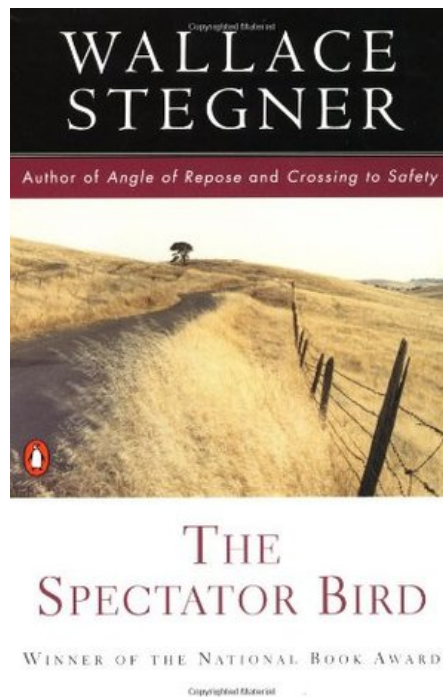




The Spectator Bird

Wallace Stegner

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The Spectator Bird

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The Spectator Bird Wallace Stegner

This tour-de-force of American literature and a winner of the National Book Award is a profound, intimate, affecting novel from one of the most esteemed literary minds of the last century and a beloved chronicler of the West.

Joe Allston is a cantankerous, retired literary agent who is, in his own words, "just killing time until time gets around to killing me". His parents and his only son are long dead, leaving him with neither ancestors nor descendants, tradition nor ties. His job, trafficking the talent of others, has not been his choice. He has passed through life as a spectator, before retreating to the woods of California in the 1970s with only his wife, Ruth, by his side.

When an unexpected postcard from a long-lost friend arrives, Allston returns to the journals of a trip he has taken years before, a journey to his mother's birthplace where he once sought a link with his past. Uncovering this history floods Allston with memories, both grotesque and poignant, and finally vindicates him of his past and lays bare that Joe Allston has never been quite spectator enough.

The Spectator Bird Details

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From Reader Review The Spectator Bird for online ebook

Tony says

THE SPECTATOR BIRD. (1976). Wallace Stegner. *****.

This is a marvelous un-put-downable novel from Stegner that was fully deserving of the prize for Best Fiction from the 1977 National Book Award. It is the story of a trip taken by a married couple to Denmark, told through the rereading of a series of journals kept by the husband during the trip twenty years earlier. The reader is not quite sure what the theme of the book is all about until very near the end. Suddenly we are brought up to speed very quickly and learn that the journals play an important part in the occurrences during their visit to Denmark and the people they met there. Up until the revelation, we are kept in suspense as to what the journals represent. The journals were written by the husband while he was on the trip, and his wife never knew about them. They seemed, in all intents and purposes, like those travelogues that many travelers keep while on vacation that usually don't get read again in the normal course of events. Not in this case. The journals reveal more than just the day-to-day events, although they do so in a very subtle way. If you only read one book by Stegner, make this one your choice. You will be very impressed by his technique of roping in the reader and making him/her a part of a twenty-year-old event. Highly recommended.

Dolors says

When do we cease to be actors in our lives to become mere spectators?

Do we really get a chance to decide who we are, what we do, where we go and with whom we share all these choices as we grope in the darkness of time?

Joe Allston, a retired literary agent, is seventy years old... and has turned into an adorable curmudgeon. With no ancestors or descendants, a tragedy involving his only son still weighting on his shoulders, and his wife Ruth as remaining companion, Joe ponders about the paths he's been walking on for the last twenty years. The self-reproach of never bonding with his son, the grief of losing him forever to the aimless waters of a remote beach, the lack of pluck to write his own novels rather than limiting himself to publish those of others, the sour taste of ageing and loneliness. Joe doesn't shy away from his failures; he patiently dissects his remorse as he observes the bird species that twitter in his garden.

Straddling two narrative lines, one in the present time and another two decades ago when Joe and Ruth travelled to Denmark trying to escape the loss of their only child, Stegner paints an introspective landscape that sometimes acquires a too intimate tinge for the reader's comfort.

Without sacrificing the necessary dose of self-effacing humor to balance out the dramatic charge of the storyline, and with elegant, firm stroke, Stegner delivers some delightful surprises that include meeting Karen Blixen and a mysterious Danish countess that will leave track in Joe's memories and mean a crossroads in his life that will haunt him for the rest of his days.

I turned the last page of this tour de force with regret, knowing it will be a while until I meet a novel that is so perfectly rounded. To witness an old man revising his life, the pain of past but necessary choices and the pangs of solitude that marked his slow ascend towards fulfillment was as arduous as it was beautiful. Such kind of beauty is the one I would ask for myself when my time comes; no more, no less.

Octavio Solis says

A beautiful novel by a master of the form. As we get older and more settled, we find the past calling for its reckoning, and in this novel Stegner takes his protagonist on a reckoning from present-day (1970's) Northern California to post-war Denmark through the journals he kept stashed away among his relics. Stegner is a writer's writer who paints the most evocative and striking scenes with his finely honed descriptive eye, while also maintaining characters of sharp wit and intelligence who have a capacity for rich and varied expression, Profoundly truthful. Satisfying story-telling. Stunning writing.

Joy H. says

Added 9/7/13.

I listened to this book via audible.com. Such great writing! Very rich with allusions and metaphors. Wallace Stegner is remarkable!

This was a heartrending story. Stegner poignantly describes the agony of being torn between two loves. There is also a detailed back-story with ominous overtones, but the romantic scenes are always pure.

The audio book was read by Edward Herrmann who definitely added to my enjoyment of the story.

One GR reviewer wrote that the main character's "interior monologues are delightfully curmudgeonly". I agree!

This book won the National Book Award for Fiction (1977).

I also enjoyed Stegner's Angle of Repose.

Marita says

In the earlier novel, All the Little Live Things*, Joe Allston had retired from being a literary agent and settled down with his wife Ruth in a country home in California.

The story of The Spectator Bird. Wallace Stegner takes place when Joe is 69 years old, and to his dismay much has changed around him. He is working on various notes when he finds an old postcard which prompts him to locate a diary from years before when he and Ruth had visited Denmark. Ruth insists that Joe read out aloud so that she might share the memories, and in the process she learns more about her husband's thoughts and feelings at that time. And so the elderly couple sit in bed, one listening and one reading.

But reliving the past can spark all sorts of other thoughts. Joe for various reasons ended up doing a job he wasn't mad keen about, his son had a senseless accident (or not!) and died, and his little paradise in California is fast changing due to development. He is now very much aware of his age and his frailties, and he ruminates on old age and everything that goes with it (some things literally). He realises that he has never really fit in, and that he has always viewed life as a spectator bird might. But on reflection, was he a spectator or not?

Some of Joe's grumpy, self-disparaging remarks are hilarious. This might not be so for a younger reader, but

those over 60 might recognise the symptoms of Joe's grouchiness and empathise with him. Let's face it, laughter is great therapy. However, sometimes there is such bitterness and pain in Joe's musings that it makes for difficult reading.

* <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

Heidi says

Another deeply satisfying book by Wallace Stegner, with themes reminiscent of *Crossing to Safety* and *Angle of Repose*: mortality, the labyrinth of marriage, the mind game that is aging and physical disability, the search for self.

I wonder if to be known to one's self, to make transparent to ourselves the good and bad that is resident in each of us, is the "safe place" Stegner alludes to so often. Perhaps the safe place is not a physical pilgrimage after all: not returning to our origins, not Bregninge, not the New World, not "the little Kafka animal's hole." Perhaps it is an internal pilgrimage: finding the wherewithal to be self-aware, and then taking the inevitable next step toward honesty.

The narrator and protagonist Joe Allston is embattled in body, mind and spirit: angry and anguished over an enormous loss he shares with his wife Ruth, hurt by a world he imagines as hostile and uncharitable toward the elderly and infirm, intimidated by youth and convinced of a feud between the generations. A curmudgeon, his wife calls him, but he is worse than that: he is emotionally closed and locked in place, a spectator.

Joe is reminded of Willa Cather who pointed out that "you can't paint sunlight, you can only paint what it does with shadows on a wall." He extrapolates this to Socrates' call to examine one's life, asking "do you really examine the life, or do you examine the shadows it casts on other lives...?"

Arm in arm with Stegner, Joe dips into the past, examines the shadows, and is rewarded with a transcendent return to sunlight.

Stegner gave me many gifts in this novel. Here are two.

One, he shares a philosophy or approach to life I have often tried but failed to put into words. Clairvoyant Karen Blixen gleefully tells her guests, one of whom she has just affronted by deliberately alluding to painful memories, "...my dear, look on it as a story...it pains Astrid to hear these things spoken of, but they are part of a story and stories are part of the accumulation you think will tell you something." When we position painful events within the larger perspective of our life story, we exchange subjectivity for objectivity, we prick the bubble of our self-importance, we reduce the event to realistic, if not amusing, proportions. We should all be storytellers!

Two, he addresses the suffering caused by secrets. Stegner describes Joe in the bath where he ruminates on how the body carries its memories in his right shoulder and elbow (competitive tennis), and right toe (kicking a friend in his youth). But the mind does the same thing. Its secrets manifest in defensiveness, resistance, mockery—his "japery," I think Joe calls it. Joe has a secret and precious time passes as he keeps it suppressed.

But the best gift of all is Stegner's sentences. He saves his most beautiful, luminous sentences for scenes

where the stakes are high, when emotion and truth, for this self-described “adolescent,” ride to the rim. This is a gorgeous book, full of truth and consequences, and I am loving my Wallace Stegner journey.

Jim says

A short, skillful novel and an improvement over *The Angle of Repose*. At first, it seems the story is about aging gracefully with good humor and safety, in spite of the corrosive feeling that in your life, you were a spectator, a valet, to the banquet of life. But it takes a turn as the husband reads his diary to his wife about a trip they took to Denmark twenty years before.

For a short book it is multi-layered with the themes of settling into retirement, being part of an old married couple and at some point in your life, you get to decide, as an adult, the course you will take with the full knowledge of the rewards and pitfalls of your choice. This book captures that white-hot moment when you are confronted with your selection.

A cool sentence from the book.

"We wanted to demonstrate that the rush to the suburbs and the country, when conducted by the right people, could be an enhancement of civilization, not an evasion of it."

A strong, funny, introspective and unapologetic look at a man's life in review.

Blaine DeSantis says

I have had a bunch of Wallace Stegner's works in my library for a few years but never got around to choosing one. So, about a week ago I walked over to the library and this book sort of jumped out at me. And so at age 63, an age I think is appropriate for reading this book, I settled in for what was a very worthwhile and thought-provoking week of reading.

The man writes beautifully and this book touches on things that I think cannot be appreciated until one hits these Golden Years of life. We have a book that discusses aging, health, relationships, as well as lives and past loves (or at least past desires). Even though written in the 1970's the book does not feel dated and the feelings that Stegner writes about are as fresh and worthy of review now. Maybe it is because I retired rather early, but I have spent quite a bit of time reviewing my own life and there is something about taking the time to contemplate one's life that makes this a perfect book for a retired individual to read.

If it is so great then why not a 5*****? Well, for me it is the fact that while it is a part of the story the entire genetics portion of the book just did not really ring true and was just hard to fathom. There were questions that were left unanswered and so for that single reason it dropped a star in my opinion. However, for me this was a very fine book. I read much of it to my wife who also enjoyed things, and the book made me realize that the time has come for me to not spend quite as much time thinking and sometimes lamenting the past, but that at age 63 there is a whole lot of future that I need to continue to live - even though I have so many of those same aches and pains that the book's lead character Joe Allston suffers from.

Lynne King says

I absolutely loved this book from page 1 to the end. Joe Alston, a nearly seventy-year old is one of these

miserable and depressing individuals who nevertheless brings joy to one. He's a pretty astute guy but very aware of his own mortality. He's also one of those honourable men whom I always find so very endearing and his wife Ruth of forty years or so understands him very well indeed.

But it was the journals that had me entranced with this book and the fact that he read them to Ruth. To travel back in time to when these journals were written about Denmark and the countess Astrid. Now they were amazing.

An excellent book.

Jim Fonseca says

They say that as we approach old age, some look back with satisfaction and contentment about the life path they followed, and some reflect with regret and guilt, and, in hindsight, wish they had followed other paths to supposedly greener pastures. Approaching 70, our narrator is squarely in the latter category. Despite his and his wife's relatively good health, an accomplished career as a literary agent, and a suburban villa an hour from San Francisco, he is filled with guilt for driving away his only child, a son who became a surfer bum and drowned. The narrator is in full whine looking at his body in the bathtub as "a museum of dereliction." He regrets "the affair not taken" on a trip long ago to Denmark in search of his mother's ancestral home. The book was written in the mid-1970's and the narrator has a lot of unfavorable things to say about the carefree lifestyle of the flower children and their disrespect for the elderly. Does the phrase "crotchety old man" come to mind? No wonder he drove his son away. There's not much plot other than what we might call a genealogical mystery as he finds things out about his Danish ancestors that he didn't really want to know. It's a good book about how seniors reflect back on life and wonder "who's next?" while those around them drop off one by one. His wife is a saint, putting up with his determined crotchetyness, so the book is also a tender love story of an aging couple. Spectator Bird won the National Book Award for Fiction in 1977.

Bruce says

Perhaps more than most of Wallace Stegner's novels, this one might be read differently by readers of different ages. Stegner wrote it when he was himself sixty-seven, and his protagonist, Joe Alston, is sixty-nine. This first person narrator is judged by his wife Ruth to have become irritable and depressed, and she is probably correct. Joe's interior monologues are delightfully curmudgeonly. He is a retired literary editor, and his thoughts and speech are filled with literary allusions. Joe is worried about aging, and his complaints have become self-fulfilling prophecies. Stegner captures the ambiance well with wonderful dialogue and creative variations in syntax. I do note that Joe's interior monologues rarely use contractions, making them seem more literary than convincing common speech.

The darker side of Joe's life as a perpetual outsider, at least in his own eyes, begins to peek out. Personal tragedies such as his son's drowning – either an accident or a suicide - have been shunted aside and buried. An unexpected letter from a Danish acquaintance of at least two decades before sends Joe to reading his journal from that time, and at the insistence of his wife Ruth they begin reading it together. Married for almost fifty years, they understand and are close to each other, although Joe deflects closeness with flippancy and irony, shielding himself from his feelings and from acknowledging them. He censors his journal, and Ruth knows that he is doing so. Alternating between scenes of contemporary life and the life that Joe and Ruth lived together in Denmark twenty years before, Stegner creates a rhythm that juxtaposes yearnings and confusions that both differ at different life stages and also function to create a continuity that affirms life and

relationships even as it retains life's poignancies.

Stegner explores the differences between America and Europe, wondering about the motivations of those who immigrated to the former, wondering whether they were seeking freedom or safety, and in what those even consist. Perhaps more important, he explores issues of intimacy, judgment, and how one assesses one's life as it begins winding down, how one copes with perceived failures and the awkward and often unsuccessful strategies for holding life at arm's length when it seems too painful to face directly. How, Stegner suggests, do we even evaluate a life, our own life? "If you examine a life, as Socrates has been so tediously advising us to do for so many centuries, do you really examine the life, or do you examine the shadows it casts on other lives? Entity or relationships? Objective reality or the vanishing point of a multiple perspective exercise? Prism or the rainbow it refracts?...What if you never cast a shadow or rainbow of your own, but have only caught those cast by others?"

Most of all, perhaps, the novel is about choosing, about making decisions at pivotal times in our lives, and then living with those decisions and, as Erik Erikson said, at the end of our lives affirming those decisions and those lives with integrity. Yes, I think readers at any age can enjoy and appreciate this book. But maybe it is only to those of us of a certain age that Stegner speaks most deeply.

Rachel says

Another beautifully crafted novel by Stegner about marriage, self-discovery, and...eugenics? Stegner artfully intertwines two plot lines, one that follows an aging, retired literary agent who is approaching his death with a healthy mix of fear, anger, and self-deprecating humor. As readers watch him struggle through his daily routines, something out of the ordinary arrives in his mailbox. It's a postcard from an old friend, a Danish noblewoman he and his wife lived with for a few months more than twenty years before. This prompts him to pull out his journal that he maintained during that trip, and his wife begs him to read it out loud to her at night, and the story told in the journal becomes the second narrative.

The second narrative is the less quotidian one. There is a dark mystery surrounding this countess, not entirely explained by her estranged husband, a social outcast because of his past Nazi sympathies. The truth is really grotesque; so horrible, in fact, that it was difficult for me to understand why Stegner opted not have any of his characters do anything about it. Although Joe Allston is defined by his passiveness, Stegner creates a society where rumors circulating in Danish society are remarkably close to fact. Therefore, I can't believe that nobody would have investigated the allegations.

What's remarkable in this novel, though, is Stegner's ability to perfectly time the peaks of the two plotlines. As the reader rebounds from the shocking revelations about Rodding's family, Stegner creates an emotional climax between Ruth and Joe, in response to old feelings about their experiences in Denmark long swept under the rug. This encounter allows Joe to share the one moment in his life where he was proactive, where he made a clear choice. It's a very satisfying resolution for the reader.

Laysee says

I had wanted to read another novel by Wallace Stegner since "Crossing to Safety". "The Spectator Bird" lived up to expectations and not because it won the US National Book Award for Fiction in 1977. Even

though it was written almost forty years ago, the relevance of the issues it dealt with shone through the pages with contemplative resonance.

Set mostly in Denmark, "The Spectator Bird" centered on Joe Allston, a 69-year-old retired literary agent, his wife (Ruth), and their summer friendship with a Danish countess who had fallen from grace. The arrival of a postcard from Astrid Wredel-Krarup stirred up memories of a "therapy" trip the Allstons had undertaken twenty years ago, and evoked feelings that mattered to Joe because the interlude was "that irruption of the irrational, that reversion into adolescence". The narration was interspersed with journal entries Joe had made from that trip as he read it aloud to his wife (at her insistence).

Perhaps, this novel would seem drearily depressing to individuals in the prime of their lives. It speaks candidly about the dignity (or indignity) of growing old and the realities of a long marriage. People who have been blessed with an enduring marriage may be able to identify with this observation, "After forty-five years we can still, if we let ourselves, bristle and bump one another around like a pair of stiff-legged dogs." Additionally, there is sobering reflection on aging: "It is not arthritis and the other ailments...It is just the general comprehension that nothing is building, everything is running down, there are no more chances for improvement." Brutal realization for disgruntled individuals such as Joe for whom it seemed life happened. During the Great Depression, the toss was between becoming a "broke talent" or a "talent broker". A significant personal loss deepened his sense of helplessness and found him having to "scratch dead leaves" over what he did not wish to see.

What I found most touching was the way the Allstons negotiated the revelations that emerged from reading the journal entries. Half the time I read with trepidation the thoughts and feelings that Joe had no way of censoring while reading without escaping the intuitive appraisal of his wife. A quiet grimace communicated unacknowledged needs and fears. "The Spectator Bird" is about honesty in intimacy. It is about choices. Joe said it well, "It has seemed to me that my commitments are often more important than my impulses or my pleasures, and that even when my pleasures or desires are the principal issue, there are choices to be made between better and worse, bad and better, good and good." Each choice is made with "a big component of pain".

Stegner has such an impeccable way with words that are at times delightfully laced with self-deprecating humor. His language has a penetrating quality that can unnerve the reader and yet one has to keep on reading. The Allstons aside, the novel has an intriguing story to tell about the Countess and the incredulous circumstances leading to her ostracism from Danish society. Great book!

Lisa says

The Spectator Bird is a beautifully written novel. What I loved most was Stegner's thoughtful, profound portrayal of a mature, complicated, loving relationship between a married couple. To steal from The Troggs, **Wallace Stegner, you make my heart sing!**

Chrissie says

I enjoyed every minute I spent with this book. Every line spoke to me. The lines had me alternately thinking or smiling.

I share a lot with the central character of the novel. I believe this is why I relate to the book as much as I do. The book is about Joe Allston, actually not just about him, but about his wife (Ruth) too, about the couple as a pair, about their relationship and their respective attitudes. The year is 1974. He is sixty-nine years old and very much aware of the fact that he is approaching old age. Health concerns trouble him. He is retired. Husband and wife have settled down in a rural community in California, offering the peace of countryside living and only an hour's distance from the intellectual community at Stanford. They have lived in NYC and have traveled extensively. Literature is an integral part of who they are. Joe's mother was of Danish descent.

The story flips back and forth between the present, 1974, and the past, 1954. In 1954 Joe and Ruth traveled to Denmark for several months; ostensibly, Joe was recuperating from myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart muscle. Beside this, their son had died in a surfing accident. Now, in the present, Joe is reading to Ruth the journals he wrote on that trip, and they are talking, finally talking about what they have not been able to speak of before.

The book is about one's thoughts as one nears seventy. It is about family relationships and guilt and misgivings and about accepting that how you feel you ought to be is perhaps not how you can be. There is a lot here about daring to voice one's innermost thoughts. The book is about connection to others. Look at the title. Are you a "spectator-bird", observing others at a distance, or are you one who lets others come close?

Before retirement, Joe had been a literary agent, making it natural that authors and books are intermingled in the telling of the story, but not in the sense of name-dropping. Instead, characters and events in well-known books are used as reference points; if you have read the book you know the kind of person Joe or Ruth are speaking of, understand their train of thought and catch the underlying humor. Nothing is explained; readers must themselves figure out what is inferred. If you have read the book you will understand. If you haven't you won't!

Cultural differences, particularly the Scandinavian lifestyle in comparison to the American, is amusingly and insightfully drawn.

The details are perfect—from the lack of adequate illumination in European hotels to the experience of traveling on a boat in a violent storm to the behavior of a Siamese cat to the tone of a Danish dinner party compared to its American counterpart to how a husband and wife married for many years communicate both verbally and non-verbally.

I very much like how the story ends. I like the choice Joe made in the fifties. I like seeing where he is today having made that choice twenty years earlier.

The book does not go off on tangents. In tone, it is low-key. It has historical underpinnings of both the 1950s and the 1970s, that is to say the years after the Second World War and the Hippie 70s.

Edward Herrmann's narration of the audiobook is fantastic. There is not a question of my rating his performance with anything but five stars. He knows when to pause. He never over-dramatizes. He captures exactly how this couple would have spoken to each other. The speed is perfect, and every word is easily heard.

This is a really good book and the audiobook is extremely well read. I do think it will appeal to some readers more than others. The words underlined in the second paragraph indicate what kind of person the book will appeal to most.

Steve says

Ever notice how, on rare occasions, certain writers really stand out for their ability to capture the subtle and complex ways of folks? It's usually a reason to celebrate since these insights are there for us to imbibe. But it may be a source of distress if what's revealed is a difficult truth. For me, Wallace Stegner is that sort of author, and this book is one I celebra-hate. Actually, hate is too strong a word, even when it's combined with a good thing. I should say I felt twinges of disappointment when recognizably human elements in the main character's make-up prevented a greater happiness. Don't get me wrong. I'm not looking for slants a la Hallmark. I just feel sad about opportunities missed, especially when those doing the missing are characters whose innermost thoughts I've been absorbing with interest.

I've told you about the malaise. I might as well mention a big reason for it (as long as I'm careful not to reveal more than the back cover does). Joe Allston, a crusty 69-year-old former literary agent, and his kindhearted wife Ruth live a rather isolated life in northern California. They had lost their son tragically in surf-boarding accident 20 some years prior. To make matters worse, Joe felt there had been unresolved father-son issues when it happened.

The story begins as a postcard arrives from an old friend from a trip Joe and Ruth had taken to Denmark. The extended stay there was, in part, meant as therapy to take their minds off their then-fresh and constant grief. It also allowed Joe to explore the small town where his mother had lived before shipping off to the states and having him. As chance would have it, they stayed with a Danish countess whose diminished circumstances required her to take in boarders. Astrid (the countess) was the one who sent the postcard. This sparked memories of the trip that Joe pursued even more by breaking out a journal he kept at the time. Ruth asked that he read it aloud so that she, too, could take the trip back in time.

The first entries in the journal were set on the boat ride over. They had met an older couple, which prompted Joe to write descriptively about their ilk, and about censorious people in general.

They sit in lace-curtained parlors and tsk-tsk on an indrawn breath, they know every unwanted pregnancy in town sooner than the girl does, they want English teachers in Augustana College fired for assigning *A Farewell to Arms*, they wrote the Volstead Act.

Once they arrived, the focus of the journal shifts to the countess. They learn that despite her elegance and good breeding, she was getting the cold shoulder from society types. Her estranged husband, unbeknownst to her when they'd been together, had been a Nazi sympathizer. Later into their stay they learn something else that explains the perceptions of her peers, but it would be a spoiler to say any more. I will say that you may or may not buy into this revelation. I decided that for me it was just a side issue, and that the far more important part of the book was Joe's exploration of self.

This self under the scope was very thoroughly studied. Joe's observational skills as a "spectator", passively taking things in, were keen enough to recognize himself as a spectator, passively taking things in. This quote was telling:

I was reminded of a remark of Willa Cather's, that you can't paint sunlight, you can only paint what it does with shadows on a wall. If you examine a life, as Socrates has been so tediously advising us to do for so many centuries, do you really examine the life, or do you examine the shadows it casts on other lives? Entity or relationships? Objective reality or the vanishing point of a multiple perspective exercise? Prism or the rainbows it refracts? And what if you're the wall? What if you never cast a shadow or rainbow of your own, but have only caught those cast by others?

Relatedly, Joe seemed to regret his apparent detachment:

That is the way the modern temper would read me. Babbitt, the man who in all his life never did one thing he really wanted to. One of those Blake was scornful of, who controlled their passions because their passions are feeble enough to be controlled. One of those Genteel Tradition characters whose whole pale ethos is subsumed in an act of renunciation.

But might there have been times, thinking of what the journal hinted at but omitted, when passions were less tepid? And might actions or inactions in the face of these be even more defining in his life? See, I know the answers to these questions, and the only way you will is to read this masterful book.

While I don't rate this one quite as high as *Angle of Repose* or *Crossing to Safety*, that's a standard few, if any, can surpass. Stegner was just about Joe's age when he wrote it, and advancing years were a theme. As sour as old Vin de Joe had become, I'd have preferred a cheerier example to live by. Beyond that, lines like this are beginning to hit home:

[...] I felt an uneasy adolescent peeking from behind my old-age make-up, as if I were a sixteen-year-old playing Uncle Vanya in the high school play [...]

Hey, but at least I wouldn't call my face a "spiderweb with eyes." Not yet, anyway.

Quibbles aside, here's the bottom line: Wallace Stegner is the real deal. With him, it's insight and great writing on every page. I hope you all do yourselves the favor of his wisdom and art.

Benji says

"Most things break, including hearts. The lessons of life amount not to wisdom, but to scar tissue and callus."

I'm not going to waffle on about this one - *cue cheers at the back* - because I'm rather ill at the moment and not in any kind of mood to write an exhaustive - and probably *exhausting* - review.

However, what I will say is that Wallace Stegner is *rapidly* becoming one of my favourite authors - and I can say that with confidence after reading just two of his books. *Crossing to Safety* was one of my favourite reads of 2016 and although *The Spectator Bird* doesn't quite hit that book's lofty heights, I very much enjoyed it.

Stegner is absolutely wonderful at exploring friendship and memory, love and loss - not to mention all the subtleties of emotion and feeling that go in-between. His prose is poetic and affecting, and it's amazing how a story that seems so simple can have so many layers and pack such an emotional punch. It was a delightful little read.

I can't wait to explore the rest of Stegner's oeuvre - maybe *Angle of Repose* next?

Mary says

Sartre wrote: *We are our choices.*

At a time of the year when many people of varying ages take stock, Stegner's story of ageing Joe Allston was especially poignant. Whatever your age, we've all had those pivotal moments in life when we chose one fork in the road over the other, and go on to either live with regret, or relief. Even those who feel they've lived uneventful lives have, at some point, actively made decisions that altered everything forever.

I sometimes get the feeling my whole life happened to somebody else.

Stegner was a master at creating characters that feel utterly normal because nothing much really happens to them. They're quietly despondent and repressed. They don't usually blow up, but accept the finality of the circumstances. It's not the most inspirational message, but it sure is realistic.

It comes as shock to realize that I am just killing time 'til time gets around to killing me.

Other than a brief digression into a bizarre (view spoiler) side story, this novel is subtle and beautifully written.

Howard says

Sometime in the mid-80's, I read Wallace Stegner's *All the Little Live Things*, which was published in 1967 and set in that decade. Despite being an admirer of his work, I wasn't impressed. I found his main character, Joe Alston, a retired literary agent pushing sixty and living with his wife in the hills near Palo Alto, California, to be tiresome. How would I describe Joe? How about crabby, curmudgeonly, crotchety, bitter, brooding, acerbic, opinionated, argumentative? Yes, any one of those will do, because they all describe Joe.

But then I just finished *The Spectator Bird*, published in 1976, which returns to the story of Joe and his wife Ruth. Ten years have passed and Joe is now knocking on the door of seventy. But he is the same old Joe (see above). He hasn't changed, but I have. While Joe is ten years older, I am now thirty years older than when I first met him in *All the Little Live Things*.

As that great philosopher Muhammad Ali once said, "The man who views the world at fifty the same as he did at twenty has wasted thirty years of his life." I was older than twenty when I met Joe and I am older than fifty now, but the principle still applies. Furthermore, I have gained twenty years on him, and though he and I couldn't be described as soul mates, I do have a better understanding and greater tolerance of him. Some – not all – but some of what he says and believes now makes sense to me.

One of the things that makes me more tolerant is that Joe had a rough childhood (as did Stegner) and I don't think I originally made enough allowance for that fact. He is also unable to come to terms with the death of his only child twenty years earlier, who was described as an over age beach bum who died either due to an accident or suicide. Part of Joe's grief can be traced to the fact that he and his son were in constant conflict and he feels that he was not a good father and thus was partly responsible for his rebellious son's death.

Furthermore, Joe is not aging gracefully. He thinks to himself at one point that "I am just killing time till time gets around to killing me." His dark outlook on life is partly due to a heart problem and the pain he experiences from the onset of rheumatoid arthritis, but it is also because he feels that he has lived an empty

life. He is both retrospective and introspective; he broods about the past and the present – and the future.

Joe feels that he has been more spectator (see title) than actor in his life and in one of his introspective moods he muses to himself:

“As for Joe Alston, he has been a wisecracking fellow traveler in the lives of other people, and a tourist in his own. There has not been one significant event in his life that he planned. He has gone downstream like a stick, getting hung up in eddies and getting flushed out again, only half understanding what he floated past, and understanding less with every year. He knows nothing that posterity needs to be told about.”

That last sentence is a reference to his wife wanting him to write his memoir. After all, he was an agent for some of the most notable writers of the day. And most important, she thinks that it will keep his mind active and alert and will help cure him of his depression.

Joe is intelligent, of course, and he isn't always a gloomy Gus. When he is in the mood he can be charming and witty. Here is what Joe thinks about the idea of writing his memoir:

“... it is one thing to examine your life and quite another to write it. Writing your life implies that you think it worth writing. It implies an arrogance, or confidence, or compulsion to justify oneself, that I can't claim. Did Washington write his memoirs? Did Lincoln, Jefferson, Shakespeare, Socrates? No, but Nixon will, and Agnew is undoubtedly hunched over his right now.”

All I have done is to set the stage. Much of the story is told in flashback to 1954 when Joe and Ruth take a trip to Denmark. They go there for an extended stay in an attempt to escape the heartbreak of the recent death of their son and to give Joe a chance to rest and recuperate from an illness. Why Denmark? Well, that is because his mother immigrated to America from there when she was only sixteen. Joe never knew his father. And because his only child and his mother have both died, he says that he has neither descendant nor ancestor.

He and his wife have come to Denmark with the idea that they might locate the house in which his mother had lived. They do; and the plot thickens. Joe is a complicated character with a complex past, but in Denmark he meets his match, a countess whose character and past are even more complex.

With the publication of this book, Stegner was at the peak of his popularity. *The Spectator Bird* won a National Book Award and his previous novel, *Angle of Repose*, won a Pulitzer.

Finally, Joe was right about Nixon and Agnew. Nixon did write his memoir, more than one, in fact, and so did Agnew. Of course, their memoirs were written after both had to resign in disgrace from their respective offices. Agnew even wrote a novel, *The Canfield Affair*. I have never read it, but the blurb here on Goodreads says: “This book is about a Vice President who was destroyed by his own ambition.” I know it isn't autobiographical because Agnew was destroyed by his greed.

Joe would have had something to say about that.

Bettie? says

Opening: **On a February morning, when a weather front is moving in off the Pacific but has not quite arrived, and the winds are changeable and gusty and clouds drive over and an occasional flurry of fine rain darkens the terrace bricks, this place conforms to none of the clichés about California with which**

they advertise the Sunshine Cities for the Sunset Years.

Page 6 - *So far as I can see, it is bad enough sitting around watching yourself wear out, without putting your only mortal part prematurely into mothballs. I am not likely even to put the papers into order, though that is the excuse I make to Ruth for not starting to write. A sort of Heisenbergs Principle applies. Once they are in order, they are dead, and so am I.*

Heisenberg Principle (the uncertainty principle: A principle, especially as formulated in quantum mechanics, that greater accuracy of measurement for one observable entails less accuracy of measurement for another. For example, it is in principle impossible to measure both the momentum and the position of a particle at the same time with perfect accuracy. Any pair of observables whose operators do not commute have this property. As defined in quantum mechanics, it is also called Heisenberg's uncertainty principle.

Page 33 - *Quit being such a Puritan, file the point off the prick of conscience, quit crying mea culpa, quit beating the breast, quit pitying myself.*

Just as well I am sharing a computer with others or I would have been copying out quotes all day long instead of getting on with the actual read. Excellent read but not one to embark upon if feeling low esteemed and/or old. The underlying eugenics story didn't ring true at all for me - just didn't buy into that, I'm afraid, and that is where the last star went flying.

4* Angle of Repose

4* The Spectator Bird
