

## ANALYSIS

*Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943)

Wallace Stegner

(1909-1993)

“Wallace Stegner’s latest book shows great advance in power and grasp over the shorter novels for which he is chiefly known, and is a much more satisfying example of regional fiction. [The term “regional” is a belittling characterization typical of New York critics.] Maturity of experience and human insight are brought to the treatment of a serious theme; characters unusually vivid and convincing are involved in a story of deep human interest. An exacting reader may note with surprise that, in spite of all this, he somewhat misses that peculiar pleasure that is to be derived from a work of literary art. He will ask himself how this is possible. And he reluctantly concludes that Mr. Stegner has yet to find himself a thoroughly distinctive style, an esthetically significant point of view.

Mr. Stegner is exceptionally well equipped by personal experience to stake out his claim in that vast and glamorous country which has not yet found its Faulkner, Wolfe, Glasgow, Caldwell or Rawlings, though it has found its Vardis Fisher and H. L. Davis. Born on an Iowa farm and living successively in Washington, Saskatchewan, Montana, Utah, Nevada, and California, Stegner is prepared to give an inside view of the great Northwest as it was passing from the pioneer to the settled agricultural stage. In numerous tales he has faithfully worked this mine, without really striking pay dirt until the present moment. *Remembering Laughter* was a fastidiously fashioned story of Iowa farm life vaguely reminiscent of *Ethan Frome* and *A Lost Lady*, and was rewarded for these merits with a publisher’s prize in 1937.

With *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* the author takes real hold on his subject. He starts out with the heroine’s background in a Minnesota village, takes her to a ‘populated locality’ in North Dakota where she marries Bo Mason, the keeper of a blind pig [like him], and follows her through a heart-breaking series of moves across the American and Canadian Northwest as her husband tries, one after another, the possible ways of making easy money.

Best justice is done to the homesteading venture in the lonely wheat fields of Canada. Here the author makes of the influenza epidemic of 1918 (featured in his earlier novel, *On a Darkling Plain*) one of the most powerful episodes in this harrowing saga; and it is here that the boy Bruce, with his gopher traps and caged weasel, is made the chief reflector of the shape and color of their life. Mr. Stegner has felt the spell of mountain and prairie, of drought, flood and blizzard; he can write of moving accidents and hairbreadth escapes which give us the feel of frontier life better than phrases about the stars and seasons. Perhaps the most intensely interesting passages are those which describe the rum-running drives of Bo Mason through treacherous back roads in peril from weather, law, and hijackers.

Of course the serious novelist will want to give us something more than exciting episodes and local color; and Mr. Stegner’s narrative is held together by themes significant on several levels of interest. His title recalls that land of Cockaigne where plenty comes easy for the man who knows how to beat the game. Plenty comes less easy since the closing of the frontier, and Bo Mason leads his family a vagabond underground life in which the satisfactions of home and society are tragically missed. That is the upper or cultural level of interest, typifying much in our rootless America. At the deeper, psychological level is the still more significant theme of personal relations in a family dominated by a strong-willed he-man, whose imagination is all used up on his buccaneering enterprises, leaving none to guide him in his private life.

Between husband and wife, the day is saved by the courage, loyalty and staying power of Elsa Mason. Between father and sons the Oedipus complex rages furiously; the life of one of the boys is ruined, and the other, hating his father, makes a narrow escape with the help of his speculative intelligence, which enables him to view the family history in long perspective. The real character creations are Elsa and Bo. Bo is a fascinating figure, many-faceted and intensely human, interesting in himself, and doubly interesting as the

typical man (or grown-up boy), a little more than life size. Elsa is also rather more than life size, and it is with her that the reader most often identifies himself. If she cloys a little in her sweet and brave long-suffering, blame it on the author's style rather than his substance.

And what of the distinctive pleasure which one takes in a work of art? There is little in the book which has not some pertinence to the theme; yet one might wish to see a more jealous selection of detail for more particular effect. The scrupulous author refrains from using the 'distortions' of art, and he does not greatly command the finer tools of irony, suggestion, pathos, fancy, or intellectual abstraction, which variously serve in the masters to give aesthetic point to a neutral subject.

The patient, realistic method is adequate to the plain truth of the situation, but the point of view is indeterminant. It is not sharply objective, as in pure Naturalism; and at the same time the impressions of the several characters, through which the action is interpreted, are not nicely individualized in tone. They are all presented in a uniform soft middle style, a trifle hesitant and apologetic, and not remarkable for either beauty or precision. The book is full of languid echoes. Bruce, driving west through Dakota, is half-hearted Thomas Wolfe. What is here referred to is not something peculiar to Wallace Stegner. It is the average well-bred 'sensitive' style of contemporary American 'realism' [and Modernism] where we do not have the intervention of an artistic individuality that speaks with authority."

Joseph Warren Beach  
*The New York Times Book Review*  
(20 September 1943) 4

"In a lean year this is a major novel. It would be a major novel even in a rich year, and the reasons lie in the quality of vitality, of generous strength, of something pressed down and running over in the new book by Wallace Stegner, that take it completely out of the realm of intellectualism into the kingdom of fiction. The kings of fiction—at least the kings of English fiction—have ordinarily been open-handed monarchs, givers of manifold good things and careless about the minor morals of the use. They have created vast, living, untidy books. *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is a vast, living, untidy book. Whole sections of it, for example, can be lifted out; in fact, have been lifted out to appear as independent literary units. But the living force of the narrative, the large, loose curve of the story here hold them in embrace, and the reader knows only that a whole world has arisen out of nowhere around him.

*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is the biography of Bo Mason, who grew up in the West (including western Canada) too late to be a pioneer and too early to be a politician. Trap-shooter, gambler, bootlegger, real estate entrepreneur, and the like, he yet possesses the fascination and the repulsion on something original, elementary, and unpredictable. He is a fool and a hero, a swindler and a god. He marries a Norse wife, who bears him two sons. His profound and masculine egotism compels his wife to follow the adventure of his existence against her judgment, and alternatively fascinates and disgusts his sons. We have his complete portrait, a dossier of events from childhood to the grave, a telling revelation of masculinity. But it remains a portrait, it never descends to become a case study. The author is steadily and sympathetically aware that his creation came too late into a world too old.

But to call this the substance of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is to do the book some injustice, inasmuch as it suggests that the novel is a conscious piece of psychological analysis, another performance by the fictional advanced guard. Bo Mason's life is, however, the occasion, not the thesis, of the book. The tale is a revelation of life in the contemporary West, a revelation without illusion and without bitterness and therefore credible and sweet. For Mr. Stegner the visible world exists. He knows the feel of a frozen radiator cap, the smell of baked clay, the look of a dead gopher, the flash of white skin at a necking party, the deadness of a shut-up shack. His boys live in a boy world, not in a projection of their parents' troubled existence. Only occasionally does the gulf open to show us the emotional tensions that slowly force father and children apart. This grasp of the normal and the sane, of what is visible and commonplace keeps the narrative in balance and compels us to accept as true the sudden spurts of cruelty that Bo Mason's impatience with dullness activates.

I have, to be sure, one major fault to find. That point of view should shift and change is, I think, normal in good English fiction, but I do not find Mr. Stegner's occasional use of differing styles quite acceptable. I

prefer his direct report of act and thought to his occasional (and innocent) attempts to write like Thomas Wolfe. For example, towards the end of the novel, he drops into a stream-of-consciousness manner in an effort to acquaint us with the values Bruce, the younger son, has acquired, that jars with the geniality and strength of the rest of the narrative. The slow death of the mother, the blindness of the son to what the father feels and of the father to the suffering of the boy—all this is true and poignant in this part of the book, but it is true and poignant in spite of the way it is presented, not because of it.

*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* is not a conscious rediscovery of American values. Mr. Stegner is amused at small-town cussedness as was Sinclair Lewis, but he knows that satire accomplishes nothing. In a larger sense, however, his book is an extraordinary study in American folkways. The language, the psychology, the customs of his characters are essential and characteristic, largely because, knowing them, he takes them for granted and does not dissect and analyze. His, to be sure, is a masculine world, just as, despite the tenderness with which the wife is treated, this is a masculine book. Possibly it is a study in an epoch that is dead.... The worship of the bitch-goddess, Success, troubled Henry Adams. The case of Bo Mason is an object lesson in that cult reduced to the lowest plainest, most masculine terms.”

Howard Mumford Jones  
*Saturday Review*  
(2 October 1943) 11

“[Stegner] has, by his own repeated admission, never ceased to feel himself a cultural anachronism.... He has an extreme need, it seems to me, to tell us how precisely Bruce Mason is Wallace Stegner. They were both sickly, thin, ‘puny,’ ‘crybabies,’ lacking in the particular ‘masculine’ qualities necessary for acceptance in frontier Whitemud, ‘mamma’s boys’ who had read all of the volumes of Ridpath’s *History of the World* by the time they were eight—and the both even had their collarbones broken when their fathers ‘knocked [them] end over end across the woodbox.’ And Bo Mason is precisely Stegner’s father, agonizingly scornful of his younger son.... Bo Mason was one kind of anachronism, Stegner was another. Perhaps it is not unfair to say that Stegner’s thoughts of himself as an anachronism reach the point of genuine obsession.”

Lois Phillips Hudson  
“*The Big Rock Candy Mountain: No Roots—and No Frontier*”  
*South Dakota Review* 9  
(Spring 1971) 3-13

“*The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner’s *David Copperfield*, was obviously written with an eye to removing [the] defect of scope. The book is nearly as endless as the West itself... We have a West still holding its own against the coming of modernity, and ethnics in the process of becoming Americans—principally, Scandinavians of the plains caught between fjords and 100 per centness.... Life is still violent and raw as the century cranks up... In *Big Rock Candy Mountain* Stegner has caught American rural history at a crucial point of equilibrium between its past and future: the boy Bruce (obviously Stegner) lives in a primitive town on the Saskatchewan-Montana border in the winter of 1918, yet hears the...gramophone and watches *Tarzan of the Apes* in installments at the movie house....

Stegner well depicts Bruce’s youthful curiosity before paintings and his mother’s gentle explanations of them.... Simultaneously, *Big Rock Candy Mountain* gains and loses by its slowness, with the baseball game near its beginning almost a metaphor for the whole book. Then as now ball games can be relaxing, but also dull. Stegner invites us to take our time and poke around in the furniture of the past, and some of that poking does feel good to the reader.... Stegner also makes us understand that the immigrants did it for themselves, not for some grand thing called American pluralism... He shows us quite nakedly that the buck was uppermost in their minds...the big rock candy mountain, or easy street....

On another level Stegner’s work fits into the Western formula. Bo Mason is the undisciplined type who yearns to wander, while Elsa is domesticating stability—a familiar, perhaps too familiar conflict. But in Bo we also have a typical American casualty to the spirit of do-it-yourself individualism, presaging Oliver Ward of *Angle of Repose*. Bo is a frustrated ball-player (with trick knee), then saloon owner, homesteader, goldminer, liquor runner. The second son Bruce pays for his frustration.”

"The novel covers the first three decades of the twentieth century. It closes in 1932, eleven years before publication of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, which Stegner composed between 1937 and 1940.... The novel is an ambitious, sprawling survey of American folkways and a critique of the expansive promises of the American Dream. Consequently, it surpasses regional categorization, a fate of too many good novels about the West.... The novel's action takes place between 1905, when Elsa flees her father's home for the plains of Hardinger, North Dakota, and 1932, when Bo commits suicide after his wife's death.

Drawn to the prairie by the soaring price of wheat, they homesteaded a section near the Montana-Saskatchewan border during late spring and summer, and lived the rest of the year in the frontier town of Whitemud, Saskatchewan.... They were led on by Bo Mason's obsession with parlaying wits into fortune—the great American entrepreneurial dream that Stegner mythicized as *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*.... The Masons' rootlessness is caused by Harry's obsession with the Big Rock Candy Mountain, and although they are atypical as a middle-class family, their experience is representative in many ways both of the American experience and the impact of the American Dream upon the family....

The family unit, as fragile and fraught with pain as it is, provides the only solidarity and stability that its members experience. In the 1930s, as Stegner wrote the novel, literally millions driven from the land took to the open road in a colossal human exodus in search of a living.... Unlike the mythic masculine West, people 'generally' came West as families. This central fact of westering underlies Stegner's thematic focus in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*.... The Mason family situation can be seen as representative of American experience.... The dream of upward mobility has been a principal factor in making Americans an uprooted people, and *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* closely examines this theme in Bruce Mason's search for identity.

The influence of the American Dream of self-made prosperity is Stegner's central theme. A man who grew to consciousness on the last North American frontier, Stegner rejected the Edenic dream that so possessed his father. Bruce Mason's repudiation of his father's obsession to 'make it big' parallels Stegner's own censure of his father's seduction by the 'folklore of hope' that the homestead laws represented, and which brought the Stegners to the Saskatchewan frontier in a 'blind and ignorant lemming impulse.' As a law student Bruce examines the disparity between the myth and the degradation of growing numbers of American as the Great Depression deepens and spreads.... He resents his father's betrayal of the family because of his desperate loyalty to a futile dream.... Bruce sees clearly that the great dream that possessed his father was viable only 'If you don't recognize limits'....

Bruce's desire to know and belong to a family is in distinct contrast to the male mystique in which the unattached, orphan protagonist is perpetually on the road among other men, fighting evil, defending justice, and maintaining his inviolable freedom.... On the contrary, Bruce learns that nurturance and responsibility to the family are essential to being manly, lessons he absorbs primarily from his mother. Suffering, sacrifice, frustration with repeated failures, and perseverance, not heroism through scenarios of traditional success, are man's destiny. Yet, these tribulations may create an admirable but silent heroism, such as Elsa's and even Bo's, as expressed in the creation and maintenance of their family.... Stegner counterpoints Bruce's thoughts with the hollow platitudes uttered over the 'remains' in the minister's perfunctory ceremony, and the novel ends with the hearse door 'closing quietly upon the casket and the flowers'....

Without comment Stegner presents a meticulous summary of Bo's meager possessions, conveying Bruce's devastation as he begins to understand his father, although he is not yet prepared to honor or forgive. Bo left no note explaining the murder of his mistress or his suicide. Bruce has no final letter to ponder and interpret, to document that his father had felt at peace at the very end. What remains for Bruce to examine in his father's room, however, does explain much to a young man who is beginning to value the uniqueness of each person in his family as an extension of himself....

In light of Mason's financial failure, seamy schemes that depression times necessitated, emotional alienation, the murder, and suicide, the perpetual care receipt makes Bruce see that a man's final spiritual declaration is that his family shall reside together, beside him even in death. This declaration explains that Bo had lived not by the letter but by the spirit of paternalism because he truly did cherish and protect his wife, whom he profoundly loved, and his sons; it proclaims that he will carry on in death symbolically as the patriarch, even though in life he was neither a traditional husband nor father....

Mrs. Winter, a sensitive friend of his father, provides the evidence that Bo Mason loved his son, because to his dying day he carried a photograph of Bruce in his wallet. This shocks Bruce, especially because his father had shared, 'perhaps with pride,' the photograph with a person whom he cared about and trusted.... Bruce had hated and misunderstood his father all of his life, but at the end of this scene in the man's room, brilliantly symbolizing both Mason's pathetic emotional squalor and his faith in his life's single covenant to love his family, the knowledge of the multiple revelations cause Bruce to break down....

The anachronism of the popular hero of American masculine mythology was evident to Wallace Stegner as he wrote his novel in the closing years of the Depression. Like most American writers of the period, Stegner focuses attention upon man as a social being with responsibilities, although not in the fashionable proletarian style of the 1930s... In Bruce Mason's attempt to forge his manhood, he had decided to become the exact opposite of his father. As Stegner has said, Bruce's choice of law as a way of life is a rational, logical decision to become a respectable insider. Unlike the outlaw, Harry Mason, his son is the respectable bourgeoisie of American society.... Bruce is convinced that as he becomes 'his own man,' ultimately alone, he must choose to accept and incorporate many qualities from his once-abhorred father, as well as honor the gentler qualities that he learned from his mother."

William C. Baurecht  
"Within a Continuous Frame: Stegner's Family Album in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*"  
*Critical Essays on Wallace Stegner*, ed. Anthony Arthur  
(G. K. Hall 1982) 98-106

"Bo (Harry) Mason of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*...is openly based on Stegner's father, George.... Mason 'sacrifices his family, ignores the law, severs his connections with society, and squanders his great potential...his life exemplifies the waste of human and natural resources that hollow myth and unchecked individualism have meant to the West.' But...Mason is, with all his faults, a vividly *alive* character, and his life gives essence and vitality to what remains in many ways Stegner's most affecting novel.

Further, Bo Mason is a tragic figure; without George Stegner and the now-challenged ethos that he embodied, we would have been deprived of the art that his misspent life inspired, and perhaps of the writer who grew out of it. Then too, there is the paradox of the American Dream, of which the title song of Mason's story is a variant. The earlier Spanish-American myths of Eldorado and the Lost Cities of Cibola have now given way to the frontier joke of the mountain made of hard candy, covered with lemonade springs and cigarette trees.... Readers of Stegner's *Big Rock Candy Mountain* may see the connections between this description of Cather's novel and the problems faced by young Bruce Mason in determining his identity, his need for an 'affiliation,' his feeling of being rootless and transplanted. Of particular interest is the idea that an individual life may be 'read' as a history of the time when it was lived."

Anthony Arthur, ed.  
*Critical Essays* (1982) 5-7

"*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* investigates the issue of the cultural and intellectual limitations of life in the interior West. A richer novel than the four that preceded it, which seem monocular in comparison, its scope allows Stegner to examine the influence of the West from several points of view: its characters include mature personalities beckoned to by the spacious country and young people who are actually formed by it. The book is filled with magic scenes (many conceived and published previously as short stories), for Stegner is never better than when narrating youth's experiences of exploration and initiation, or sports contests, or trips by car or wagon....

Stegner wants to show the falseness of the candy mountain idea (the 'idea of the West') and the deprivation that results from following it. The story is about victims; it stresses an unsatisfactory boyhood. Despite the shifting, limited point of view, with its implication that all four members of the Mason family will characterize themselves and be treated with similar detachment, the narratives are influenced both in voice and choice of events by the fact that the author identifies himself in some very important ways with Bruce and his mother Elsa. The father, Bo Mason, may be the novel's central character, as most critics have suggested, but Bruce is clearly most important in Stegner's mind. The narrative begins with Elsa...and ends with Bruce....

A good example of Stegner's skill is the scene of Bo's proposal—the couple sits in the middle of a vast, flat, snow-covered North Dakota field whose stark emptiness is implication enough that her agreement to marry his forebodes a bleakness of its own... The novel's last note is mollification, with both Bruce and the reader looking back to the loving scenes the family had...The reference to those youthful scenes that Canzoneri [critic] observed are the sparkling moments of the novel, where 'even the "hated" father becomes so fully real and alive in his own person that the reader sees beyond the perceptions of the son and achieves understanding and compassion'."

Kerry Ahearn

"*The Big Rock Candy Mountain and Angle of Repose: Trial and Culmination*"  
*Western American Literature* (Spring 1975) 11-27

"From the beginning, Stegner consciously mined his life and the histories of his family and friends for his first fiction. After his prize-winning initial novel, *Remembering Laughter* (1937), based on his wife's family history, he turned out a series of apprentice works that culminated in his first blockbuster, *Big Rock Candy Mountain* (1943). Hailed as a sprawling picaresque story of the early-twentieth-century West, the novel, Stegner admitted, was 'family history reasonably straight.' The author's parents served as models for the stunning portraits of Bo Mason—booming, restless, wandering husband—and Elsa Mason—nesting, reluctant, and peace-loving wife dragged throughout the Far West. Here was the first major installment of Stegner's extraordinary career as a western humanist, a superb novel bursting with the stark story of a questing family criss-crossing the two Wests searching for stasis and meaning....

If his mother Hilda and his wife Mary were the two heroines of his life, his father George was the villain. Although Stegner celebrated his father's energy and his talents as a fund of lore and local history, his son Page recalled that Stegner never said 'twenty-five words' about Page's grandfather, and when Stegner was asked about his treatment of father figures in *Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Recapitulation* (1979), he noted that he had not placed a marker on his father's grave—and then added, 'and I never will.' On the other hand, later in life he saluted the perseverance and warmth of his mother and celebrated her as a 'sticker' who exuded a healthy spirit of western community."

Richard W. Etulain

"Wallace Stegner, Western Humanist"  
*Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer*, ed. Charles E. Rankin  
(U New Mexico 1996) 50, 56

"*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* might seem an example of much that he complained about. It is set during those last years of the frontier he said were consistently heroized. It has characters that fit the dichotomized scheme of freedom-seeking men and civilizing women. It has a good bit of the standard issue turn-of-the-century western plots—drought, loneliness, dislocations, wind and bugs. But *Big Rock Candy Mountain* has so much more—is so full of so much good history—that it is continuously pushing outward against the limits of that old formula, bending what could have been predictable into new and interesting shapes.

When Bo Mason is parched out by drought on his Saskatchewan homestead, for instance, he turns to bootlegging when he is inspired by, of all things, the influenza epidemic of 1918. Then he uses a new technology, in the shape of a succession of automobiles, to play the international boundary and fuzzy authorities to his advantage, which brings a brief flush of prosperity but also difficulties with modern silk-shirted plug-uglies in that internationally recognized center of organized crime, Great Falls, Montana. The

story keeps our attention while still telling us a lot about the changes afoot in that part of the world, and I, for one, get some genuine sense of where the West was heading....

It is true as Stegner himself pointed out, that Bo and Elsa in *Big Rock Candy Mountain* fit the usual formula of restless man and civilizing woman, but the resemblance to the usual pattern stops there. Who, after all, is the story *about*? Bo? Elsa? Bruce? It's hard to say, and that's the point. Among many things, the book is about how we all turn out the way we do in part because of the wonderful and the perfectly godawful things that happen to us in our families, and also about how looking back into that intimate world, as Bruce begins to do in the book's final paragraphs, is a continuous act of revelation and reinvention. And so, if nothing else, Stegner teaches me that if we want to know what the West is and who westerners are, and also what we should and shouldn't do and be, we need to spend more time trying to reconstruct the western past through the thousands of stories like that of the Masons. We need to make our history, in the root meaning of the word, familiar.

Doing that, Stegner's second lesson quickly becomes obvious. The family as a focus of understanding has its own severe limits. Bruce Mason became who he was partly out of interactions with parents and brother but also because of what he took from the world beyond their reach, and for Bruce—as for Wallace Stegner—those other influences were largely of the physical environment. Stegner's writing is full of finely drawn descriptions of the western country—or, more exactly, perceptions of those places. I would guess that all fans have their favorite passages. Mine is the first ten paragraphs of chapter four of *Big Rock Candy Mountain*: Bruce's impressions of the Canadian homestead, a collage, the 'mousy smell of the house, the musty smell of packed quilts'."

Elliott West  
"Stegner, Storytelling, and Western Identity"  
*Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer* (1996) 63-65

"First in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and then in its sequel, *Recapitulation*, Bruce Mason's problem of forgiveness is similar to Larry Morgan's in its ambiguity [*Crossing to Safety*]. On the one hand, he wants to win his father's approval; on the other, he is oppressed by his father's callousness and his dishonesty. His father makes life difficult and unpleasant not only for him, but for his mother—and it is the latter that the son cannot forgive. His mother, a simple, hardworking woman with a taste for books, only wants the opportunity to settle down somewhere and make a home for the family. But her husband's boom-or-bust temperament makes them permanent migrants, first as he tries one get-rich scheme after another and finally as a bootlegger, always just one step ahead of the law. It is an archetypical conflict between man and woman in the West as it really was.

But Bruce's father, Bo, is not an evil man. His worst quality is a bad temper, and this, and a rather flexible sense of right and wrong, is balanced against courage, a fun-loving nature, and enormous capacity for hard work. The reader is likely to find Bo somewhat attractive, but Bruce, the artist-as-young-man and by temperament the opposite of his father, grows increasingly resentful and finds, by the end of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, that he hates him. In this, the most autobiographical of Stegner's novels, the situation is one that closely reflects his own experience, as he admitted on a number of occasions. He was haunted all his life by his relationship with a father very much like Bo Mason, and in listening to him talk about his father, one couldn't help but feeling that for him, personally, forgiveness was a difficult battle. That was why, perhaps, it came to have such a central place in his work. Just how much it haunted him may be indicated by Stegner's return to the Bo-Bruce relationship more than thirty-five years after the publication of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* in *Recapitulation*, an apparent effort to put the ghost of the first novel to rest."

Jackson J. Benson  
*Wallace Stegner: His Life and Work*  
(Viking 1996) 9-10

"*The Big Rock Candy Mountain* [is] the most successful book of the first half of his career. It takes the figure of Bruce Mason, variously called 'the boy,' 'David,' and 'Bruce' in the stories, and traces his life from early childhood until young manhood and the deaths of first his mother and then his father. It is a long book, more than six hundred pages, and an immensely rich one, overflowing with anecdotes and

autobiographical detail. Just how rich a vein Stegner had tapped is suggested by the fact that he had to cut more than two hundred pages from the beginning of the novel. Nevertheless, once he was through with this work, he went back to his roots only rarely—a couple of short stories and the history-memoir-fiction combination called *Wolf Willow* (1962).”

Jackson J. Benson  
“Finding a Voice of His Own: The Story of Wallace Stegner’s Fiction”  
*Wallace Stegner: Man and Writer* (1996) 215

Michael Hollister (2015)



The Big Rock Candy Mountain/Wallace Stegner. p. cm. eISBN : 978-1-101-07789-4. The train was rocking through wide open country before Elsa was able to put off the misery of leaving and reach out for the freedom and release that were hers now. She tucked her handkerchief away, leaned her shoulder against the dirty pane and watched the telegraph wires dip, and dip, and dip from pole to pole, watched the trees and scattered farms, endless variations of white house, red barn, tufted cornfield, slide smoothly backward. The Big Rock Candy Mountain is a 1943 semi-autobiographical novel by American writer Wallace Stegner. It follows the life of the Mason family (Bo and Elsa with their sons Chester and Bruce) during the early 20th century in the United States and Canada. The book is structured in ten sections. The fictional family in the book, like Stegner's family during his childhood, frequently moves to different cities in pursuit of various financial schemes that never work out. The novel also matches Stegner's "Big Rock Candy Mountain", first recorded by Harry McClintock in 1928, is a folk song about a hobo's idea of paradise, a modern version of the medieval concept of Cockaigne. It is a place where "hens lay soft boiled eggs" and there are "cigarette trees." McClintock claimed to have written the song in 1895, based on tales from his youth hoboing through the United States, but some believe that at least aspects of the song have existed for far longer. It is catalogued as Roud Folk Song Index No. 6696.