
Stegner would never have presumed to take on the responsibility of shaping the society of the West. Yet, in spite of himself, he did—more so than any other modern writer.

Stegner was born in rural Iowa in 1909 and grew up all over the West, dragged about by a shiftless father. The only member of his family to obtain even a high-school education, Stegner went on to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa. In the decades that followed, he published more than two dozen novels and historical works as well as short stories and essays; he founded the creative writing program at Stanford University, which spawned a galaxy of western superstars; and he championed environmental causes long before the fight became fashionable, eventually serving as special assistant to the secretary of the interior in the early 1960s.

This collection of essays, published shortly before his death last April, shows Stegner in all his different roles. In "Living Dry," he is the environmental activist explaining why the region's climate simply cannot sustain excessive development. In "Striking the Rock," he is the historian charting the rise and fall of the various federal institutions that control more than half of the West's acreage. In "Variations on a Theme by Crèvecoeur," Stegner calls for a new western literature, enjoining writers to forget the glorified cowboy myth and get down to the hardscrabble business of describing an actual region. And in "Finding the Place: A Migrant Childhood," he is again a boy of the West recalling his dad, whose version of the American dream—getting something for nothing—sent him on a quest through western landscapes that would serve as his son's most formative education. Unlike Jack Kerouac and others, however, Stegner never romanticized the "on the road" quality of western life: "Our migratoriness has hindered us from becoming a people of communities and traditions, especially in the West," he notes. "It has robbed us of the gods who make places holy." In the early 1940s, he quit teaching at Harvard to forge over the next half century a bond with the western landscape and its society.

Linking these 16 essays is a knowledge of

what it takes to appreciate the West: "You have to get over the color green; you have to quit associating beauty with gardens and lawns; you have to get used to an inhuman scale; you have to understand geological time."

Out of his appreciation of vast spaces and the small human struggles for self-reliance set against them, Stegner created a body of writings that has become identified with the contemporary West. In one essay, he posits (in typically low-key style) that "it wouldn't hurt if some native-born writer . . . was around to

serve as culture hero—the individual who transcends his culture without abandoning it, who leaves for a while in search of opportunity and enlargement but never forgets where he left his heart." Stegner himself is no longer "around," but to numerous readers he is that hero he so offhandedly envisioned.



WHAT REMAINS and Other Stories. By Christa Wolf. Trans. by Heike Schwarzbauer and Rick Takvorian. Farrar Straus. 295 pp. \$25

THE AUTHOR'S DIMENSION: Selected Essays. By Christa Wolf. Ed. by Alexander Stephan. Trans. by Jan Van Heurck. Farrar Straus. 336 pp. \$27.50

These stories and essays by the former East Germany's most famous writer arrive here under a cloud: the recent revelation that from 1959 to 1962 Wolf was an *Inoffizielle Mitarbeiter* (I. M.), an informal collaborator for the East German secret police, the dreaded Stasi. Suddenly Christa Wolf, who was once considered her country's dissident Joan of Arc, appears to be a quisling who slept with the enemy. With this knowledge, how should a reader respond to her novella "What Remains," which evokes the life of a person living under constant Stasi surveillance?

Wolf recently said she fears "being reduced to these two letters"—I. M. Although Wolf did not confess her Stasi connection until police records were made public, those records suggest that the secret police found her ultimately of little use. Indeed, her role changed when she became the object of Stasi surveillance between 1969 and 1980. The year 1969 is significant. It was

the year after the Russian invasion of Czechoslovakia, an event that caused many behind the Iron Curtain to rethink their positions on communism. Wolf, a strong believer in the possibilities of a true socialist state, retreated into her writing, trying to transcend through literature the evil she now suspected lay around her. She watched as other writers opted to leave, staying on herself, apparently deciding that it was better to try to change things from within the country, however muted her voice might become as a result of government censors.

Now that East Germany is no more, can it be said that Wolf chose wisely? Can her writing survive the dual cataclysm of that regime's collapse and the stain of her former collaboration?

The evidence of her nonfiction, collected in *The Author's Dimension*, suggests that it cannot. In a final essay written just three months after the fall of the Berlin Wall, her pain is evident: Wolf lobbied briefly for the creation of a post-communist, democratic East German state; seeing her efforts frustrated, she abandoned her literary crusade, declaring that "the politicians and the economists have the floor now." In earlier pieces, Wolf's insights are occasionally brilliant, but the effect of the whole is that of a dated, sometimes self-serving historical document. By contrast, the fiction in *What Remains* may outlive the situations that inspired it. The poignant story "June Afternoon," for example, is intriguing precisely because it vividly brings to life a world that has passed out of our knowing. In it, the narrator is enjoying an idyllic afternoon in East Berlin, a peaceful moment that is interrupted by the sudden appearance of an American helicopter patrolling the border. Such intrusions, where the personal is forfeited to harsh social realities, are typical of Wolf's stories. The "forbidden fruit" her characters have eaten is not that of good and evil but the knowledge that they cannot escape living at a particular moment in history.

CULTURE OF COMPLAINT: *The Fraying of America.* By Robert Hughes. Oxford Univ. Press/New York Public Library. 210 pp. \$19.95

Hughes, a native Australian, has resided in the

United States for the last 23 years. A busy man, he has managed to write weekly art criticism for *Time* while producing several excellent books on subjects ranging from Modernism to Australian history to the city of Barcelona. A largely unabashed "pale patriarchal penis person," Hughes now jumps into the middle of America's current cultural war. The result is a witty, often rebarbative attack on the various inanities spewed forth by the two "PCs"—the patriotically correct and the politically correct. These three essays, originally delivered as lectures at the New York Public Library, might be described as an attempt to construct an unwimpy cultural liberalism, a bolder middle ground. With almost equal force, he swings right ("With somnambulistic efficiency, Reagan educated America down to his level") and left ("The world changes more deeply, widely, thrillingly than at any moment since 1917, perhaps since 1848, and the American academic left keeps fretting about how phallogocentricity is inscribed in Dickens's portrayal of Little Nell"). Hughes, moreover, rightly detects a symbiosis between the warring sides, characterizing them as "two Puritan sects, one plaintively conservative, the other posing as revolutionary but using academic complaint as a way of evading engagement in the real world." In his shrewdest essay, "Moral in Itself: Art and the Therapeutic Fallacy," he looks through the silliness of the Robert Mapplethorpe controversy. Drawing on historian Jackson Lears's critique of America's therapeutic culture, Hughes sees the elevation of Mapplethorpe's photography to the status of High Art as a secular variant of the view of art as "quasi-religious uplift," a notion grounded in the Puritan distrust of art that has no overtly moralizing purpose.

Useful and entertaining as all this is, Hughes might have subjected his own philosophical foundations—and his own middle ground—to closer scrutiny. A certain glib *Time-Life* phraseology—colorful, compact, and contrapuntal—can too easily substitute for real engagement. Yet when Hughes does reveal his own values—his veneration for craftsmanship, his belief in standards of artistic excellence—he does so with passion and conviction.