

crossing to safety by wallace stegner

Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety": A Journey Through Time and Loyalty

Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety" stands as a profound exploration of friendship, marriage, and the enduring passage of time, set against the backdrop of intellectual and personal journeys. This 1987 novel, often considered Stegner's masterpiece, delves into the lives of two couples, the narrator Sid and his wife Charity, and their closest friends, Larry and Beth. The narrative unfolds through reflections on shared experiences, particularly at the fictionalized version of the University of Utah in Salt Lake City and later in the rugged beauty of the American West. This article will meticulously examine the intricate themes, compelling characters, and the enduring legacy of Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety," offering a deep dive into what makes this novel a cornerstone of American literature. We will explore the novel's structure, its portrayal of evolving relationships, and the subtle yet powerful ways Stegner captures the essence of life's triumphs and tribulations.

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Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety": A Literary Examination

Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety" is more than just a story about two couples; it is a meditation on the very fabric of human connection and the passage of life. Stegner, a celebrated historian and novelist, brings his characteristic keen observation and lyrical prose to this intricate tapestry of friendship, marriage, and the search for meaning. The novel is a testament to the power of sustained relationships, the quiet resilience required to navigate life's inevitable storms, and the profound

impact of shared experiences. Through the interwoven lives of Sid and Charity Page, and Larry and Beth McEwan, Stegner crafts a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally resonant, exploring the ways in which our closest bonds shape our identities and provide a sanctuary amidst the flux of existence. The title itself, "Crossing to Safety," evokes a sense of journey, of seeking refuge and stability in the shared landscape of enduring love and companionship.

The novel's setting, primarily in the American West, further amplifies its themes. Stegner, known for his deep connection to and advocacy for the Western landscape, imbues "Crossing to Safety" with a palpable sense of place. The stark beauty and sometimes unforgiving nature of the West serve as a mirror to the characters' internal lives, reflecting their struggles, their moments of clarity, and their ultimate resilience. This literary examination of Stegner's work highlights his ability to blend the personal with the environmental, creating a rich and textured reading experience that continues to captivate readers and critics alike. Understanding the context of Stegner's own life and his dedication to conservation can further illuminate the deeper meanings embedded within "Crossing to Safety."

The Narrative Framework of Crossing to Safety

The narrative structure of Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety" is a deliberate and artful construction, mirroring the retrospective nature of memory and the gradual unfolding of understanding. The story is told from the perspective of Sid Page, looking back on his long and complex friendship with Larry and Beth McEwan. This retrospective viewpoint allows Stegner to weave together past and present, juxtaposing youthful idealism with mature reflection. The reader experiences the progression of the relationships not in a strictly linear fashion, but through a series of interconnected memories, anecdotes, and shared experiences that gradually reveal the depth and evolution of these bonds.

Stegner masterfully employs a layered narrative, where Sid's recollections are often prompted by present-day events or observations. This technique not only adds a sense of immediacy to the unfolding story but also emphasizes the enduring nature of the past and its influence on the present. The novel is structured around significant periods in the characters' lives, from their early days as graduate students to their later years grappling with career, family, and the inevitable challenges of aging. The rhythm of the narrative is often slow and contemplative, allowing for a deep immersion in the characters' inner lives and the subtle nuances of their relationships. The dialogue, often sharp and insightful, further contributes to the authentic portrayal of long-standing friendships.

The Role of Memory in Shaping the Narrative

Memory serves as the fundamental building block of "Crossing to Safety." Sid's act of writing the story is, in itself, an act of remembering and processing a lifetime of shared history. Stegner uses this narrative device to explore how memory is selective, subjective, and often colored by emotion. As Sid recounts events, he not only presents them but also interprets them, revealing his own evolving understanding of the people and events that have shaped his life. This focus on memory highlights the subjective nature of truth and the way our personal narratives are constructed and reconstructed over time.

The Influence of Setting on the Narrative Arc

The settings in "Crossing to Safety" are not mere backdrops; they are integral to the narrative arc and the characters' development. From the academic halls of the University of Utah to the rugged expanses of the American West, each location carries its own resonance. Salt Lake City, in particular, provides a tangible grounding for the early years of their friendships and academic pursuits. Later, the geographical shifts and the enduring presence of the Western landscape serve as a powerful metaphor for the resilience and adaptability of the characters. The physical environment often mirrors the internal states of the protagonists, offering moments of both solace and challenge.

Character Dynamics and the Bonds of Friendship in Stegner's Novel

At the heart of Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety" lies a profound examination of character dynamics, particularly the complex and enduring nature of friendship. The novel centers on the intricate relationship between two couples: Sid and Charity Page, and Larry and Beth McEwan. These are not relationships built on superficiality, but rather on a deep, shared history forged through intellectual pursuits, personal struggles, and mutual respect. Stegner meticulously crafts these characters, imbuing them with a realism that makes their interactions and evolving bonds utterly believable and deeply moving.

Sid, the narrator, is an intellectual, a historian by profession, who often finds himself observing and analyzing the relationships around him, including his own marriage to Charity. Charity, a resourceful and grounded woman, provides a counterpoint to Sid's more introspective nature. Larry McEwan, a charismatic and ambitious writer, is Beth's husband, and their dynamic is often portrayed as more volatile and passionate than that of the Pages. The contrast between these couples, and the ways in which they complement and challenge each other, forms the emotional core of the novel. Stegner's portrayal of these bonds is subtle, avoiding melodrama, and instead focusing on the quiet acts of loyalty, understanding, and shared vulnerability that sustain friendships over decades.

The Nuances of Sid and Charity's Marriage

The marriage of Sid and Charity Page is depicted with a remarkable degree of realism and quiet strength. Their union is not one of grand romantic gestures, but of enduring partnership and mutual support. Sid, as the narrator, often reflects on Charity's pragmatism, her resilience, and her unwavering presence in his life. Their relationship is tested by the ordinary trials of life, including professional challenges, financial concerns, and the inevitable shifts that occur as people age. Stegner highlights the importance of shared domesticity and the quiet comfort found in long-term commitment. Their journey is a testament to the idea that safety and fulfillment can be found not in external validation, but in the steady bedrock of a shared life.

Larry and Beth: A More Volatile Union

In contrast to the steady current of Sid and Charity's marriage, the relationship between Larry and Beth McEwan is portrayed as more tempestuous and passionate. Larry, a writer of considerable talent but also a certain restlessness, often finds himself at odds with the demands of convention and the expectations of his career. Beth, equally intelligent and strong-willed, navigates the complexities of her marriage with a mixture of love, frustration, and profound understanding. Their relationship is marked by intense discussions, creative collaborations, and moments of both profound connection and significant strain. Stegner uses their dynamic to explore the challenges inherent in artistic temperaments and the ways in which passion can be both a driving force and a source of conflict.

The Enduring Power of Shared Experience

What truly binds these characters together, beyond their individual relationships, is the immense weight of their shared experiences. From academic struggles and career aspirations to personal losses and moments of profound joy, their lives are inextricably intertwined. Stegner emphasizes that it is these shared journeys, these common trials and triumphs, that forge the deepest and most lasting connections. The novel illustrates how friendship can act as a bulwark against the uncertainties of life, providing a sense of belonging and a shared understanding that transcends individual circumstances. The "crossing to safety" is, in many ways, achieved through the collective strength and support derived from these enduring bonds.

Themes Explored in Crossing to Safety

Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety" is a novel rich with thematic depth, offering readers a nuanced exploration of fundamental human experiences. The title itself hints at a central theme: the search for security, stability, and belonging in a world often characterized by flux and uncertainty. This search is primarily undertaken through the lens of enduring friendships and the institution of marriage, highlighting how these relationships can provide a sanctuary and a sense of grounding amidst life's inevitable challenges.

Beyond the overarching theme of safety, Stegner delves into the complexities of love, loyalty, and the passage of time. The novel artfully portrays how relationships evolve, mature, and adapt over decades, weathering the storms of individual growth and external pressures. The sacrifices made for friendship and the quiet compromises inherent in long-term commitment are central to the narrative's emotional resonance. Furthermore, "Crossing to Safety" is deeply concerned with the nature of artistic creation, the pursuit of intellectual endeavors, and the ways in which these aspects of life intertwine with personal relationships. The novel also subtly examines the broader societal shifts and cultural landscapes that influence the characters' lives, adding another layer of historical and cultural significance.

The Search for Belonging and Sanctuary

The concept of "safety" in the novel is multifaceted. It encompasses not only physical security but also emotional and intellectual sanctuary. The characters find this safety in their shared understanding, their mutual trust, and the consistent presence of one another. Stegner suggests that true safety is not a destination, but rather a continuous process of building and maintaining meaningful connections. The act of "crossing" implies a journey, a deliberate movement towards a place of refuge, which in this case is found within the supportive structures of friendship and marriage. The novel celebrates the idea that a well-lived life is one anchored by strong, reliable human connections.

Love, Loyalty, and the Evolution of Relationships

Stegner masterfully depicts the enduring power of love and loyalty, showcasing how these qualities manifest in different forms throughout a lifetime. The novel is a testament to the fact that love is not static but evolves, deepening and changing as individuals grow and circumstances shift. The loyalty displayed between Sid, Charity, Larry, and Beth is not always expressed through grand gestures, but often through quiet understanding, unwavering support during difficult times, and the willingness to forgive and adapt. The narrative explores the sacrifices that loyalty often demands and the profound rewards that come from such devotion. The evolution of these relationships over many years provides a compelling study of human connection's resilience.

The Interplay of Art, Intellect, and Personal Life

As many of the characters are involved in academic and artistic pursuits, "Crossing to Safety" also explores the complex interplay between intellectual ambition, creative expression, and personal life. Stegner, himself a respected academic and writer, brings an insider's perspective to the challenges and rewards of these endeavors. The novel examines how career aspirations can impact relationships, how the pursuit of art can be both exhilarating and isolating, and how personal life can fuel or hinder creative output. The intellectual debates and discussions that pepper the narrative underscore the importance of shared ideas and the stimulation that comes from engaging with others on an intellectual level. The novel suggests that a life well-lived often involves a delicate balance between personal fulfillment and professional or artistic achievement.

The Significance of Place in Wallace Stegner's Work

Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety" is deeply rooted in its sense of place, a characteristic that permeates much of his celebrated oeuvre. The novel's settings, particularly the American West, are not merely geographical locations but active participants in the narrative, shaping the characters' experiences, perspectives, and ultimately, their destinies. Stegner's profound understanding and deep affection for the Western landscape are palpable throughout the novel, imbuing it with a rich texture and a sense of authenticity. The rugged beauty and the often-harsh realities of the West serve as a powerful metaphor for the challenges and triumphs the characters face in their personal lives.

The specific locales within the novel, such as Salt Lake City and the surrounding desert landscapes, are rendered with meticulous detail, reflecting Stegner's belief in the formative power of environment. The characters' interactions with these landscapes, their appreciation for its grandeur, and their struggles against its limitations all contribute to their development. This deep connection to place is a hallmark of Stegner's writing, elevating his stories beyond mere personal dramas to reflections on the human condition within a specific, and powerfully evocative, context. Understanding the significance of place in his work is crucial to appreciating the full scope of "Crossing to Safety."

The American West as a Defining Landscape

The American West is more than just a setting in "Crossing to Safety"; it is an integral element that influences the characters' identities and their outlook on life. Stegner, a passionate advocate for conservation and a keen observer of the West, uses the landscape to mirror the internal struggles and the resilience of his characters. The vastness, the beauty, and the often-unforgiving nature of the West provide a backdrop against which the enduring bonds of friendship and marriage are tested and strengthened. The characters' connection to this land, their appreciation for its open spaces and its inherent challenges, shapes their very being.

Salt Lake City: A Crucible of Friendship and Intellect

Salt Lake City serves as a pivotal setting in the early stages of the characters' lives and their enduring friendships. It is within the academic environment of the University of Utah that Sid, Charity, Larry, and Beth first forge their deep connections. The city represents a period of intellectual exploration, career beginnings, and the formation of lifelong bonds. Stegner portrays Salt Lake City not just as a physical space, but as a cultural and intellectual crucible where these young people are shaped by their environment and their interactions with each other. The experiences shared in this setting lay the groundwork for the enduring relationships that the novel explores.

Nature's Influence on Human Resilience

Throughout "Crossing to Safety," the natural world acts as a constant presence, influencing the characters' moods, their philosophical outlooks, and their capacity for resilience. The stark beauty of the desert, the grandeur of the mountains, and the ever-changing skies all contribute to a profound sense of perspective. Stegner suggests that a connection to nature can foster a deeper understanding of life's cycles, its inherent challenges, and the importance of adapting and persevering. The characters often find solace and clarity in their encounters with the natural world, reinforcing the idea that external environments can deeply impact internal states and the strength of human spirit.

Critical Reception and Enduring Legacy of Crossing to

Safety

Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety" has consistently been lauded by critics and readers alike, solidifying its position as one of his most significant and beloved works. Upon its release, the novel was met with widespread critical acclaim, praised for its insightful character portrayals, its elegant prose, and its profound exploration of enduring themes. Reviewers often highlighted Stegner's ability to capture the nuances of long-term relationships, the complexities of marriage, and the passage of time with a rare combination of wisdom and compassion. The novel's retrospective narrative structure and its deep engagement with the American West were also frequently cited as particular strengths, contributing to its rich and evocative tapestry.

The enduring legacy of "Crossing to Safety" is evident in its continued relevance and its consistent presence on lists of essential American literature. Stegner's masterful storytelling and his keen observations on the human condition continue to resonate with contemporary audiences. The novel serves as a touchstone for discussions about friendship, marriage, and the search for meaning in life. Its influence can be seen in subsequent generations of writers who have been inspired by Stegner's approach to character development and his ability to weave profound philosophical questions into compelling narratives. The novel's exploration of loyalty and the quiet strengths that sustain us through life's journey remains a powerful and inspiring message.

Critical Acclaim and Literary Merit

From its initial publication, "Crossing to Safety" garnered significant critical praise. Many reviewers lauded Stegner's sophisticated prose, his meticulous attention to detail, and his profound understanding of human psychology. The novel was recognized for its quiet power, its lack of melodrama, and its authentic depiction of relationships. Critics often pointed to the depth of character development, particularly in the portrayal of the two couples, as a major achievement. The novel's literary merit lies in its ability to engage readers on both an intellectual and emotional level, prompting reflection on their own lives and relationships. Stegner's skill in crafting a narrative that feels both deeply personal and universally relatable cemented the novel's status as a significant contribution to American literature.

Stegner's Influence on Subsequent Writers

The impact of Wallace Stegner's writing, and "Crossing to Safety" in particular, extends to subsequent generations of authors. His approach to character, his masterful use of setting, and his nuanced exploration of human relationships have inspired many who followed. Stegner's ability to balance intellectual depth with compelling narrative storytelling provided a model for writers seeking to explore similar themes. The novel's enduring popularity and its continued critical examination underscore its lasting influence on the landscape of American letters. Writers often cite Stegner as a formative influence, appreciating his commitment to craft and his profound insights into the complexities of the human experience.

The Novel's Continued Relevance

The themes explored in "Crossing to Safety" remain remarkably relevant today. The novel's examination of the enduring power of friendship, the evolution of love, and the search for meaning in a complex world continues to strike a chord with readers. In an era often characterized by fleeting connections and constant change, the novel's celebration of loyalty and sustained commitment offers a powerful counterpoint. The wisdom and insight embedded within Stegner's narrative provide guidance and comfort, reminding readers of the essential human need for connection and belonging. The novel's message about finding safety and fulfillment through deep, abiding relationships is a timeless one.

Conclusion: The Enduring Resonance of Crossing to Safety

Wallace Stegner's "Crossing to Safety" stands as a timeless testament to the enduring power of human connection, the complexities of marriage, and the profound journey of life. Through the interwoven lives of Sid and Charity Page and their closest friends, Larry and Beth McEwan, Stegner crafts a narrative that is both deeply personal and universally resonant. The novel masterfully explores the quest for sanctuary, the quiet strength of loyalty, and the inevitable transformations that time brings to relationships. Its meticulous structure, rich characterizations, and evocative portrayal of the American West all contribute to its enduring literary merit. The legacy of "Crossing to Safety" lies in its ability to illuminate the fundamental truths about love, friendship, and the search for meaning, making it a vital and cherished work for readers of all generations.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of Wallace Stegner's 'Crossing to Safety'?

The central theme of 'Crossing to Safety' is the enduring nature of friendship and love in the face of life's challenges and the passage of time, explored through the intertwined lives of two couples.

How does Stegner use the concept of 'crossing to safety' in the novel?

The title 'Crossing to Safety' serves as a metaphor for finding stability, happiness, and a sense of belonging within relationships and in one's personal life, particularly in contrast to the uncertainties and struggles of a career and the external world.

What is the significance of the contrasting personalities of the

two main couples, Larry Morgan and his wife Beth, and Sid Lang and his wife Cherie?

The contrast highlights different approaches to life and love. Larry and Beth represent a more introspective and intellectual partnership, while Sid and Cherie embody a more passionate and perhaps less stable dynamic, allowing Stegner to explore various facets of human connection.

How does 'Crossing to Safety' reflect Stegner's own experiences as a writer and academic?

The novel draws heavily from Stegner's life, particularly his experiences as a writer and his deep friendships. The portrayal of academic life, the creative process, and the balancing of personal and professional lives are all informed by his own background.

What makes 'Crossing to Safety' a relevant and enduring work in contemporary literature?

'Crossing to Safety' remains relevant due to its profound exploration of universal human desires for connection, security, and meaning, as well as its nuanced portrayal of long-term relationships, personal growth, and the search for contentment.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to *Crossing to Safety* by Wallace Stegner, with descriptions:

1. Angle of Repose

This novel, also by Wallace Stegner, explores the life of a historian piecing together the story of his grandparents' lives in the American West. It delves into themes of ambition, marriage, and the constraints placed upon women in earlier eras, much like the characters in *Crossing to Safety* grapple with their own histories and relationships. The narrative's focus on the creation of art and the sacrifices made for it resonates with the artistic pursuits of the protagonists in Stegner's later work.

2. The Stone Angel

By Margaret Laurence, this Canadian novel centers on Hagar Shipley, an elderly woman looking back on her life and the regrets that accompany it. Similar to Sid Lang in *Crossing to Safety*, Hagar confronts her past with a mix of stubbornness and newfound clarity, examining the nature of legacy and self-identity. The novel's exploration of aging and the complex relationships within a family provides a parallel to the enduring friendships and marital bonds in Stegner's book.

3. A Good Man Is Hard to Find

Flannery O'Connor's collection of short stories is known for its Southern Gothic sensibility and exploration of flawed characters confronting moments of grace. While stylistically different, O'Connor's keen observation of human nature and the underlying spiritual currents in ordinary lives echo Stegner's focus on the interior lives of his characters and the ethical dilemmas they face. Both authors delve into the complexities of faith, doubt, and the search for meaning.

4. The Corrections

Jonathan Franzen's novel examines the unraveling lives of a Midwestern family as they navigate

aging, personal crises, and societal changes. Like the characters in *Crossing to Safety*, the Lambert family grapples with the consequences of their choices and the enduring, sometimes strained, bonds of family. The novel's introspective nature and its examination of the American middle class offer a contemporary perspective on similar themes of legacy and fulfillment.

5. The Shipping News

Annie Proulx's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel tells the story of Quoye, an adrift man who returns to his ancestral Newfoundland home. The novel shares *Crossing to Safety*'s focus on protagonists seeking a sense of belonging and purpose, often through relationships and the landscapes that shape them. Both works feature characters who are somewhat outsiders, looking for a place to anchor themselves and find meaning in their lives.

6. Middlemarch

George Eliot's masterpiece is an epic novel set in a provincial English town, exploring the lives and aspirations of a diverse cast of characters. The novel's intricate portrayal of marriages, social ambition, and the quiet struggles of individuals seeking a meaningful existence mirrors the depth and breadth of character development in *Crossing to Safety*. Eliot's examination of how individuals shape and are shaped by their communities and relationships is a core element of both works.

7. The Sportswriter

Richard Ford's novel introduces Frank Bascombe, a divorced sportswriter navigating midlife and the complexities of contemporary American life. The introspective voice and the protagonist's search for meaning and connection in a world often perceived as shallow or meaningless are reminiscent of the quiet contemplation of the characters in *Crossing to Safety*. Both books explore themes of personal disillusionment and the enduring quest for authenticity.

8. My Ántonia

Willa Cather's classic novel celebrates the resilience and spirit of pioneer women on the Nebraska prairie. The novel's focus on the strength of female friendship and the enduring power of memory to shape identity provides a strong parallel to the friendship between Charity and Sally in *Crossing to Safety*. Both books capture the essence of strong bonds formed through shared experience and a deep understanding of each other's lives.

9. The Remains of the Day

Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, narrated by an aging English butler, Stevens, reflects on his life of service and his complex relationship with his former employer. The novel's exploration of regret, duty, and the unspoken emotions that shape a life, much like Stegner's characters look back on their pasts, offers a profound meditation on memory and the choices that define us. Both works delve into the subtle ways in which personal histories and unfulfilled desires can linger.

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