



Wallace Stegner, a Pulitzer Prize-winning author and former director of the Stanford University writing program, spent his high school and early college years in Utah. Many of his books, which include *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, *Mormon Country*, *The Gathering of Zion*, *Angle of Repose*, and *Recapitulation*, deal with the West and particularly the Mormon West. "I didn't choose a literary career and dedicate myself to it. I didn't choose the West as the place I would write about and from . . ." he once observed. "It turned out that I had to chew, because I had those teeth, and it turned out that I had to chew cottonwoods because those were the trees I grew up among, the ones that I found handy for my chewing."¹

For Mormons this was a fortunate discovery. Stegner has been a sympathetic and perceptive outside observer, teaching us much about ourselves because of his dedication to what he has described as his "obligations" as a writer: "not to flatter, not to praise, certainly not to overpraise" and "to try to be honest, to try to be impartial, to try to be serious."²

This interview was conducted at his home in California during March 1979 by Peggy Fletcher and L. John Lewis.

SUNSTONE: Your most recent novel, *Recapitulation*, was set in Salt Lake.

STEGNER: Yes. Several of my books have been set in Salt Lake. Parts of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, of which *Recapitulation* is a sort of continuation. Parts of the Joe Hill story. At least two of the essays in *The Sound of Mountain Water*.

SUNSTONE: Are your perceptions of Salt Lake different in this new book? There is a constant reference to the changes brought by time.

STEGNER: Yes, my perceptions are very different in this one. They were bound to be. I had got myself into the position of following a man who returned to his home town after half a century. My sense of how different it could be derived from the experience of a friend who graduated from the University of Utah in 1929 and went

down to Aruba to work for an oil company. In 1932 he came back through Salt Lake and joined some others of us to go to the Olympics in Los Angeles. He had been on a desert island for three years, and he was overwhelmed by change. Primarily the change had been wrought by neon, which the rest of us had barely noticed because it came a little at a time. For him, the whole town had changed. In *Recapitulation* I was projecting things like that across forty-five years, a time span in which many changes will take place even in a traditional town. Also, I was playing with themes of remembering and forgetting, the indelibility and capriciousness of memory. When you return to a place that you haven't seen in a long time, there is often a disturbing strangeness. Memory is attached to places, and when the places change, memory is disrupted. In *Recapitulation* I was not reporting my own experience, because I have been back to Salt Lake often since I left off living there. But things do change. That's partly what the book's about.

SUNSTONE: Is it your feeling that the people have changed? That they have become less conservative—more cosmopolitan?

STEGNER: Oh, sure. Radio and television have helped rub away provinciality in Salt Lake as elsewhere. That's not all good—in a sense they have homogenized the country. You have no idea how far off, behind the mountains, Salt Lake seemed before television, air travel, and more than the beginnings of radio. In the Twenties, we were still playing with crystal sets, scratching on a piece of rock with a wire and cheering when we got a sound in the headphones. It was only at the end of the Twenties that we began to get radio as a systematic invasion of our geographical isolation. It happened to every corner of the United States. Benny DeVoto went through the Middle West about 1940 and was amazed to find that, through radio, the Middle West had discovered the salad. Similar changes happened in clothes, speech, many other things. In my novel I was jumping back from the full present into a time when radio was very young and television unheard of. Those days, you didn't get up in the morning and listen to Begin or Sadat while you brushed

your teeth. I don't look upon mass communications as a savior, exactly. Much of the time they're cheap, sleazy, and dim-witted. But they do mean that nobody, in even the remotest parts of the country, need any longer feel cut off from the rest of the world.

SUNSTONE: So in your own personal experience, do you see Salt Lake as really changed—in terms of the people, the culture, Mormon doctrine?

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STEGNER: I haven't been in Salt Lake enough to be a competent judge, but my impression is that Salt Lake is much like other regional capitals. It has the same contacts with the outside, though its Mormon focus tends to make its responses somewhat different. But by and large, it is like Boise or Portland or Denver or other cities with which it might be compared. It is the center of a big area, the economic and cultural capital of a region. What happens to the others happens to it—the same growth into the suburbs, the same problems of growth, pollution, strain on institutions. One thing that does make it different is the enormous financial power of the Church. A lot of the development in Salt Lake is Church financed and directed. Trolley Square may be a local variant of San Francisco's Ghirardelli Square, but the ZCMI complex is different from business complexes elsewhere.

Another thing that in the old days made Salt Lake unique was its instant access to the desert and mountains. I have the impression that that contact with the earth has diminished as the population has increased and the suburbs spread. When I was a boy we could take a streetcar to 21st South and 13th East (which is where the State Penitentiary then was), and from the Prison Farm's fence could hook onto a D&RG freight going up Parley's Canyon, and be up in the mountains in half an hour. By contrast, the last time I tried driving up into one of the canyons it was a hassle.

I get the impression that Salt Lake is very big on development and that there are many wheeler-dealers among those who run the town. It could be that the Church is a brake on the worst aspects of this; it could be that the Church abets it. I don't know. I rather suspect the latter.

SUNSTONE: Do you think that reflects a materialist strain that always has been a part of Mormon culture?

STEGNER: If so, it's something that Mormonism shares with the United States at large. Despite common criticism, Mormon industry and business may actually be more responsible than industry and business elsewhere. But it is not likely to ignore the main chance. What I see in Salt Lake may be based on hit-and-run observation, so don't quote me as doing anything but guessing. But it is clear that Salt Lake is one of the leaders in the boom that affects the entire Rocky Mountain area. Salt Lake isn't booming in isolation, and it isn't lagging behind. Uranium, coal, oil and real estate development have all offered big opportunities to entrepreneurs, among whom we have to include the Church.

SUNSTONE: What about the Mormon sense of history? Do you see that as having made a difference in Salt Lake as against some place like Denver or the other capitals you mentioned?

STEGNER: Perhaps some. Not enough to make it really different. Because there is civic pride in other places, there is a sense of history, there are cultural aspirations as well as go-getterism. Denver's Public Library, for example, is a great historical repository, and Denver has better museums than Salt Lake, and more, though not necessarily better, music. It is not a monumental city in the way Salt Lake is. Salt Lake has monuments, and statues, and treasured buildings, and Church shrines that are unusual in a town so young. Salt Lake set out to create early what might have taken half a millennium, because it does have the impulse, stimulated by both piety and a sense of social difference, to preserve the symbolic records of its history. I don't know whether it is still there or not, but there used to be—on Sixth East, I think—the stump of a little old cedar tree that was supposed to have been the only tree in the Valley when the pioneers arrived. Is that still there?

SUNSTONE: Yes.

STEGNER: Good. I approve of that impulse to preserve what has been historically important. It's more characteristic of Utah than of other western states. It was almost compulsory for Mormon emigrants to keep diaries during the trek across. Well, if you were fleeing Pharaoh across the Red Sea, and knew it and knew the significance of what you were doing, wouldn't *you* have kept a diary? No other wagon parties are that well recorded. A lot of people in the Gold Rush had a sense of history, too, but they were looking for a gold mine, not heaven on earth. They were more interested in getting news of new diggings, and buying shovels, than in taking notes or recording Providences. That historical piety is one of the things that has most interested me in Mormon culture. It has kept track of itself, it has valued its own saga. Ironic, too: the Mormons came into the West to build the future, and even as Clayton's odometer clicked off the miles, they had already begun to build a past.

SUNSTONE: What other things do you see as characteristic of Mormon culture?

STEGNER: To a modern swinger, it would look very straight, perhaps goody-goody, probably anachronistic. I am not a modern swinger, and I have no antipathy to straight arrows. But they do look very middle class to voguish people. Their virtues are family virtues, there is a strong and cohesive sense of community—exactly what the sociologists lament the passing of in our society. The virtues that the Mormons have chosen, or inherited, are old-fashioned American virtues, many of them stemming from rural New England and upstate New York. It remains to be seen how well they hold up in the face of Utah's—and the Church's—growing involvement in the technological society. They haven't held up very well in the rest of the United States, or in any place highly industrialized. But when you ask me what qualities I see in Mormons, I hardly know where to begin. That's a book—my third Mormon book. And I'll have to hold the book until I see how the Church handles its dilemma.

SUNSTONE: We, in fact, have noticed in a number of your books emphasis or interest in the family relationship: how did the children interact with the parents, and the marriage relationship. Did any of that come out of your time in Salt Lake?

STEGNER: I suppose it must have. Also, I grew up all over the West. If you read western history, you can't get around the fact that if people coming west didn't come, like the Mormons, as communities, they generally came as families. Very often, because it took time on the frontier to consolidate communities, the only cohesive element in their society was the family. I have noticed in several parts of the world that where there is virtually no community, because of war or other disruption, there is still a strong sense of family. The West was a social disruption for most Americans and most immigrants. Families did hold together because the family was the last line of defense against anarchy, the only social unit there was. Because it was part of my subject matter and also part of my life, I have probably put some of that last-ditch family solidarity in my books.

SUNSTONE: You have also said that all writers reveal something of their personal philosophy—personal value system—in what they write, which gives some consistency to their works.

STEGNER: I think they do. You can't write a book without revealing some of yourself, and what you reveal of yourself may be, for some readers, the most intimate and valuable thing in the book. I've said somewhere else that fiction is dramatized belief. You inevitably reveal yourself in what you elect to put your characters through and how you make them respond to their experience, and also in how you (I hope subtly!) nudge a reader into responding to what he reads.

SUNSTONE: Tell us about your book *Angle of Repose*—what you were saying about the grandmother especially, and the marriage relationship.

STEGNER: I was probably, in an ever-so-delicate way, calling my western egalitarian grandmother a snob. Her snobbery was almost like a tragic flaw, and it was actually the only thing about her that I myself didn't like. She couldn't ever see anything in her own life quite straight because she kept seeing it all through the eyes of her tony



eastern friends. But notice: I didn't write the book to prove that Grandmother was a snob, or that snobbery is an unpleasant weakness. I wasn't writing a morality play. I was writing a novel about a woman who had many fine qualities and great talents, and who led a most interesting life in interesting places. But if, as you seem to be, you are asking why I became Grandmother's judge, I have to say that I didn't like her snobbery, thought it a weakness, and used it to bring her to disaster. She didn't respect her husband as much as she should have. She thought of him as a boy in man's clothing, always on

Fiction is dramatized belief.

another man's errand and never quite up to the Clarence Kings and the articulate easterners. Whereas, as I pursued that family through the novel, I came to think of him as a sort of hero. He was at least as competent, though never so visibly, as she, and he had dreams that were quite as big and less selfish. Several people have told me that they were amazed, on reading the book for the second time, to find that Oliver, not Susan, is the hero. I suppose I bent their arms, in a way. I wanted him to come off as better than she thought him, and her to come off as a little less admirable than she thought herself. And then, of course, just because I don't believe there is any hero without a flaw, I gave him that hard, ugly streak of unforgiveness that perpetuated the anguish she had brought into their lives.

I should point out, too, that I had a sort of historical and sociological motive in that novel. Both Oliver and Susan were of a class that we have tended to overlook in our view of western history. We think of the western pioneer as a simple man with a handcart or covered wagon, a tall shanghai rooster, one spotted hog, and a grade-school education. But not all pioneers were farmers, and not all were poorly educated. I wanted to show, in Oliver and Susan Ward, some pioneers who were educated, gifted, well-born and well-connected, but were still authentic pioneers. The West was not entirely a deculturated desert. Not everybody lost his shirt, or came west without one.

SUNSTONE: In *Gathering of Zion* you treat the Mormon immigrants to the West—in this book as impartially as possible.

STEGNER: I was deliberately letting the emigrants speak for themselves, so that there was literally no attitude I could take, pro or con. I was simply trying to recreate the experience as the people who had it had lived it. That seemed to me the only fair way. And I've never had anything but pleasant comments from Mormons about that too. In *Mormon Country* I had inadvertently made a few comments that some people thought condescending. I didn't want that to happen again.

SUNSTONE: It has been said that *Mormon Country* was by and large much more positive and favorable, and not as objective as *The Gathering of Zion*.

STEGNER: It isn't as objective; it's more personal. I was neither pro-nor anti-Mormon when I wrote it. I was living in Cambridge, Massachusetts and very homesick for Utah and people I knew. I probably was more enthusias-

tic in that book, but now and then I was moved to say something about doctrine. Those were the spots that some people objected to.

SUNSTONE: We in the Mormon Church who are in the arts have been somewhat dismayed by the lack of literature that has been produced by the culture. There are plenty of other religious cultures that have produced fine literature: case in point, Jewish culture. What do you think the chances are that the Mormon culture could produce good literature? Is there such a thing as Mormon literature? Or ought there to be?

The chorus of every play ought to be in the hearts of the audience.

STEGNER: That's a complicated and difficult question. I will have to answer it piecemeal. First, Mormon culture hasn't had quite the time that Jewish culture has had. Give it another three or four thousand years and then ask your question. Second, Mormonism has until recently been preoccupied with its differences, its conflicts with the surrounding American culture, its martyrdoms. The dramas of the Mormon experience that have caught writers' imaginations have been the mobbings and burnings, Haun's Mill, Nauvoo, and the hardships of the migration west to a desert frontier. The literature that has resulted has almost always had a self-righteous tone, and sometimes it has been outright faith-promoting. That has meant that it can be read with conviction only by Mormons. And how many Mormon readers are there—readers of fiction especially? And if a condition of being able to read Mormon stories is unshakable faith, then what happens to literary excellence? To any of those cosmopolitan swingers out there who *do* read, Mormon literature is likely to seem at best parochial, at worst incredible. Mormons themselves think of themselves as a peculiar people. In some ways they are so peculiar, both in their history and in the dense web of their practical life and their faith, that outside readers just won't believe them when they see them in print.

Writers, Malcolm Cowley says, are people with readers. Unless Mormon writers can stir up enough readers within the four million or so who know about and believe in Mormon history and Mormon life, then they are going to have to find readers outside, as in fact all significant literatures have done. The only way they can do that, I think, is to write about people, and let the faith take care of itself. I will envelop the people, it will be part of the dramatic propriety of the context, but can't look like an attempt to justify or proselytize, and it may well leave entirely behind the old wrongs. Though Jewish tradition contains plenty of stories out of the pogroms, and now is all but dominated by the horrors of the Holocaust, look where its ancient strength lies: creation myths, stories like those of Job, Judith, David and his rebellious doomed son Absalom, the Prodigal Son, the poetry of the Psalms with their celebration of carnal and celestial love, *People*, who happen to have been Jews, and reported without a trace of whitewash, with all their humanity about them. King David was a great hero of the Jews, but Jewish writing shows him proud, stubborn, and inclined to

crawl into wrong beds. Have Mormon writers achieved that degree of objectivity and honesty about Joseph Smith and Brigham Young? Could a Mormon writer write the story of Parley Pratt without making it an exemplum of Gentile ferocity and persecution? Could he tell the story of an apostate as a human story, and not an instance of weak faith? The trouble with a lot of Mormon literature is that it has had a compulsion to moralize. I suspect that when the Mormon experience is made into real literature, its writers will have to have achieved a sympathy for more points of view than one, and will have to deal with some pretty harsh challenges to the traditional Mormon beliefs. You can't make a statement about faith without dealing in some fashion with doubt, giving doubt its due.

This is to say that Mormon literature is going to have to be open-minded, both about dogma and about history. I am sure that in the past some Mormon historians have been embarrassed by the tendency of the Church to whitewash or conceal some incidents in its history. I remember a public seminar in which several of us—Juanita Brooks, Sam Taylor, and I, among others—urged the then Church Historian to open up the archives to scholars. He admitted that he couldn't, completely. Now Leonard Arrington seems to have done so. That is an indispensable first step.

The Catholic Church has known for a long time that doubt and questioning are ultimately more faith-promoting than dutiful piety. If you don't leave room for doubt, you're probably not going to convince those outside readers that what is being reported is valid human experience.

There is one further problem: that Mormon society is so well organized, and operates on principles so different from those of other societies, that the novelist who tries to deal with it finds himself constantly tempted to stop his story and explain celestial marriage, or the Word of Wisdom, or the Temple sacraments. The only way is to be bold—take all that for granted, let it be found out by readers. *Never* explain. The best reader is one who is eager to find out what's going on, and why. Let him guess and make inferences. As Benny DeVoto once said, if a reader is with you at all he's probably a mile ahead of you. You don't have to *teach* him Mormon history and doctrine and sociology; he can learn it.

You ask if there is a Mormon literature. Not much of one, yet. Some beginnings. Ought there to be a Mormon literature? Of course. There ought to be a literature for every society on earth, it's as natural as birds singing. But it takes a while. It takes some big imagination that can see around the Mormon world, see its relations to the rest of the world. And unquestioning piety would be as out of place in such a writer as extreme modesty in a gynecologist.

SUNSTONE: Does it have to be a Mormon?

STEGNER: Not necessarily. It might well be an ex-Mormon or someone who has lived much among Mormons without being one. One of the Mormon novels that people take seriously is Vardis Fisher's *Children of God*. Fisher was brought up as a Mormon, but lapsed. A year or so ago Leonard Arrington and someone else tried to make a case for the notion that Fisher was actually more Mormon than he pretended, was still a member of the

faith when he wrote his book. Fisher's wife was somewhat indignant, half afraid that Vardis would rise from the grave in a rage. According to her, he had repudiated the faith entirely, and I think he had. But he *knew* it, that's the point, and knew many things about it that he had to respect and wouldn't misrepresent. Half the trouble with Mormon literature of the past is that it was written largely either by sensationalizers or by defenders of the faith.

It would be one thing if Mormonism could depend on breeding up its own full complement of readers. In a way, the Deseret Bookstore serves the clientele, and I gather you don't think what it dispenses is quite literature. Literature has to have validity for a world audience. A writer writing in English has to offer something to New York and London, and perhaps to English-speaking Chinese in Singapore, and to everyone else able to inspect the human condition through the medium of language. When a culture is large enough to contain its own large intellectual class and its own large reading public, then a lot of literature can come out of even the most repressive and thought-controlled society. Every Russian writer from Pushkin to Solzhenitsyn has had trouble with the censors, but Russian literature is one of the greatest in the world. It didn't become so by whitewashing the Czars or the Commissars. It became so by looking at them honestly, sometimes with open anger, sometimes speaking in riddles to avoid persecution, and probing deep into what makes people people.

Mormon society was never that repressive, but in its history it certainly has tried to control thought. The way to write a significant body of literature is to keep your mind utterly free and absolutely open, and to write for the world. That means opening things up, as Leonard Arrington has done, apparently with the full approval of the First Presidency. Now all you need to do is work and wait.

SUNSTONE: Do you think that anyone outside the Mormon culture cares about a crisis of faith?

STEGNER: Of course. But it must be expressed in other than doctrinal terms. Let's face it, a crisis in a Catholic over the doctrine of transubstantiation isn't likely to be very interesting to non-Catholics. But if you can make him so human that we can take his faith and his doctrines as emblematic of our own, then the crisis will interest anyone who has *any* faith, of any kind. Then it's a human crisis involving faith, not a theological argument. I have known Mormon missionaries who went out into another world and had their faith shaken. Some of them never recovered. Could their mental struggles and anguish be made into fiction? I think so, if what we are given is less the abstract arguments pro and con, and more the consequences of doubt or apostasy on the personal relationships of that young person—effects on his family, friends, community, effects that put him crosswise in the society that used to be his shelter and reassurance. Fiction is made of human relationships and human qualities, not of theological arguments.

SUNSTONE: What about Dostoevsky?

STEGNER: Does he argue theology?

SUNSTONE: The Grand Inquisitor is as Theological as one can get.

STEGNER: All right, you win. As long as you've got Dostoevsky to do it. But it's not the most natural fiction. Dostoevsky felt intensely, he was convulsed with those themes of crime and retribution and resurrection, and he coughed them up burning hot. The passion makes them live. Whoever said that a novel is what happens in this room today wasn't talking poppycock. One of the good definitions of a novel is Willa Cather's: "A passion and four walls."

It takes some big imagination that can see around the Mormon world, see its relations to the rest of the world.

SUNSTONE: Could you write a novel about Mormons without their theology?

STEGNER: Yes. Concentrate on the family, which in a way is theological in Mormondom, but is more. What's more important than the articles of faith is the relationships between daughters and mothers, sons and fathers, in a big Mormon family. That's closer to us as readers than any other human experience. We're all sisters, brothers, children, parents. I think that the strains of family life are the most natural subject matter for a Mormon novel. You can take the religious side of it almost for granted, or let it leak out. Let me repeat DeVoto's rule: If a reader is with you at all he's probably a mile ahead of you.

SUNSTONE: So if you're a good writer, you don't have to explain why your characters are doing some seemingly bizarre things?

STEGNER: I think that's right. But some situations do have disadvantages, and this is one. The chorus of every play ought to be in the hearts of the audience. We write within large sets of assumptions that we share or largely share with our readers. If our readers don't share our assumptions, we have lost them. When we are dealing with peculiar societies the only chance we have is to make our characters interesting enough as people so that the readers will leap on every clue, and fill in for themselves what is not at first understandable. That is how Faulkner leads us to understand his world, the blacks and whites, the shadow of slavery, the antebellum and post-bellum pride, the upward mobility of the Snopeses. They take themselves absolutely for granted. You never find Faulkner standing around in his story explaining things. If he is talking at all, he is talking through other mouths than his own, limiting himself to what his spokesman-characters would see or know or understand.

Novels, that is, are as if overheard. The characters give themselves away, the author should be present only as a faint vibration, something that is never overt but that like a current carries the novel's people and events in a certain direction. He cannot preach or apologize. Once that lesson has been learned and put into practice, Mormon fiction will be as valid and interesting as any other fiction. It might even gain a certain piquancy from being about people and a society different from the usual run.

Notes

¹Wallace Stegner, "Literary by Accident," *Utah Libraries* (Fall 1975):14

²Ibid.