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Book Review: On Teaching and Writing Fiction

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There have been several collections of essays by and about Wallace Stegner, but this one takes in new territory, his ideas about the teaching of creative writing and about the art of fiction. He was a teacher of writing for most of his life, first at Utah, at Wisconsin, and then at Harvard. He went to Stanford in 1945 where he founded and directed the Writing Program, a workshop format modeled after his student experience at Iowa (the only graduate writing program in the country at that time) and his summers teaching at the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference.

As teacher and director, he was very successful. The Stanford workshop became one of the two premier programs in the United States, a model duplicated at universities all over the country. Many of his students became successful
writers of serious fiction and nonfiction, including, among the best known, Ernest Gaines, Edward Abbey, Harriet Doerr, Robert Stone, Tillie Olsen, Scott Momaday, Raymond Carver, Judith Rascoe, Wendell Berry, Eugene Burdick, Scott Turow, Tom McGuane, Pat Zelver, Evan Connell, Larry McMurtry, Jim Houston, Ken Kesey, and Al Young. Even abbreviated, it is quite a list.

Although he didn’t like spending his time on administration, Stegner was happy to be able to carry out his own vision of what a successful program should be. Reflecting his sense of democracy and the primary importance to him of talent, entrance to the program depended on a writing sample, not academic status, and there was no discrimination on the basis of age, sex, or race. Because he succeeded in getting an endowment for the program, he was then able to offer fellowships that enabled students just to write without worrying about supporting themselves. Finally, because he was an extremely successful author, he was able to inspire his students by example.

In an excellent foreword to the collection, Lynn Stegner, prominent author in her own right and Stegner’s daughter-in-law, notes that “he was there to help students realize the full literary potential in their work through themselves as unique and uniquely evolving individuals, not to convert them to Stegner’s style or Stegner’s themes, or even to Stegner’s dreams for them. Guidance, not influence, was his watchword.” Writing for Stegner was nearly a sacred occupation, what is written reflecting the integrity as well as the skill of the writer. Quoting him, Lynn Stegner points to the heart of what he was as a writer and teacher: “Any work of art is the product of a total human being;’ he has said; good fiction is ‘dramatized belief.’”

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