



The Sound of Mountain Water

Wallace Stegner

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A book of timeless importance about the American West, our "native home of hope."

The essays, memoirs, letters, and speeches in this volume were written over a period of twenty-five years, a time in which the West witnessed rapid changes to its cultural and natural heritage, and Wallace Stegner emerged as an important conservationist and novelist. This collection is divided into two sections: the first features the eloquent sketches of the West's history and environment, directing our imagination to the sublime beauty of such places as San Juan and Glen Canyon; the concluding section examines the state of Western literature, of the mythical past versus the diminished present, and analyzes the difficulties facing any contemporary Western writer. *The Sound of Mountain Water* is at once a hymn to the Western landscape, an affirmation of the hope embodied therein, and a careful investigation to the West's complex legacy.

The Sound of Mountain Water Details

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From Reader Review The Sound of Mountain Water for online ebook

Alex says

Enjoyed the descriptions of exploring the southwest during the years immediately following WWII, but skipped the literary criticism, which was most of the book.

Courtney Allen says

I wanted to love this book but I just... did not. I fell in love with Wallace Stegner in *Angle if Repose*, and while it was fun to read writing from his own perspective, most of these essays felt dated and not relevant to today.

Though I did enjoy the contrast of Glen Canyon before and after the dam, and have read a few other stories of Havasupai it was enjoyable to read about that in the earlier part of the 19th century. But I skimmed through the rest of the essays.

Carol Bakker says

I enjoyed these essays on life in the West and writers of the West. I will come back later and tell you why. As all good books do, this added weight to my TBR list. Now I am eager to read Bernard DeVoto.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

I enjoyed the first 169 pages of this book. I won't be reading beyond that. From page 170 on, the pieces are better suited to a college course on writers of the American West. I'm not fond of reading writers writing about the writing of other writers. The one exception being book introductions, which are often helpful.

I really liked the pieces I did read because I have been to or near most of the places he wrote about: Death Valley, Grand Canyon, Glen Canyon, southern Utah, Mojave Desert. It was interesting, if a little sad, to read how things were when Stegner was there in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, and compare that with how they were when I was loving those places in the 70s, 80s, and 90s.

I think the "Coda" wilderness letter was probably my favorite piece. Short, but powerful and moving. I remember learning in my college Environmental Science courses about the "idea of wilderness" being an important cultural value, even if most people never visit that wilderness. The things we learned could have been (probably were?) lifted straight from this letter written in 1960.

Robert Chamberlin says

Stegner is a Utah darling. It is thrilling to read his prose about my new environs, however his writing can be wooden and forced at times.

Tracy says

A collection of old essays written starting in the 1940's. I enjoyed them. I love Stegner's writing, especially when he's writing about places I know.

My two favorites were "The Rediscovery of America: 1946. It is about a road trip from Salt Lake, down to Lake Mead, Deep Springs school, Death Valley and back. The other one I liked was "At Home in the Fields of the Lord", a tribute to hometowns; and Salt Lake City, in particular, as Stegner's hometown.

I liked these quotes:

"Any place deeply lived in, any place where the vitality has been high and the emotions freely involved can fill the sensory attic with images enough for a lifetime of nostalgia. As the poet says, "There, for a while, I lived life to the hilt, and so come what may."

"There is this solid sense of having had or having been or having lived something real and good and satisfying, and the knowledge that having had or been or lived these things I can never lose them again. Home is what you can take away with you."

Ginger says

Even if you know little, nothing or a great deal about the West, you should read this. Stegner's dedication to writing about the environment, people, and our place... our roll in it is thoughtful and speculative. The first half of his book, (stories, essays, memoirs and thoughts over the twenty-five year period, approximately 1946 to 1969 about the settling of the dry West—everything west of the 100th meridian in America) is dedicated to water, landscape and the environment of change upon it. Each chapter left me spellbound... wondering how his adventures would impact his future writing. I have read almost everything he has written and seriously only read this because I'm getting to the bottom of his books. I am not a reader of short stories as they have never been able to keep my attention, or I should say, I always found myself lost trying to figure out why I was reading a short story, as they never satisfied my curiosity, not enough time to develop characters or scenarios. In this book I was taken in and transfixed with the idea of the west, Stegner identified something in me that has been at the bottom of my gut for as long as I can remember; "Westerners...fearing the loss of what little tradition we have, we cling to it hard; we are hooked on history." He goes on to say, "we know the obligation to be ourselves even when it seems we are squares." I'm stunned into silence and then quiet observation of this moment in time, this moment that I am indeed very thankful to have. In the second half of the book, Stegner introduces the reader to writers that had an impact on him. Again very good, but I was not as transfixed as I was with the first half. He does stir up my creative side, he makes me think about the impact I have and as an artist how I touch the world. I will find some of the

authors that he discusses and read them, but I'm pretty sure no other writer will touch my heart in the way he does and has.

Lisa-Michele says

It is the writing, just the writing, that keeps me coming back. I'm lucky he writes about things I enjoy, like the west, but I'd probably read him describing cereal too. This collection of essays was written from the 1940s-1960s and Stegner himself admits it was written "in innocence, with a simple minded love of western landscape". Now he is older and wiser and, now, he is no fan of Lake Mead or Lake Powell. But the essays are priceless for the time and place they were written.

"We simply need that wild country available to us, even if we never do more than drive to its edge and look in. For it can be a means of reassuring ourselves of our sanity as creatures, a part of the geography of hope." He writes in support of wilderness, and it is interesting to hear the arguments from a half century ago. Some of it played out just the way he thought, and some of it was far worse.

He argues for a present, possessed sense of the west, not just a myth. "...millions of westerners, old and new, have no sense of a personal and possessed past, no sense of any continuity between the real western past which has been mythicized almost out of recognizability and a real western present that seems as cut-off and pointless as a ride on a merry-go-round that can't be stopped." This is a critical concept for we that love the west. When I lived on the east coast I noticed how people reacted to the fact that I came from Utah. They would talk of national parks and vacations. It meant nothing to them other than a trip. Our dependence on tourism helps create that. It is like east coast Americans are a bunch of Disneyland dads, just showing up for the fun part and leaving their trash everywhere.

Stegner's essay on the writing of history is also a "must-read" as he addresses so many of my questions. What is a narrative? What is a point of view? Did DeVoto or Harte get it right? How do I "force shape and eloquence on a resistant and complex of historical fact?" I wish I knew. He extols Willa Cather and I would have to agree that she is brilliant: "[her] characters stretch into symbolic suggestiveness as naturally as trees cast shadows in the long light of a prairie evening." As I said, the writing.

Paul Garns says

If you live west of Denver and haven't read Wallace Stegner, you're not living right. The essays collected here are a bit less accessible than some of his other stuff, but this one's worth the slog. My favorites were the essays on Havasupai Canyon and touring the Mojave Desert. It's a hymn to the West. Give it a whirl.

Mike Barnett says

The book has two parts: the first is very nice, but I wish I had skipped the second. The first part contains some nice essays about different places and experiences in the West. The second contains essays that are

supposed to be literary criticism, but --- to me at least --- really fell flat. Still, I'm a complete Stegner junkie so I can't help but like it overall.

Tom Birdseye says

A beautiful, layered homage to the West, and in particular the desert landscape and people. Dated in both voice and cultural nuance at times, it still shines. If you love the backcountry and canyons of the Southwest, this is a worthy read.

Greg says

I love Stegner. And I loved reading these essays, the best of which are travelogues through the American West. He's unique voice, and tragically under represented in the pantheon of America's great writers.

"The Rediscovery of America: 1946" describes his first road trip after the gas rationing of World War II. "One of the least-bearable wartime deprivations was the loss of our mobility. We are a wheeled people." It is beautifully nostalgic and typically (for Stegner) hopeful.

"Packhorse Paradise" is Stegner's venture into Havasupai, and he describes the canyon exactly as I experienced it myself. "This is sure enough the Shangri-la everyone has said it is, this is the valley of Kubla Khan, here is Alph the sacred river, and here are the gardens bright with sinuous rills where blossoms many an incense-bearing tree."

"Glen Canyon Submersus" is his account of returning to the site of what once was Glen Canyon after it was dammed and flooded to create Lake Powell. "In gaining the lovely and the usable, we have given up the incomparable."

"At Home in the Fields of the Lord" is his love letter to his boyhood home of Salt Lake City, that resonates with me deeply. "Its soil is held together by the roots of the family and the cornerstones of the temple...Knowing Salt Lake City means knowing its canyons, too, for no city of my acquaintance except possibly Reno breaks off so naturally and easily into fine free country...From its founding, Salt Lake City has been sanctuary; that has been its justification and its function."

andrea says

Loved the essays about his adventures in the back country the most. Love the way he writes.

Salvatore says

A great collection of non-fiction that evokes the West. I could quibble with a couple of things - in fact I will, if you ask me - but overall, Stegner makes the flatness, the horrors, the lack of water, the landscapes seem

grand without becoming mystical about it.

David Doty says

I have been slowly working my way through Wallace Stegner's entire body of work, and this collection of essays and letters ranks right up among his best. The first part presents a fascinating series of Stegner's personal journeys throughout the American West, describing road trips in the 40s through Arizona, Nevada, and Death Valley; a packhorse trip into Havasupai Canyons; and a boat excursion into Lake Powell. The second part is a terrific treatise on the importance and style of literature in the American West, and how fundamental such literature is to the sense of community that will be necessary to conserve all that is good about the West.

In the book's opening "Overture," Stegner describes an experience he had as a child in 1920, camping on the banks of the Snake River, and his words demonstrate his gift for language that I never tire of reading:

"By such a river it is impossible to believe that one will ever be tired or old. Every sense applauds it. Taste it, feel its chill on the teeth: it is purity absolute. Watch its racing current, its steady renewal of force: it is transient and eternal. And listen again to its sounds: get far enough away so that the noise of falling tons of water does not stun the ears, and hear how much is going on underneath--a whole symphony of smaller sounds, hiss and splash and gurgle, the small talk of side channels, the whisper of blown and scattered spray gathering itself and beginning to flow again, secret and irresistible, among the wet rocks."
