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THE BIG ROCK CANDY MOUNTAIN

THE CONSEQUENCES OF A DELUSORY AMERICAN DREAM

KENNETH C. MASON

A DELUSORY AMERICAN DREAM DEFINED

Wallace Stegner's great, obsessive theme, evidenced in all of his novels, from the first, *Remembering Laughter* (1938), to the latest, *Recapitulation* (1979), is the hard, painful process by which solid, culture-engendering and -preserving values are achieved. The portrayal of intrafamilial conflicts and tensions, extending across generations, has been the means by which Stegner has most successfully demonstrated this process of acquiring civilization-building values. Stegner has left the depiction of the alienation and angst of the modern antihero to others.¹ The family is what truly inspires him, stimulating him to give sensate fictional body to his ideas.

Critics have recognized this fact and Stegner himself is fully aware of it.² "And what is fiction made of anyway? It's made of births and

deaths and weddings and courtships. I don't know what we're going to make of it when the family has gone out of style completely. There's nothing left. You starve yourself without family—you starve your hatreds as well as your loves. We need a core of associations. . . . We need indispensable relationships." We find these "indispensable relationships," productive of both so much hatred and of so much love, fully accomplished for the first time in Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943), his fifth novel. Stegner does not attain such complexity, such verve, and such breadth in his fiction again until *Angle of Repose* (1971), his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel. Since the larger and more interesting part of *Angle of Repose* is set in the latter half of the nineteenth century, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* remains Stegner's most searching, expansive, and compelling novel about twentieth-century America.

The Big Rock Candy Mountain is in the tradition of the novel depicting the defeat of the American dream, a tradition including Cooper's *The Pioneers*, Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance*, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha novels, Cather's *A Lost Lady*, Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath*, and Wright's *Native Son*.⁴

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More exactly, Stegner's novel reveals the moral and social bankruptcy of one widely held version of the American dream: the myth of raw, unrestrained individualism. This individualism attempts to conquer the land and all other antagonists, never feeling the need to conquer itself. As Stegner has made clear in his essays and interviews, this dream of individual power is a pernicious one; it is selfish, anarchic, and destructive of the fiber of the greater human enterprise in America, which seeks to create a productive, pluralistic culture that imparts to each person a sense of his or her personal significance, and that is, at no irredeemable expense to the earth, materially prosperous.

Stegner has offered us, in the character of Harry (Bo) Mason, a man who embodies the delusory American dream in his every sinew, nerve, thought, and urge. In pathetic counterpoint to Bo, Stegner has offered Elsa, Bo's wife, and Chet, his older son. Bruce, the younger son and the only survivor in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, emerges as an imperfect synthesis of Bo's reckless, restive energy and Elsa's patient, directed industry, of Bo's happily rootless ambition and Elsa's frustrated yearning for a home and stability. In his essay "Fiction: A Lens on Life," Stegner says that "if fiction isn't people it is nothing."⁵ Stegner shows one fatally misdirected form of the American dream in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. I shall examine the effects of the failure of that dream on the four members of the Mason family.

BO MASON IN QUEST OF THE DELUSORY DREAM

Bo Mason is, it can be reasonably argued, the largest, most charismatic character Stegner has yet created; and he is very likely, to his author, the most reprehensible. Bo Mason is a social outlaw, a misfit and malcontent, who recognizes no law or order that restricts or threatens his own best interests—and reviewers and critics have never failed to respond to him.⁶ Bo is a tornado of unbridled appetite and

ambition, and like a tornado, he is immensely damaging to the lives of the people who cross his path, his loved ones in particular. Bo gives to the novel its title, since his is the delusory dream of "some Big Rock Candy Mountain where life was effortless and rich and unrestricted and full of adventure and action, where something could be had for nothing."⁷ Irresponsible toward society, careless of family, and stubbornly defiant in both attitudes, Bo is driven, and is finally consumed, by his dream of material success.

Bo Mason's most striking quality is a naïveté that sees no obstacle as too great to vanquish in the fulfillment of his dreams. Bo is yet another incarnation of the "American Adam" that R. W. B. Lewis has maintained is the heroic prototype of our classical American literature: "an individual emancipated from history, happily bereft of ancestry, untouched and undefiled by the usual inheritances of family and race, an individual standing alone, self-reliant and self-propelling, ready to confront whatever awaited him with the aid of his own unique and inherent resources."⁸ What Bo Mason comes to learn, however, is that he is not and never has been "emancipated from history," and that by trying to act as though he is, he has killed the promise and hope of his own life and wrought hardship, havoc, and shame on his family. But how has Bo come to be possessed of such innocence? How has he come to be a much belated pioneer, a man who once said, as Elsa remembers, that "he should have lived a hundred years earlier" (p. 83)?⁹ To begin to answer these questions we must look at the "skeleton biography" (p. 21) Stegner gives us of Bo's adolescent years, the years before he settled in Hardanger, North Dakota, to run a billiard parlor and blind pig.

Bo is the proponent and victim of what we might call the will to wealth, the perversion of the capitalists' competitive urge toward money and power that defines human fulfillment only in those narrow terms.¹⁰ Fred Mason, Bo's father, is a man of "irascible individualism" (p. 21). He is also an inventor, a "propagator of great schemes" (p. 21). We can see already

where the greater share of Bo's psychological inheritance has derived from. The only thing necessary to complete Bo's sense of identity is a sullen sense of injustice, of unfair defeat at the hands of fate, or, as in this case, at the cruel hands of his father. Fred Mason beats his six sons and one daughter, beats them to enforce his tyrannically strict moral code, but also to maintain his influence over them.¹¹

Bo has been an abused child, and he does not merely resent his father, he hates him. In his fourteenth year Bo leaves home to begin a life of rootless wandering.¹² The recurrence of parental abuse and filial rejection in the next generation, with Chet and Bruce, is one of the unhappy symmetries in Stegner's plot. Bo is not simply being malicious when he rubs Bruce's nose in the boy's own excrement or sharply chastizes the teenage Chet; he is reenacting a pattern of behavior that began with Fred Mason, a reenactment now a commonplace in the psychology of child abuse. Bo's flight from his father's farm to the rough margin of late nineteenth-century America toughens (or coarsens, depending on one's perspective) his character, and fills him with the frontier dream of instantaneous wealth.

Stegner describes Bo's feelings and defines the young man at the same time, as Bo watches the influx of Russians and Norwegians into North Dakota: "Here everybody was his own boss, here was a wide open and unskimmed country where a man could hew his own line and not suffer for his independence. Obstacles raised by nature . . . he could slog through with almost fierce joy, but obstacles raised by institutions and the habits of a civilized community left him prowling and baffled" (pp. 30-31). Bo has succumbed to the myth of unrestrained individualism, and in so doing, set himself almost totally beyond the pale of "civilized" life. The ultimate act of his juvenile biography is a typically impulsive one, foredoomed to failure. In the summer of 1899—symbolically just before the turn of the century and modern America's final foreclosure on its frontier past—Bo buys half a building in

Hardanger, installs bowling alleys, pool tables, a thirty-foot bar and mirrors, and orders bottled beer, believing that within five years he will be "buying out the brewery" (p. 32). The year 1905 arrives to find the town no bigger, the saloon become a scarcely profitable blind pig, and Bo aching for release.

Stegner has fully established his theme and the character of his protagonist in this biographical sketch—supposedly a collocation of information Bo imparts to Elsa Norgaard, the admiring, new young woman in town, as they sit on the steps of her uncle's house many different evenings of the summer of 1905. The remaining 530 pages of the novel are a dramatic iteration and reiteration, in increasingly dark, violent, sordid, and desperate terms, of this theme. Bo changes little in the course of the novel, and his unwillingness or inability to change is what makes him a pathetic figure.¹³ The idyllic interlude of Bo's courtship of Elsa, during which it is Bo's dream to "find some good proposition and dower [themselves] in and keep [their] nose to the grindstone and make a pile" (p. 71), is followed by marriage and five years of the unprofitable, unexciting proprietorship of a hotel (complete with speakeasy)—years that fall like dull clods of earth on Bo's spirit, smothering it in the ordinary.

It is Pinky Jordan, the tramp fresh from the Klondike gold fields, who leaves behind him in Bo's hotel, one day in 1910, a "vision" of "some place where money [can] be made like drawing water from a well" (p. 83)—a vision, in short, meant to reignite and fan to white heat Bo's delusory hopes of attaining instantaneous wealth. Despite setbacks, including a police raid on the hotel's blind pig and Elsa's shamed flight with the two boys back to her father's home in Indian Falls, Iowa, the spring of 1911 finds a reconciled Bo and Elsa en route to the Cibola of the Alaskan gold fields. When their hegira is abruptly terminated by Chet's contraction of scarlet fever in Seattle, Washington, Bo's hopes are stifled, and once again it becomes obvious that he has been "born too late" to play a role in the opening up of a new

country or to achieve the kind of success he so deludedly seeks.¹⁴

In his perspicacious essay "Born a Square," Stegner speculates: "It may well turn out that more than any other region the West abounds in that characteristic American figure, the symbolic orphan."¹⁵ We have already seen that Bo Mason has been "orphaned" from his family and from the larger American society into a wanderer's life on the fringes of social respectability. Stegner, however, has wrung a new change on the myth of the "symbolic orphan" by forcing his Bo Mason to shoulder a responsibility that the Leather stockings, the Ishmaels, the Huckleberry Finns, and the Nick Adamses have never had to meet: a wife and two children. It is almost as if Stegner desires to confront this mythic American figure head on, to place him (and his family) in the spiritual jeopardy of test after test, and to demand that he mature into a full human being—that is, that he achieve a more realistic basis for his identity.¹⁶

Citing Crane's "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky" and Wister's *The Virginian*, Stegner has written that the use of the dialectic of "the freedom-loving, roving man and the civilizing woman" in serious fiction treating the western past "is inescapable." This has certainly proven true for Stegner himself: "Long before I had heard this theme stated, and before I knew enough western literature to state it myself, I had put it into Bo and Elsa Mason in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. . . . Male freedom and aspiration versus civilization, violence and danger versus the safe and tamed."¹⁷ The first major explosion in the Mason family occurs when Bo, still sore about the Alaskan boondoggle and irritated by Elsa's refusal to go with him to try "bonanza" farming in Saskatchewan, vents his vexation and anger on two-year-old Bruce for defecating on the path to the privy. Stegner ensures that we will have no sympathy for Bo in this scene by emphasizing Bo's ire and Bruce's terror. Elsa's assault on Bo, to rescue her "baby," and her thoughts as she succors Bruce afterward reveal the normative outrage and indignation

with which Stegner wants us to identify. Elsa sees their tent-house in the woods as a "gravestone in her life," a monument over a "dead marriage" (p. 129).

Bo may have been saddened and temporarily humbled by his violent outburst, but his obsession with "making his pile" has hardly been weakened. Bo's letter asking Elsa and the children to rejoin him in Saskatchewan, for example, is modestly apologetic, but predominantly boosteristic. Elsa understands full well that "the thing she fears in [Bo], the thing that [made] her shut him out that night, [is] still there, deep in his violent and irritable and restless blood" (p. 163). Their next major confrontation comes in the winter of 1919, in the middle of the catastrophic flu epidemic of that year, when Bo decides that bootlegging whiskey into dry Saskatchewan will become his new "gold mine" (p. 248).

Elsa does not leave Bo this time, but she states her opposition to the whiskey business in no uncertain terms: "I'd have been satisfied with just a bare living, if we could only keep what we've had up here. So don't ever say you did this for me or them. Don't ever forget that I was against it" (p. 252). Once again Stegner has placed Elsa in the position of moral victim, and Bo in the uneasy but unbudging position of moral outlaw. So it will be as Bo continues to give rein to his delusive dream—getting arrested in Havre, Montana, moving his family first to Great Falls, Montana, and then to Salt Lake City, where they live in a succession of twelve houses in four years (one of which is used as a speakeasy), constantly on the dodge from federal prohibition officers.¹⁸ When Bo's total assets have risen to thirty thousand dollars and Bruce is one summer away from entering college, Elsa confronts Bo again about the whiskey business, but he does not give it up—at least not until he can buy into a Reno gambling casino. By that time Chet is dead, Bruce is smoldering with bitter hatred in law school, and Elsa has terminal breast cancer.

Most of the last three sections of the novel are told from Bruce's point of view, and on

several occasions it is given to Bruce to summarize his father's life. Bruce realizes the shallow nature of his father's dream and coldly condemns him for his allegiance to it: "Or suppose I said that all his life he has been haunted by the dream of quick wealth and isn't quite unscrupulous enough to make his dream come true. . . . Suppose I labeled him: a self-centered and dominating egotist who insists on complete submission from his family and yet at the same time is completely dependent on his wife, who is in all the enduring ways stronger than he is" (p. 437). After Elsa's death, Bo sells out his interests in the casino and resumes whiskey-running. Eventually he comes to throw every dollar he has down a barren gold mine—a literal gold mine this time, though the symbolism of deluded hope is the same as in the metaphorical gold mine of bootleg whiskey.

What makes Bo's final defeat doubly pathetic is that he has rejected Bruce's advice not to become involved in the mine and that, further, he has had to borrow money from Bruce for his last futile efforts at making the mine go. The rub is that, as Edward Weeks has said, "Bo never knows that he is beaten."¹⁹ Hence, he never learns from nor corrects his mistakes. Materially and spiritually bankrupt at age 61, his wife and favorite son dead, his other son as good as dead to him, and his mistress scornful of his poverty, Bo exercises the only control he still has over existence—his mastery of firearms—and shoots his mistress and himself. Bruce views his father's death with cold impersonality: "At the very end, before that fatal morning, he must have looked down his road and seen nothing, no Big Rock Candy Mountain. . . . Nothing. The end, the empty end, nothing to move toward because nothing was there" (p. 552). The insubstantiality of Bo's obsessive dream, and the impossibility of its physical attainment, have finally crashed in on Bo without mercy. His defeat is pathetic, because, though he is possessed of talents, intelligence, and energy, he was cursed before he had started by a violent, abusive upbringing and the influence of a semibarba-

rous, quasi-frontier society, a society whose values are the morally deficient ones of the will to wealth.

ELSA MASON AS VICTIM OF THE DELUSORY DREAM

Bo Mason is undeniably the dominant personality in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, but he is not the only person to be reckoned with in the novel. The book is a chronicle of the lives of two generations of the Mason family. We will reach a broader perception of the moral and emotional complexity of Stegner's novel if we examine the three other principal characters—Elsa, Chet, and Bruce. The love of Elsa Norgaard for Bo Mason is one embroidered with foreglimmerings of tragic unhappiness. Even before Elsa meets Bo, her fate is symbolically determined by Stegner to be misfortune and the deep hurt of disappointed hopes.

The novel opens with Elsa's train ride to "freedom," from her father's home in Indian Falls, Iowa, to her Uncle Karl's house in Hardanger (both towns are fictional). Elsa's departure has been promoted by her father's sudden marriage to her best friend, somewhat less than three years after the death of Elsa's mother. In leaving, Elsa revolts against this wedded union, which she sees as a betrayal of herself and of the memory of her mother. Elsa's mother defied her own parents by running away at age seventeen to marry a carpenter. Inside six months, her new husband took her from Voss, Norway, to a farm in Minnesota, where he proceeded to work her into the grave at the age of thirty-four. Elsa, who dropped out of school at age fourteen to nurse her mother and to assume her labors on the farm, "has always felt the daguerreotype [of her sick mother] to be a portrait of martyrdom" (p. 8). Because Stegner makes the seventeen-year-old Elsa—soon to marry a man her family will disapprove of—also run away from her family, the intention of the symbolic parallelism is unmistakable: Elsa, like her mother, will live a hard life as martyr to her

husband, and will die a difficult death. We might even see Elsa's and Bo's constant uprooting as the symbolic analogue to her parents' uprooting and emigration to America.

Stegner symbolically negates Elsa's flight to freedom by making her become sick from the train's motion and the smell of its smoke. This negation is followed fast by her first dejected view of Hardanger as "ugly" (p. 4). Stegner's portrait of the town's bleakness is telling, as these three sharply honed sentences illustrate: "Dust-choked streets and side-walks that were treacherous to walk on because sometimes the ends of the boards were loose. A general store whose windows were crammed with overalls, pitchforks, gloves, monkey wrenches, spools of barbed wire, guns, boxes of ammunition, ladies' hats. A butcher shop and bakery under the same roof, the windows of both opaque with fly specks" (p. 4). The contents of the general store's windows make it manifest that the young and innocent Elsa has entered a masculine world, a world of work and sweat, as stubbornly impervious to refinement as a monkey wrench, but which likes to show off its ladies in fine hats. The "dust-choked" streets, the "treacherous" sidewalks, and the "flyspecked" windows are images full of symbolic portent for the life Elsa will begin to make for herself in Hardanger. The guns and ammunition boxes in the windows of the general store serve as a foreshadowing of her encounter soon after with Bo, who is a crack shot.

Elsa finds Bo a bit "fresh" in their first brief meeting, but that opinion is soon broadened to a view of Bo as a man who is "restless and dissatisfied" (p. 20), a man "so good at everything he [does]," and "the most masterful, dominating, contradictory, and unusual man she [has] ever met" (p. 21). Kerry Ahearn is quite correct in saying that "generally, the narrative does not allow Bo and Elsa to get very close together," but he is less convincing when he concludes that "it not only ignores the dimension in Elsa's personality that is attracted to Bo's sexuality, but actually tries to discourage any such implication."²⁰ When

Stegner characterizes Bo as "masterful" and "dominating," in Elsa's eyes, and when he has Elsa accept one hundred kisses from Bo during the buggy ride home the night of the trap shoot and carnival, it is difficult to agree that Stegner's narrative avoids the sexual nature of Elsa's attraction to Bo.

The winning of the trap-shooting match is one of the most significant events in Bo's life, a moment of true achievement, emblematic of his talent and potential. While Elsa is much attracted to Bo's skill as a marksman, his behavior at the carnival later that same day gives her reason for concern. Bo and his gambler friend Jud Chain cheat at a ball-throwing game; they both throw at the "nigger baby" whose head is stuck out of a painted curtain, so that, in dodging Bo's ball, he is struck by Jud's. Elsa's fears become outright horror when, not long after, she sees Bo slug a tramp who has struck one of the gambling machines in Bo's poolhall.²¹ Though Elsa breaks off her relationship with Bo for a time, she soon finds herself agreeing to marry him. Hereafter, she will be trapped pathetically between her desire for Bo and her repulsion at his behavior.

The core of Elsa's identity is her continual longing for a settled, stable way of life, a life within the limits of the law and social convention, a life summarized by the single word *home*. Elsa yearns for a sense of cultural continuity and belonging for herself and for Bo and, more importantly, for Chet and Bruce. Elsa accepts but never gives her consent to their outsider milieu, the only place, it seems, where Bo can move with a sense of freedom and possibility. It is an article of Elsa's personal integrity and identity that she never agrees to Bo's extralegal business activities. Throughout the novel Elsa maintains the position of victimized moral superiority:

That rough country was where he belonged, really. But it would blow everything she wanted sky-high, up-root her again, take the children into a country where there weren't even schools. (P. 116)

For an instant, sitting in the sweet afternoon sun with these women who read books, went to plays, knew music, moved in an atmosphere of ideas, she felt a pang of bitter black envy. It had never occurred to her why the world of criminals and law-breakers was called the underworld, but it was clear now. You were shut out. (Pp. 424-25)

Elsa is thinking these last thoughts while convalescing in a sanitarium, and they powerfully evince the deprived nature of her social position, of her whole life as an outsider. Nonetheless, Elsa's role in the novel can be seen as ethically exemplary, as demanding stamina, moral courage, and a strong sense of identity. Elsa makes sacrifices for Bo, but she never relinquishes her own dreams and aspirations.

Elsa's status as victim is most effectively symbolized by her breast cancer. Her death affects us more than either Chet's or Bo's (sensational as his is) because we recognize that, with her death, all hope for her generation of the Mason family has evaporated: the civilizing force has been stilled. After Elsa's death, Bo's tragic denouement is as much as accomplished; there can be no other end for him.

CHET MASON AS VICTIM AND BRUCE MASON AS SURVIVOR

As children, Chet and Bruce not infrequently find their places square on the demarcation line of the conflict between the dreams of their parents, aligned as partisans—Chet with Bo, Bruce with Elsa. The two boys are so different as to be nearly opposites, and this makes the fact all the more salient that they both come, as young men, to reject their father. Chet is gregarious, rough, and reckless; he thrives on play-boxing with Bo and on any event promising danger or adventure. Stegner draws Chet's childhood experiences exuberantly, and a few of these scenes—for example, Chet's tending to his father's liquor business

during the flu epidemic, while Bo is deathly ill—are reminiscent of Mark Twain.

Bo's relationship to the adolescent Chet is one of unspoken pride in his ability as a potentially major league pitcher and chary emotional distance resulting from Chet's dislike for the whiskey business and Bo's disapproval of Chet's prodigality and carelessness. Bo uses his influence with a Double-A league coach to get Chet a summer's work with a team, but when Chet is arrested with Bo at their apartment for liquor possession, the boy is so humiliated that he throws away his baseball hopes and elopes to Wyoming with his girl friend, Lara Betterton, lying about his age. (He is seventeen, which seems to be Stegner's magic number for elopements.) Chet's marriage breaks up just before he contracts pneumonia, an illness that brings to a miserable end a life of misfortune. Robert Canzoneri sees Chet's death as exemplifying Stegner's strength in characterization, and that it certainly does, especially since Chet is so unlike either Elsa or Bruce, and since he is so much more emotionally vulnerable than Bo.²² Though Bo is ravaged by Chet's death, he receives no sympathy from a bitter Bruce, who cannot help but lay some of the blame for his brother's death on Bo's shoulders. Bruce's resentment is nothing new; he has been nursing his hatred of his father for a long time.

Bruce's adolescent experiences one summer on the Saskatchewan farm and the July fifth car trip with his parents to the Bearpaw Mountains are rich, vital scenes, among the most memorable in the novel. Yet that same summer offers three instances of Bo's violence and insensitivity that show the beginnings of Bruce's estrangement from his father: Bo tests a .22 rifle by shooting a sparrow, though Bruce pleads with him not to; Bo strikes Bruce, impatient with his crying and with the car that will not start to take them into town for the July Fourth festivities; and Bo becomes angry with Bruce for getting sick on the day they are to move to Whitemud. These three incidents are followed by Bo's selling of Bruce's broken-legged colt, Socks, to the Whitemud veterinar-

ian as the family prepares to leave for Montana. Bruce is promised that the pony will be well provided for, but as the Mason family drives out of town, the boys see the colt's body on the town dump. Bruce's feeling of betrayal is almost unmitigable.

Bruce feels even more cruelly betrayed as a young man when his cancer-stricken mother tells him that Bo has been seeing another woman. Joseph Warren Beach notes that "between father and sons the Oedipus complex rages furiously," and this is nowhere more apparent than in the sickbed scenes, in which Bo, Elsa, and Bruce all figure.²³ Bo makes awkward appearances in the sickroom, feeling out of place in that unfamiliar environment, and Bruce relishes his discomfort. Bruce's hatred of his father reaches such a pitch that, following the death of his mother, he takes Bo's pistol and goes out onto the streets to search Bo out and kill him—a nearly classical Oedipal act. Bruce gives up that mad course, but he and Bo confront each other for the last time a few hours later, and Bruce departs, permanently alienated, never to see his father again.

Stegner leaves it to Bruce to sum up the meaning of his parents' lives. It is not surprising that Bruce's thoughts turn again and again to his father's delusory dream of sudden riches. That dream inspired Bo to crisscross the West in quest of the Big Rock Candy Mountain, never offering his family a stable home. With Bo's death, however, Bruce realizes that as the only survivor of his ill-fated family, his true home is in Salt Lake City, because that is where his dead are buried. His family's search for the illusory mountain has ended in dispossession, premature death, and suicide, but Bruce has emerged alive from all of this sorrow, and he must somehow come to terms with his family's dark history and move on.²⁴ Bruce's final estimation of his parents is probably the most thought-provoking passage in the novel:

Harry Mason was a child and a man. . . . In an earlier time, under other circumstances,

he might have become something the nation would have elected to honor, but he would have been no different. He would always have been an undeveloped human being, an immature social animal, and the further the nation goes the less need there is for that kind of man. . . . He was more talented and more versatile and more energetic than she [Elsa]. Refine her qualities and you would get saintliness, but never greatness. His qualities were the raw material for a notable man. Though I have hated him, and though I neither honor nor respect him now, I can not deny him that. (Pp. 561-62)

Bruce may be incorrect in his ultimate assessment of his parents, but he is very much right in seeing Bo as an anachronism. The developing national culture of the early twentieth century had a far greater need for Elsa's civilized values than it did for Bo's rough manliness, and in that fact lies the pathetic reality of Bo's delusory dream. Bo is a frontiersman without a frontier, a man with no meaningful role to play in the modern West.

The Big Rock Candy Mountain is a book that lingers long in the memory, a novel whose individual scenes and whose whole sad breadth continue to impinge powerfully on our feelings. Pathos is the burden of the larger part of this chronicle, but the book closes on a note of affirmation and genuine hope for the future. Among Bruce's last thoughts are these: "Perhaps it took several generations to make a man, perhaps it took several combinations and re-creations of his mother's gentleness and resilience, his father's enormous energy and appetite for the new . . . before a proper man could be fashioned" (p. 563).²⁵ Stegner clearly implies that Bruce's troubled meditations on his family have enabled Bruce to assume responsibility for the future, to become the "proper man" whose possibility he has foreseen.

NOTES

1. Stegner's most narrowly and superficially

imagined novel, *Fire and Ice* (1941), offers in Paul Condon, its protagonist, a portrait of just such a hero. Edwin Vickers, the protagonist of *On a Darkling Plain* (1940), is, at least at the beginning of that novel, a man who suffers the estrangement of the anti-hero.

2. Most notably, Kerry Ahearn, in "Heroes Vs. Women: Conflict and Duplicity in Stegner," *Western Humanities Review* 31 (Spring 1977): 125-41, and William C. Baurecht, "Within a Continuous Frame: Stegner's Family Album in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*," in Anthony Arthur, ed., *Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1982), pp. 98-108. Baurecht makes the point succinctly and well: "The principal agent of psychic continuity for all of the Masons is, as well, the family; the family is, in fact, the die that forms and indelibly stamps the consciousness of each" (p. 98).

3. "Interview with Wallace Stegner," *Great Lakes Review* 2 (Winter 1974-75): 25. Stegner says much the same thing in David Dillon, "Time's Prisoner: An Interview with Wallace Stegner," *Southwest Review* 61 (Summer 1976): 261-62.

4. This is so apparent in the novel that it almost goes without saying. Three important Stegner critics have noted it in memorable terms. See Chester E. Eisinger, "Twenty Years of Wallace Stegner," *College English* 20 (December 1958): 112, and Forrest G. and Margaret G. Robinson, *Wallace Stegner* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 118.

5. Wallace Stegner, "Fiction: A Lens on Life," in *The Writer in America* (Folcroft, Pennsylvania: Folcroft Press, Inc., 1951), p. 6.

6. See Howard Mumford Jones, "World out of Nowhere," *Saturday Review of Literature* 26 (2 October 1943): 11; Diana Trilling, "Fiction in Review," *Nation* 157 (30 October 1943): 506; Kerry Ahearn, "Heroes Vs. Women": 127; Chester E. Eisinger, "Twenty Years": 112; and Forrest G. and Margaret G. Robinson, *Wallace Stegner*, pp. 114, 115.

7. Wallace Stegner, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1957; original copyright, 1943), p. 83. All further citations to this edition will be given parenthetically in the text.

8. R. W. B. Lewis, *The American Adam: Innocence, Tragedy, and Tradition in the Nineteenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 5.

9. Stegner comments interestingly on Bo's anachronistic existence in Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1983), p. 47.

10. William C. Baurecht calls this "the great American entrepreneurial dream," "Within a Continuous Frame," p. 99.

11. A description of Bo's childhood rings close to a prophecy of his later treatment of Chet and Bruce: "The children learned early to avoid their father, for his one hand was quick at backhanded slaps, and his temper was hair trigger. A crying or teasing or noisy child set him mad with irritation; he was fond of telling what a damned pest kids were—his especially, the damndest pack of mongrels ever whelped" (p. 22).

12. Lois Phillips Hudson's percipient comment in "The Big Rock Candy Mountain: No Roots—and No Frontier," *South Dakota Review* 9 (Spring 1971): 3, that "perhaps more than any other living writer, Wallace Stegner embodies in his work and in his own life the cardinal fact of Western America in the Twentieth Century—namely, that our rootlessness has never had the compensation of frontier opportunity," rings especially true for Bo Mason, who has been born too late for anything but the delusory promise of the American and Canadian Midwest, those semi-arid lands Stegner has written of in *Beyond the Hundredth Meridian* and *Wolf Willow*.

13. Stegner underscores this aspect of Bo's personality in *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature*, p. 49: "One of the things that marks people like [Bo], it seems to me, is an unwillingness to accept or understand change and also an unwillingness to understand or accept the responsibilities that go with the change."

14. This is the first of many foreshadowings of Chet's untimely death from pneumonia at age twenty-three. What is interesting is that this foreshadowing, like the later death, is presented as a crucial frustration of Bo's dream of material success.

15. Wallace Stegner, "Born a Square," in *The Sound of Mountain Water* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1969), p. 179.

16. Stegner has said in "History, Myth, and the Western Writer," in *The Sound of Mountain Water*, p. 197, that in western regional fiction, "often the structure of a story is created by the testing of the hero," and he includes his story "Genesis" (from *Wolf Willow*) in his examples.

17. *Ibid.*, p. 195.

18. Stegner just mentions this fact in passing in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, but he devotes a whole chapter to it in *Recapitulation*, the novel concerned with Bruce Mason's return as a man in his sixties to Salt Lake City, the recrudescence of his youthful memories, and his coming to terms, after so many years, with his dead. For a full discussion of the relationship between the two novels, see Forrest G. Robinson's essay, "Wallace Stegner's Family Saga: From *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* to *Recapitulation*," *Western American Literature* 17 (Summer 1982): 101-16.

19. Edward Weeks, "Something for Nothing,"

Atlantic 172 (November, 1943): 128.

20. Kerry Ahearn, "The Big Rock Candy Mountain and *Angle of Repose*: Trial and Culmination," *Western American Literature* 10 (Spring 1975): 16.

21. Stegner's craft as a writer is apparent when, near the end of the novel, he has Bruce tell us that slot machine sluggers in Bo's casino are taken downstairs by bouncers and beaten (p. 469). Such symmetry in plotting is frequently used by Stegner to support his theme.

22. Robert Canzoneri, "Wallace Stegner: Trial by Existence," *Southern Review* 9 (Autumn 1973): 809.

23. Joseph Warren Beach, "Life-Size Stegner," *New York Times Book Review*, 26 September 1943, p. 4.

24. I do not agree with the Robinsons that, in his meditations on his family, "Bruce hammers home what the narrative has already made perfectly

clear" (p. 117). It should be kept in mind that these meditations point as much to Bruce's future as the family's survivor as they do to the past, and so, move beyond the events of the narrative. Stegner says in his own defense in *Conversations with Wallace Stegner on Western History and Literature*, p. 57, that ". . . some of the meaning of the book for me lay in the growth of understanding and the growth of understanding can't be fictionalized unless you have somebody grow *into* understanding, which amounts to authorial comment. It isn't really authorial comment, it's Bruce Mason's comment, and I don't think I would take it out."

25. This concern with the fashioning of a "proper man" across several generations looks forward to the final sentence of *Angle of Repose* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), p. 567, in which Lyman Ward asks himself if he is "man enough to be a bigger man than my grandfather."