

on teaching and writing fiction

wallace stegner

on teaching and writing fiction wallace stegner stands as a cornerstone in the study of American literature and creative writing pedagogy. Wallace Stegner, renowned for his contributions as a novelist, environmentalist, and educator, profoundly influenced the craft of fiction writing through both his own works and his dedicated teaching career. His approach to teaching fiction combined rigorous attention to narrative structure, character development, and the importance of place, all while fostering a supportive environment for emerging writers. This article explores Stegner's philosophies on teaching and writing fiction, his impact on literary education, and the enduring relevance of his methods. We will delve into his biography as it relates to his pedagogical style, examine his teaching techniques, and highlight key lessons for contemporary fiction writers. Finally, practical advice derived from Stegner's methods will be outlined to guide aspiring authors in honing their craft.

- Wallace Stegner's Background and Legacy
- Philosophy of Teaching Fiction
- Techniques and Methods in Fiction Writing
- Impact on Students and American Literature
- Practical Advice for Writers Inspired by Stegner

Wallace Stegner's Background and Legacy

Wallace Stegner was an influential American writer and educator whose career spanned much of the 20th century. Born in 1909, Stegner's literary output includes novels, short stories, essays, and memoirs. He is often celebrated as the "Dean of Western Writers" for his vivid portrayals of the American West. Beyond his writing, Stegner's legacy is closely tied to his role as a teacher, especially at Stanford University where he founded the Creative Writing Program. His work and teaching left an indelible mark on generations of writers, including notable figures such as Wendell Berry and Ken Kesey.

Early Life and Literary Career

Stegner's early life in the American Midwest and West deeply influenced his thematic focus on nature, community, and identity. His novels, such as *Angle*

of Repose, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1972, showcase his mastery of narrative and character development. His writing style is characterized by an elegant yet accessible prose that emphasizes realism and psychological depth.

Contributions to Literary Education

Stegner's most enduring contribution to the literary world is arguably his commitment to teaching fiction. At Stanford, he established a workshop model that emphasized peer critique and close reading, fostering a collaborative learning environment that has been emulated in many creative writing programs across the United States. His approach was grounded in the belief that good fiction is both an art and a craft that can be taught and refined.

Philosophy of Teaching Fiction

The core of Wallace Stegner's teaching philosophy revolves around the balance between creative freedom and disciplined craftsmanship. He believed that while imagination is essential, writing fiction requires rigorous attention to technique and structure. Stegner emphasized the importance of storytelling as a means to explore human experience deeply and authentically. His teaching sought to nurture originality without sacrificing clarity or coherence.

Emphasis on Story and Character

Stegner asserted that the heart of fiction lies in its story and characters. He encouraged writers to develop multi-dimensional characters whose motivations and conflicts drive the narrative forward. This approach ensures that stories resonate emotionally and intellectually with readers. For Stegner, characters were not mere plot devices but reflections of complex human realities.

Importance of Place and Setting

One distinctive aspect of Stegner's fiction and teaching was his focus on the significance of place. He taught that setting is not just a backdrop but an active element shaping character and theme. The American West, with its vast landscapes and cultural nuances, often served as a fertile ground for exploring identity, history, and environmental concerns in his work and curriculum.

Techniques and Methods in Fiction Writing

Wallace Stegner's approach to teaching fiction involved practical techniques that fostered both creativity and precision. His methods have been documented

in various educational contexts and have influenced how fiction writing is taught in creative writing programs nationwide.

Workshop Model and Peer Critique

Stegner pioneered the workshop-style class where writers present their work for critique by peers and instructors. This method encourages constructive feedback, helping writers identify strengths and areas for improvement. The workshop model also creates a sense of community, which Stegner believed was vital for sustaining a writer's motivation and growth.

Focus on Revision and Craft

Stegner underscored the importance of revision as a critical phase of writing fiction. He taught that initial drafts are rarely perfect and that through careful editing, writers can refine plot, dialogue, and prose style. Mastery of craft elements such as pacing, point of view, and dialogue was integral to his curriculum.

Encouraging Authentic Voice

While emphasizing structure and technique, Stegner also championed the development of an authentic voice. He encouraged writers to draw on their own experiences and perspectives, thereby producing work that is original and sincere. This balance between individuality and craft remains a hallmark of effective fiction writing instruction.

Impact on Students and American Literature

Wallace Stegner's influence extends beyond his own literary achievements to the success and development of his students. Many of his protégés have become prominent authors who credit Stegner's mentorship for their artistic growth. His teaching legacy has shaped American literature by cultivating a generation of writers who value both innovation and craftsmanship.

Notable Students

Stegner's teaching nurtured an impressive roster of writers, including Wendell Berry, Ken Kesey, and Larry McMurtry. These authors have contributed significantly to American literary culture, each bringing unique voices and narratives that reflect the depth of Stegner's pedagogical impact.

Influence on Creative Writing Programs

The workshop model and emphasis on rigorous critique that Stegner championed have become standard in creative writing programs nationwide. His approach helped legitimize creative writing as an academic discipline, combining literary analysis with practical writing exercises to develop skilled fiction writers.

Practical Advice for Writers Inspired by Stegner

Drawing from Wallace Stegner's teachings offers valuable guidance for contemporary writers seeking to improve their fiction craft. His focus on story, character, setting, and revision provides a comprehensive framework for developing compelling narratives.

Key Writing Practices

- **Write Regularly:** Consistent writing practice helps build discipline and sharpens skills over time.
- **Develop Complex Characters:** Invest time in understanding your characters' motivations, backgrounds, and conflicts.
- **Use Setting Purposefully:** Employ setting to enrich your story's themes and influence character behavior.
- **Engage in Peer Review:** Participate in workshops or writing groups to receive and give constructive feedback.
- **Revise Thoroughly:** Approach revision as an essential process to improve clarity, pacing, and emotional impact.
- **Find Your Voice:** Draw on personal experiences and perspectives to develop originality in your writing.

Incorporating Stegner's Insights

Applying Stegner's teaching principles involves balancing creativity with structure. Writers are encouraged to experiment imaginatively while paying close attention to the technical aspects of fiction writing. This integrated approach helps produce work that is both artistically vibrant and technically sound.

Frequently Asked Questions

Who is Wallace Stegner and why is he significant in fiction writing?

Wallace Stegner was an American novelist, short story writer, and environmentalist known as the 'Dean of Western Writers.' He is significant for his contributions to American literature and for mentoring many successful writers.

What is 'On Teaching and Writing Fiction' by Wallace Stegner?

'On Teaching and Writing Fiction' is a collection of essays and lectures by Wallace Stegner that explores his insights on the craft of fiction writing and his philosophy on teaching writing.

What are some key themes Wallace Stegner emphasizes in his teaching of fiction?

Stegner emphasizes the importance of character development, authenticity, narrative structure, and the writer's connection to place and experience.

How does Wallace Stegner view the role of a fiction writer?

Stegner views the fiction writer as a storyteller who must balance imagination with truth, creating believable characters and situations that resonate with readers.

What advice does Wallace Stegner give to aspiring fiction writers?

He advises writers to read widely, write regularly, focus on honesty in storytelling, and be patient with the writing process.

How did Wallace Stegner's teaching impact American literature?

Stegner's teaching nurtured a generation of influential writers, including Wendell Berry and Sandra Day O'Connor, greatly shaping contemporary American literature.

What writing techniques does Stegner promote in 'On Teaching and Writing Fiction'?

He promotes techniques such as detailed character sketches, strong sense of place, disciplined revision, and the importance of narrative voice.

Can 'On Teaching and Writing Fiction' be useful for writers outside of fiction?

Yes, many principles Stegner discusses, such as clarity, storytelling, and revision, are applicable to other forms of writing as well.

Where can I find Wallace Stegner's essays on teaching fiction?

His essays are compiled in the book 'On Teaching and Writing Fiction,' which is available in bookstores and online retailers.

What makes Wallace Stegner's approach to teaching fiction unique?

Stegner's approach is unique for its blend of practical advice, literary philosophy, and his deep appreciation for the American landscape and culture, which he believed enriched storytelling.

Additional Resources

1. Angle of Repose by Wallace Stegner

This Pulitzer Prize-winning novel explores themes of family, history, and the American West. Stegner's rich storytelling and deep character development provide valuable lessons on narrative structure and voice that are beneficial for writers studying fiction. The book demonstrates how to weave historical detail with personal drama effectively.

2. Crossing to Safety by Wallace Stegner

A poignant exploration of friendship and the passage of time, this novel by Stegner offers insights into character development and the subtle dynamics of relationships. Writers can learn from his nuanced dialogue and the way he builds emotional resonance without overt exposition. It's a masterclass in showing rather than telling.

3. Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft by Janet Burroway

This comprehensive guide covers the essentials of fiction writing, including character, plot, point of view, and style. While not specific to Stegner, it complements the study of his work by breaking down the techniques he employs. It's a great resource for understanding the craft behind compelling storytelling.

4. *The Sound of Mountain Water: The Changing West of Wallace Stegner*

A collection of essays and reflections by Stegner, this book provides insight into his perspectives on the American West and environmental themes. Writers interested in Stegner's thematic concerns and descriptive style will find inspiration here. It also sheds light on how personal experience informs fiction.

5. *On Writing Well by William Zinsser*

Though focused on nonfiction, this classic writing guide offers principles of clarity, simplicity, and style that are invaluable to fiction writers. Stegner's clear and vivid prose echoes many of the techniques Zinsser advocates. Studying this book helps fiction writers refine their language and voice.

6. *The Novelist as Teacher: Wallace Stegner and the Creative Writing Program at Stanford*

This collection of essays examines Stegner's dual role as a novelist and educator, highlighting his teaching philosophy and influence on American fiction. It provides aspiring writers and teachers with insights into how Stegner approached the craft and pedagogy of fiction writing. The book illustrates the connection between writing and teaching.

7. *Birding, Writing, and the West: Essays from the Wallace Stegner Literary Center*

This anthology includes essays on writing, nature, and the Western landscape, reflecting Stegner's legacy as a writer deeply connected to place. It offers practical advice and inspiration for fiction writers interested in integrating setting and environment into their work. The collection underscores the importance of observation in storytelling.

8. *The Art of Fiction: Notes on Craft for Young Writers by John Gardner*

A seminal guide on the craft of fiction, Gardner's book delves into narrative techniques, character creation, and thematic development. Writers studying Stegner can benefit from Gardner's detailed analysis of what makes fiction work on a fundamental level. This book complements Stegner's practical and philosophical approach to writing.

9. *Where the Bluebird Sings to the Lemonade Springs: Living and Writing in the West by Wallace Stegner*

This memoir and collection of essays reveals Stegner's reflections on his life, writing habits, and the Western landscape that shaped much of his fiction. It offers valuable perspective on the life of a writer balancing creativity, place, and teaching. Readers gain insight into the personal experiences behind Stegner's storytelling craft.

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