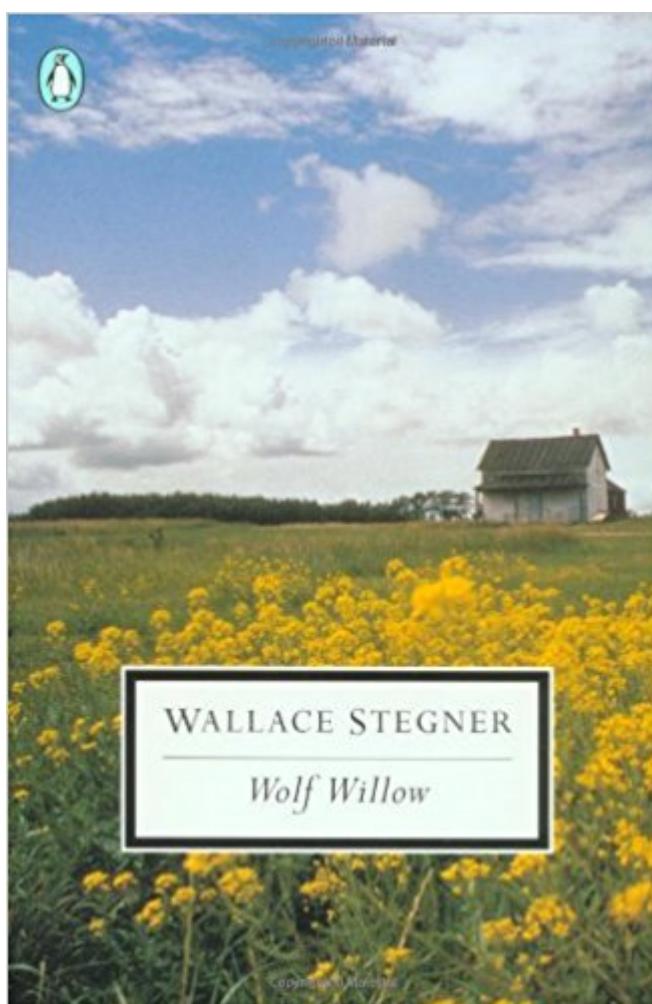


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# Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, And A Memory Of The Last Plains Frontier (Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics)



## **Synopsis**

Wallace Stegner weaves together fiction and nonfiction, history and impressions, childhood remembrance and adult reflections in this unusual portrait of his boyhood. Set in Cypress Hills in southern Saskatchewan, where Stegner's family homesteaded from 1914 to 1920, *Wolf Willow* brings to life both the pioneer community and the magnificent landscape that surrounds it. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

## **Book Information**

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## **Customer Reviews**

Beautiful and moving...In many ways the best of all the good books Stegner has written. -- Walter Van Tilberg Clarck  
Enchanting, heartrending, and eminently enviable. -- Vladimir Nabokov

Wallace Stegner was born in 1909 in Lake Mills, Iowa. The son of Scandinavian immigrants, he traveled with his parents and brother all over the West-to North Dakota, Washington, Saskatchewan, Montana, and Wyoming-before settling in Salt Lake City in 1921. Many of the landscapes he encountered in his peripatetic youth figure largely in his work, as do characters

based on his stern father and athletic, outgoing brother. Stegner received most of his education in Utah, graduating from the University in 1930. He furthered his education at the University of Iowa, where he received a master's and a doctoral degree. He married Mary Stuart Page in 1934, and for the next decade the couple followed Wallace's teaching career-to the University of Wisconsin, Harvard, and eventually to Stanford University, where he founded the creative writing program, and where he was to remain until his retirement in 1971. A number of his creative writing students have become some of today's most well respected writers, including Wendell Berry, Thomas McGuane, Raymond Carver, Edward Abbey, Robert Stone, and Larry McMurtry. Throughout his career and after, Stegner's literary output was tremendous. His first novel, *Remembering Laughter*, was published in 1937. By the time of his death in 1993 he had published some two dozen works of fiction, history, biography, and essays. Among his many literary prizes are the Pulitzer Prize for *Angle of Repose* (1971) and the National Book Award for *The Spectator Bird* (1976). His collection of essays, *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs* (1992), was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle award. Although his fiction deals with many universal themes, Stegner is primarily recognized as a writer of the American West. Much of his literature deals with debunking myths of the West as a romantic country of heroes on horseback, and his passion for the terrain and its inhabitants have earned him the title 'The Dean of Western Letters'. He was one of the few true Men of Letters in this generation. An historian, essayist, short story writer and novelist, as well as a leading environmental writer. Although always connected in people's minds with the West, he had a long association with New England. Many short stories and one of his most successful novels, *Crossing to Safety*, are set in Vermont, where he had a summer home for many years. Another novel, *The Spectator Bird*, takes place in Denmark. An early environmentalist, he actively championed the region's preservation and was instrumental-with his now-famous 'Wilderness Letter'-in the passage of the 1964 Wilderness Act. Honest and straightforward, educated yet unpretentious, cantankerous yet compassionate, Wallace Stegner was an enormous presence in the American literary landscape, a man who wrote and lived with ferocity, energy, and integrity. Page Stegner is a Professor Emeritus of American Literature at the University of California at Santa Cruz.

Like many other reviewers of *Wolf Willow*, I am amazed by how this book speaks to me. Probably my deep enjoyment arises from reminiscing about my own childhood.... an experience of a much simpler life and time. A time of creeks and turtles, hundreds of hummingbirds massed on a giant azalea patch falling over the creek, playing with the children of sharecroppers, etc. *Wolf Willow* brought me back to that stunning time of my own childhood and amazement that Mr. Stegner was

able to raise a simple life to such lively interest.

Wolf Willow is Wallace Stegner's "memoir" of his youth in Saskatchewan nearly a century ago, a narrative augmented by his gripping reconstruction of the vicissitudes of a landscape hard and hostile towards those who sought to subdue and settle it. You'll find the heart of his account in the back-to-back chapters entitled "Genesis" and "Carrion Spring," which stand as irrefutable witness to the lucid style which won Stegner his Pulitzer. My recommendation: if parts of this tale seem, on occasion, thick and ploddy, isolate those two chapters and have a rigorous go at their 100 pages. Here you'll discover the rhythms of Stegner's poetic prose as you meet trapper Schultz (with "his passionate taciturnity" behind eyes "gray as agates"), along with his Russian wolfhounds (his alter egos), along with his pimply-faced kid, as feral and menacing as the old man. Here you'll encounter Rusty and Ray and their cohorts in a winter "wilderness [that] howled in all its voices," listen to "the faint dark monotone of wolves," and glimpse "a horn of moon declining toward the western horizon," above men trapped in harshest circumstance, "welded and riveted into a society of friends and brothers." In the end, Wolf Willow will expose you to a time and trek of epic desolation and perdurable haunting, under the guidance of a writer so mesmerizing and compelling that long after you've put down his book you'll find yourself unable to put down his story. J. Michael Thompsonmazais@aol.com Sept. 30, 2013

One of my favorite Stegner books. The map at the beginning of the book is invaluable and Stegner's research is impressive. He captures the time & place with skill and expertise. Interesting to note that he & Ivan Doig are young boys in the same general area of Montana and the Canadian border. I was able to locate places on Stegner's map that showed up in Nocturnal Prairie by Doig. Both of these authors have a clarity in their writing style that is mesmerizing and refreshing to me.

Here is all you need to know about Wolf Willow: go to about the middle part of the book. There is a novella called "Genesis," a stand alone body of work that is exceptional. Very exceptional. You do not need to read anything before or after (although "Carrion Spring," right after Genesis, is good). This novella is, I believe, fiction writing at its absolute finest. And I say that having been a bit disappointed in some of Stegner's other novels.

Wallace Stegner, the inveterate fiction/non-fiction writer of western America, is at his best with this autobiographical account of his six years (aged 10 to 16) living with his family in south-central

Saskatchewan, Canada with frequent visits to north-central Montana in the period of the "closing of the Canadian Frontier" with thrashing machines replacing short-horn/long-horn cattle drives from Canada to the US and vice-versa. Stegner's eye for details and the nuances of life on the Canadian/American prairies is never failing in capturing both the people and the times (1910-16) particularly his novella half way through his autobiographical memories of the great blizzard of 1907 and the last cattle drive from French River to Montana through the eyes of a benighted English gentlemen hellbent on learning about cowboy life first hand. The book, named for a yellow bush found along river banks in Canada and Montana, and known for its distinctive pleasing fragrance, is a tour de force of the continental Great Plains and life on the turn of the century prairie Canada. An excellent companion to Willa Cather's quasi-biographical *O, Pioneers!*

When they say "a history, a story, and a memory," they mean just that. It is all three, and it is excellent. One wonders at the beginning just what is going to happen and where it might be going. But just wait . . . By the time you're finished, you will agree you've just encountered another fantastic voyage with Wallace Stegner.

Wallace Stegner is known as a "western" author, and this book gives insight into why that is true. Stegner covers stories from his own childhood, but spends much of the book on the psychology of both the frontier west and the great plains. What kind of people settled these area, why did they come, and how did that fantastic landscape and climate affect them? If you are a fan of Stegner's writing you won't be disappointed. If you'd like some understanding of the settling of the Great Plains of the U.S. and Canada, you won't find a more readable or insightful work.

I grew up in Montana, my father was raised on a homestead in Colorado. I've heard and read many a tale of hardship and survival in the harsh climate of the West, but Stegner's novella in *Wolf Willow* is the best Western voice yet.

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