

Hope for the Human Condition

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The Spectator Bird. By Wallace Stegner. New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1976, 214 pp.

As an indulgent and unrepentant reader of novels, I grew tired of the absurd, the pessimistic, the despairing years of the anti-hero. Thus it is heartening to find many of the best novelists now writing with some hope for the human condition. Writers of fiction often see and describe most clearly the status of society and the attitudes of its members, and recent novels like Warren's *A Place to Come to*, Cheever's *Falconer*, Percy's *Lancelot*, and Stegner's *The Spectator Bird* present an uplifting view of life and the future in the United States in the last quarter of the 20th century.

Uplifting, that is, if one doesn't expect too much. These are not books with "happy endings". Their heroes and heroines have problems they never really solve, but they keep striving to overcome difficulties, to improve themselves and to find meaning in their lives—even comfort and happiness in the companionship of family and friends.

Most often, this happiness comes from acceptance and self-knowledge rather than from repentance and change. This may be a disturbing view of life to many Mormons who will find these books unsatisfying because they leave God, at least a personal caring God, out of life's formula. Stegner does acknowledge God near the end of *The Spectator Bird* when he says "God distributes with an uneven hand." This notion that God's intrusion into human affairs is arbitrary or unfair conflicts with the Mormon ideal heard in testimony meetings and General Conferences, the idea that God is giving guidance and direction at every turn, and that God's apparent "unevenness" only

seems so because of our inability to understand.

While "man is that he might have joy" in Mormon philosophy, joy comes from eternally progressing through this life into a celestial existence, not from the experience of being a human being. The second estate is not enough by itself and is important only as it prepares man for the next life. Protagonists in *The Spectator Bird* view life from a different set of assumptions. They struggle with a senseless universe or an unresponsive God but, surprisingly, find at least a measure of peace and contentment. And the irony is that it comes through the same values which Mormons espouse—love of family and commitment to service, work and responsibility.

The Spectator Bird recounts a few weeks in the life of Joe Allston, a 70-year-old retired New York literary agent living with his wife in the hills near Palo Alto, California. (Stegner readers met the Allstons nine years earlier in *All the Little Live Things*.) Joe Allston is facing the end of a life over which he has had no control and in which he has found little meaning. This perceived lack of meaning is the result of Joe Allston's rootlessness (he knows little about his parents) and the lack of hope for continuity after his life. (His only offspring was killed as a young man.) Allston's background has always shamed him—a lower-class emigrant mother from Denmark and a father identified only as a railroad worker killed soon after Allston's birth. When Joe and Ruth Allston's son, an aging beach-bum, drowns in the ocean, Allston does not know whether it is death by accident or whether the son has let go on purpose. Not knowing torments Allston, as does the guilt and responsibility he feels at

having failed his son by being unable to accept his alien values. But Allston feels rejected too—by the son in a classical generation gap confrontation: "In rejecting me (he) destroyed my compass, he pulled my plug, he drained me. He was the continuity my life and effort were spent to establish."

Thus as *The Spectator Bird* begins, Joe Allston is living without past or future, "killing time till time gets around to killing me." He describes himself as:

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 down stream 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.

Allston has tried to build a shell around himself and has attempted to become a spectator in life, rather than a participant. The novel, in an affirmation of life shows this to be an impossible quest. At the end, Allston says of himself, "The Spectator bird (has) the feathers beaten off him in a game from which he had thought he was protected by the grandfather clause."

Joe Allston's search for his roots becomes a search for the meaning of his life. This search entails a trip to Denmark, his mother's country, and provides mystery and excitement by means of a fascinating, if somewhat implausible, subplot. But the results of the trip are disappointing. Allston does find out a great deal about his mother's background and her reasons for emigrating to America, but his disillusionment remains because this knowledge does not satisfy his craving for life's meaning.

Stegner appears to be saying here that searching for and even finding one's roots does not by itself give meaning to life. Even though Joe Allston has discovered his roots, he continues to be frustrated by his lack of a sense of accomplishment. To some extent, this is a problem everyone faces as aging accelerates, and one problem this novel has is that it too often reads like a litany of old men's complaints. The question Allston never faces up to is that, short of becoming a believer, he had no basis to expect

much "meaning" out of his life.

This dilemma is best demonstrated by a retired Swedish couple named Bertelson whom the Allstons meet on the ship. Having migrated to America at an early age, the Bertelsons have now retired and are going back to the old country to enjoy their golden years. They had worked all their lives with the dream of going back to their native land—a better place. But the husband dies on board ship and before reaching their destination. Allston laments: "Oh, his poor dream. Oh, his poor fifty years of dull work with its deferred reward. Oh, his poor dim dependable unimaginative not very attractive life that was supposed to mature like a Treasury bill."

Stegner seems to be saying that if one lives his life only in the hope of ultimate reward (heaven?), he will be disappointed. But the paradox is that Allston, having lived a much different life and having expected different rewards finds himself less certain than Bertelson. Bertelson at least had his dream, and perhaps it was fortunate that he died before he learned the falseness of that dream.

Allston's problem is that he too had a dream: that humanistic values give meaning to life, and that through these values one can define himself as good and his life as worthwhile. Stegner's problem is that just as changing moral standards in Sweden would have made it unrecognizable as the country Bertelson remembered as a child, so also have changing times undermined the humanistic standards Joe Allston relied upon.

Stegner treats a question which has always troubled mankind. Are the old values being eroded by a new generation, or does it just seem that way as one grows older? In *All the Little Live Things*, he came close to concluding that in the 1960s we did lose sight of the enduring values, or at least the youth did, but in *The Spectator Bird* he seems to be saying that we were only momentarily off track. Even though Joe Allston is near death, he is able to look back on this life with some satisfaction and to look forward to the rest of his life with anticipation and hope. He describes why, after his earlier despair, he is able to do this:

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 prin-