's Monthly* editor Richard Watson Gilder, and the couple began encouraging Foote's literary efforts. Foote's first published short story about New Almaden appeared in the Atlantic Monthly in 1881.

Loss is dominant in Foote's early writing. In her first novel, *The Led-Horse Claim: A Romance of a Mining Camp,* easterner Cecil Conrath joins her shiftless brother in Colorado and falls in love with a mine superintendent, Hilgard. Poaching, exploitation and competition abound in the frontier, and Cecil's brother is killed in a battle between rival mining groups. Though Cecil and Hilgard marry, her family's opposition and the toll of daily life overshadow this happiness. In her short stories, too, loss accompanies life in the West. The heroine in "The Exile" is completely cut off from Eastern culture, and in "The Fate of a Voice," a heroine abandons her singing career when she marries a mining engineer.

Foote's twentieth-century fiction takes a brighter perspective on life in the West. Her work is more realistic, more politically and socially aware, and less sentimental. Loss now brings Foote's characters to greater understanding. In *The Desert and the Sown,* a young man and his mother, Paul and Emily, reconcile themselves with their heritage in the West and with Emily's estranged husband (and Paul's father), Adam, just before he dies. Bold wrote that "The dominant impression here is that the West is a positive force which can be integrated with the East to good purpose; but the role of death in facilitating integration sustains the hint of loss and irreconcilable tension." Kent Ljungquist wrote in *Dictionary of Literary Biography,* "As Mary Hallock Foote's own career evolved, her fiction transcended the 'protected' perspectives of her somewhat sappy heroines in romances such as *The Led-Horse Claim.* In works such as *Edith Bonham* and *The Ground-Swell,* Foote achieved a mature narrative perspective in which the West serves as a significant backdrop for fictional dramas of psychological subtlety and acuity."

As the Footes moved from Colorado to Mexico, and to Idaho, Mary produced sketches, stories and essays about these locations. She began a correspondence with Rudyard Kipling and contributed two illustrations for his *The Naulahka* (1892). In 1888 and 1889 *Century* published a collection of her drawings titled *Pictures of the Far West,* based on the landscape, wildlife, homes and people of Idaho. William Allen Rogers praised these and Foote's other drawings in *A World Worth While: A Record of "Auld Acquaintance"* (1922), writing "There is a charm about her black-and-white drawings which cannot be described, but it may be accounted for by the fact that, more than any other American illustrator, she lived the pictures from day to day which she drew so sympathetically." In 1893 she served as an art juror for the World's Columbian Exposition (Chicago World's Fair), and was included in *Century*'s tribute, "The Century Series of American Artists." The Footes moved to Grass Valley, California in 1895, and remained there for thirty years. She retired from illustration and concentrated on her writing, producing eight additional novels and four volumes of short stories. She also began her memoir, published as *A Victorian Gentlewoman in the Far West: The Reminiscences of Mary Hallock Foote.*

Foote and her husband returned to the East in 1932, settling in Hingham, Massachusetts. After she died, her work fell into obscurity until 1971, when Wallace Stegner wrote a fictionalized biography of her in *Angle of Repose.* Stegner contrasts Arthur Foote's rootlessness to Mary's nesting instincts, admiring her patience, endurance and courage. For this "protected woman's point of view" of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century West, as Stegner put it, Mary Hallock Foote's illustrations and fiction remain valuable.

Further Readings

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Source Citation

"Mary Anna Hallock Foote." *Contemporary Authors Online*. Detroit: Gale, 2002. *Biography In Context*. Web. 29 July 2013.

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Biography of Wallace Stegner

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Wallace Stegner once said about his writing, "In fiction I think we should have no agenda but to tell the truth." Stegner's prose has inspired generations of Americans to seek their own truth. In The Geography of Hope, A Tribute to Wallace Stegner, written by his friends, colleages, and his son, Page Stegner, we sense a far greater resonance than a mere collection of memorial applause. "It is a book about what one man has taught us, by his example, about the accountable life; a book about what it means to be a responsible, loving, thoughtful, constituent of the human race. That is the only way he would have it."

Wallace Stegner was born on February 18, 1909 in Lake Mills, Iowa. Over a 60 year career he wrote 30 books. Among the novels are, The Big Rock Candy Mountain, 1943; Joe Hill, 1950; All The Little Live Things, 1967 (Commonwealth Club Gold Medal); Angle of Repose, 1972 (Pulitzer Prize); The Spectator Bird, (National Book Award), 1977; Recapitulation, 1979; Collected Stories, 1990, and Crossing to Safety, 1987. The nonfiction includes Beyond the Hundredth Meridian, 1954; Wolf Willow, (A History, A Story, and a Memory of the Last Plains Frontier), 1962; The Sound of Mountain Water, 1969; Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West, 1992, a collection of essays that earned him a nomination for the National Book Critics Circle award.

Although Wallace Stegner is called "the dean of Western writers," not all of his fiction is laid in the West. One of his most successful novels, Crossing to Safety takes place in Wisconsin and Vermont. The Spectator Bird is in California and Denmark. All The Little Live Things is pure California, not typically Western. Many of his short stories have a variety of settings: Vermont, Egypt, the South of France, as well as the American West. His non-fiction, however, and one of his most eloquent statements about the environment, The Wilderness Letter, are definitely Western. His impact, historically and environmentally, is Western.

Wallace Stegner wrote about the need to preserve the West, and he also fought for it. He became involved with the conservation movement in the 1950's while fighting the construction of dam on the Green River at Dinosaur National Monument. In 1960 he wrote his famous Wilderness Letter on the importance of federal protection of wild places. This letter was used to introduce the bill that established the National Wilderness Preservation System in 1964. Wallace Stegner also founded the Committee for the Green Foothills in Santa Clara County, California and was involved with The Sierra Club and Wilderness Society. He also served as assistant to the Secretary of the Interior, Stewart Udall, during the Kennedy administration. There, he worked on issues dealing with the expansion of National