Angle of Repose (Modern Library) by Wallace Stegner

Brilliant, Thoughtful, Mesmerizing

Winner of the Pulitzer Prize when it was first published in 1971, Angle of Repose has also been selected by the editorial board of the Modern Library as one of the hundred best novels of the twentieth century.

Wallace Stegner’s uniquely American classic centers on Lyman Ward, a noted historian who relates a fictionalized biography of his pioneer grandparents at a time when he has become estranged from his own family. Through a combination of research, memory, and exaggeration, Ward voices ideas concerning the relationship between history and the present, art and life, parents and children, husbands and wives. Set in many parts of the West, Angle of Repose is a story of discovery—personal, historical, and geographical—that endures as Wallace Stegner’s masterwork: an illumination of yesterday’s reality that speaks to today’s.

Angle of Repose is a long, intricate, deeply rewarding novel, wrote William Abrahams in the Atlantic Monthly. [It] is neither the predictable historical-regional Western epic, nor the equally predictable four-decker family saga, the Forsytes in California, so to speak... For all [its] breadth and sweep, Angle of Repose achieves an effect of intimacy, hence of immediacy, and, though much of the material is historical, an effect of discovery also, of experience newly minted rather than a pageantlike recreation... Wallace Stegner has written a superb novel, with an amplitude of scale and richness of detail altogether uncommon in contemporary fiction.
Angle of Repose is a novel about Time, as much as anything--about people who live through time, who believe in both a past and a future. . . . It reveals how even the most rebellious crusades of our time follow paths that our great-grandfathers feet beat dusty.

--Wallace Stegner

My Personal Review:
One of Wallace Stegners greatest peeves as a Western writer was the myth of the West that was promulgated in the bulk of the books about the region. The vast majority of Western novels and movies tended to perpetuate utter myths about the West, instead of grappling with the West itself. Perhaps no American writer knew the West as well as Stegner, not excepting his student Edward Abbey. An inveterate hiker and explorer, he camped or walked nearly every area in the West. He wrote innumerable books about the West and took time to visit every spot he wrote about. For instance, in writing of John Wesley Powells trip down the Colorado, he retraced his route to gain the greatest possible grasp of what he saw. He traveled the trails that the Mormons and others took in relocating to the West. He was one of the few people to hike along Glen Canyon before Lake Powell consumed it. Moreover, he was raised in the West, spending his childhood on what remained on the frontier.

Given all this, I find it utterly astonishing that a couple of reviewers should have the impression that he does not know whereof he wrote. For instance, one reviewer wrote, Bottom line: the West has a geography, and its denizens a temperament, that demands that we write and read about it in a way that does justice to the hard realities of life in a barren place. Why he would imagine that Stegner, who was intimately familiar with the geography, was one of its denizens, and knew first hand the hard realities of the place by spending his childhood in a variety of barren places, utterly baffles me. I suspect that it is because the book writes about the REAL West and not the West of the Imagination.

Lyman Ward, distinguished historian (Stegner himself, though primarily a writer of fiction, was the author of several works of history, though the character was based on former colleague of his who suffered from a physical condition precisely like Wards) is studying family documents with an eye to writing a book detailing the story of his grandmother and grandfather. The novel is brilliant on multiple levels. It is a fascinating study of the travails of an invalid struggling with his own enormous physical sufferings. It is a vivid and accurate retelling of a story of what life was actually life in the frontier in the late nineteenth century. But primarily it is a powerful and overwhelming reflection on the nature of human frailty, love, and the healing power of forgiveness. Although Ward reflects on the marriage of his grandparents, this is actually a surrogate for confronting the tragedies in his own, and whether he will rigidly refuse to forgive his wife for her wrongs against him, or whether he will allow redemption and healing to take place.
The novel has aroused considerable controversy among some feminist writers, for an interesting reason. Stegner himself was a very strong supporter of women's rights (indeed, although he was uncomfortable with the youth movements of the sixties, he remained an old school liberal all his life, with powerful convictions about toleration and acceptance of all people regardless of race, creed, or gender). Stegner became aware of the unpublished letters of the 19th century writer and painter Mary Hallock Foote. He gained permission from a family member to incorporate portions of those letters in a work of fiction, and he did so in ANGLE OF REPOSE, Foote providing the explicit model for Susan Burling Ward. The controversy has rested in whether Stegner used too much of the prose of Mary Hallock Foote in his book. Some have estimated that as much as 10% of the entire text might stem from Foote. My own take is that his use of Footes letters was far more creative than plagiaristic. For one thing, he didn't so much take the story he tells from Footes letters as builds a brilliant story around them. Also, some of the details of the novel of greatest import--such as the question of Susan Wards possible adultery--were not part of Footes story at all. Moreover, while the letters that Stegner uses are quite good, they do not match the other sections of the book where Stegner writes in his own voice. Stegner is clearly a better prose writer than Foote, and why a better writer would be thought to have need of a lesser one to generate a novel is difficult to explain. Moreover, Foote in no way contributed to the architecture of the novel as a whole, and she obviously played no role in the contemporary sections of the book. Finally, to the degree that Ms. Foote is remembered at all today, it is entirely because of Wallace Stegner. He not only included some of her work in anthologies he did earlier, but elevated part of her story to a central place in this very great novel. Given all this, I'm not sure how Stegner can be justly accused of any wrongdoing.

Regardless of the controversy, this remains not merely one of the greatest novels ever written about the West, but one of the finest American novels of the second half of the twentieth century. Stegner remains a staggeringly underappreciated as a writer. He wrote in a beautiful, distinctive, gorgeous prose that not even his extremely illustrious stable of students (Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry, Thomas McGuane, Ken Kesey and Larry McMurtry, Ivan Doig, and many, many others) has been able to match. Edward Abbey said shortly before Stegner's death following an automobile accident that he was the only living American writer deserving of the Nobel Prize, and I believe he was right.

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