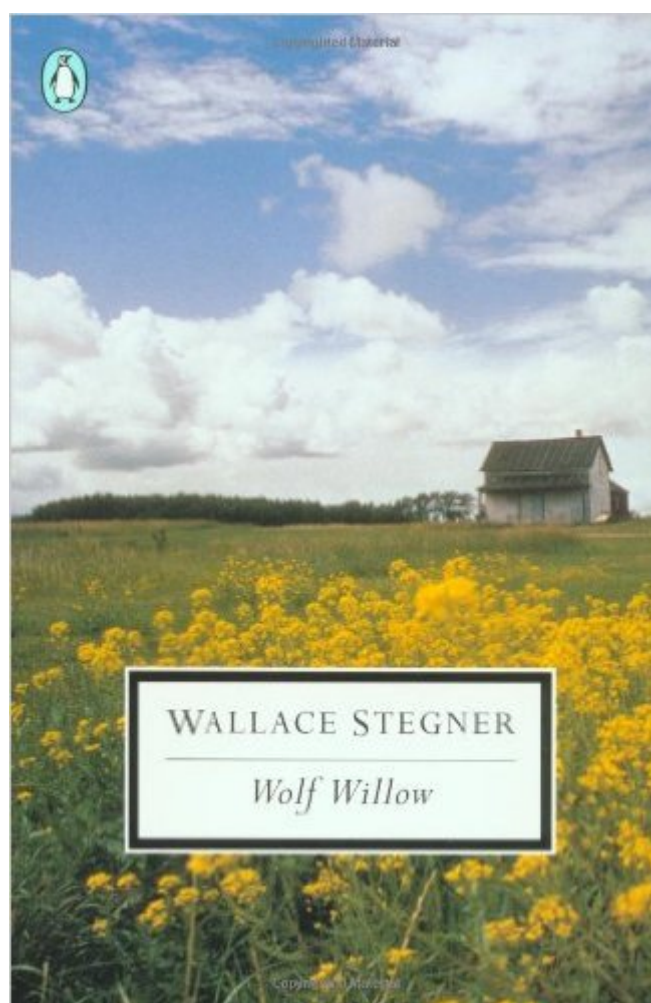


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Wolf Willow: A History, A Story, And A Memory Of The Last Plains Frontier (Penguin Twentieth-Century Classics)



Synopsis

Wallace Stegner weaves together fiction and nonfiction, history and impressions, childhood remembrance and adult reflections in this unusual portrait of his boyhood. Set in Cypress Hills in southern Saskatchewan, where Stegner's family homesteaded from 1914 to 1920, *Wolf Willow* brings to life both the pioneer community and the magnificent landscape that surrounds it. For more than seventy years, Penguin has been the leading publisher of classic literature in the English-speaking world. With more than 1,700 titles, Penguin Classics represents a global bookshelf of the best works throughout history and across genres and disciplines. Readers trust the series to provide authoritative texts enhanced by introductions and notes by distinguished scholars and contemporary authors, as well as up-to-date translations by award-winning translators.

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Customer Reviews

This wonderful collection of essays and fiction about the last Western frontier is both romance and anti-romance. Writing in the 1950s, Stegner captures the breath-taking beauty of the unbroken plains of southwest Saskatchewan and the excitement of its settlement at the turn of the century. Part memoir, the book recounts the years of his boyhood in a small town along the Whitemud River in 1914-1919, the summers spent on the family's homestead 50 miles away along the Canadian-U.S border. His book is also an account of the loss of that Eden and the failed promise of agricultural development in this semi-arid region with thin top soil. Stegner is a gifted, intelligent writer, able to

turn the people and events of history into compelling reading. The opening section of the book describes the experience of being on the plains and specifically in the area where Stegner was a boy. And it lays out the geography of that land -- a distant range of hills, the river, the coulees, the town -- which the book will return to again and again. The following section evokes the period of frontier Canada's early exploration, the emergence of the metis culture, the destruction of the buffalo herds, the introduction of rangeland cattle, and then wave upon wave of settlement pushing the last of the plains Indians westward and northward. A chapter is devoted to the surveying of the boundary along the Canada-U.S. border; another chapter describes the founding of the Mounted Police and its purely Canadian style of bringing law and order to the wild west. The middle section of the book is a novella and a short story about the winter of 1906-1907. In the longer piece, eight men rounding up cattle are caught on the open plains in an early blizzard.

This book has no right to be so absorbing. Though the topic of this forgotten book by Wallace Stegner reeks of self-indulgence-- A writer returns to where he grew up, reminisces about his youth and the history of the frontier town his transient childhood most identified as home and concludes with a 100-page fictionalized account of a the terrible winter of 1906-- he manages to tie his past inexorably to ours, linking his nostalgia for his youth with our own, and exploring the promise and inevitable waste of the American Dream lived out on our frontiers. Stegner, like Proust, experiences an "ancient, unbearable recognition" spurred by a return to the sites, sounds, and most importantly, smells of his childhood. He dreams of this period and is "haunted, on awakening, by a sense of meanings just withheld, and by a profound nostalgic melancholy." Everyone has some awareness of a deep meaning lurking in our past that has not, or cannot, be fully interpreted. Perhaps the best part of the book is section three, the novella length exposition on the hope and danger of the high plains that does a superb job of creating looming dread as the winter drops hard on the land. Near the end of section three, Stegner expounds on what it is to be an American pursuing the Dream: "How does one know what wilderness has meant to Americans unless he has shared the guilt of wastefully and ignorantly tampering with it in the name of progress? One who has lived the dream, the temporary fulfillment, and the disappointment has had the full course.... The vein of melancholy in the North American mind may be owing to many causes, but it is surely not weakened by the perception that the fulfillment of the American Dream means inevitably the death of the noble savagery and freedom of the wild.

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