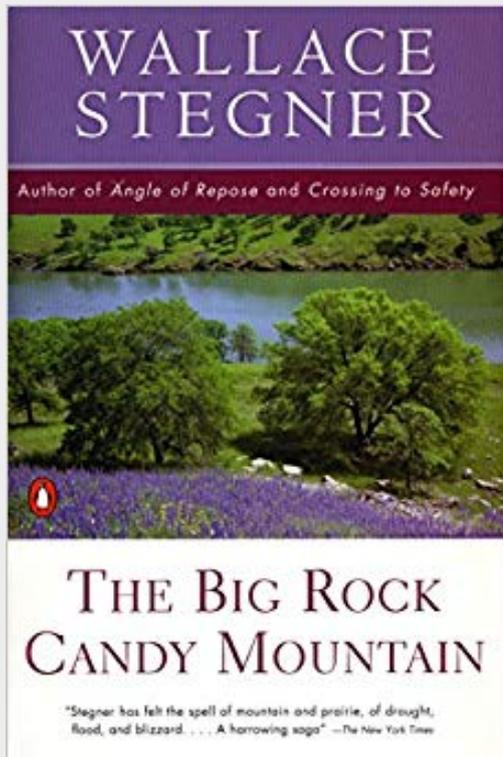


The Big Rock Candy Mountain (Contemporary American Fiction) by Wallace Stegner



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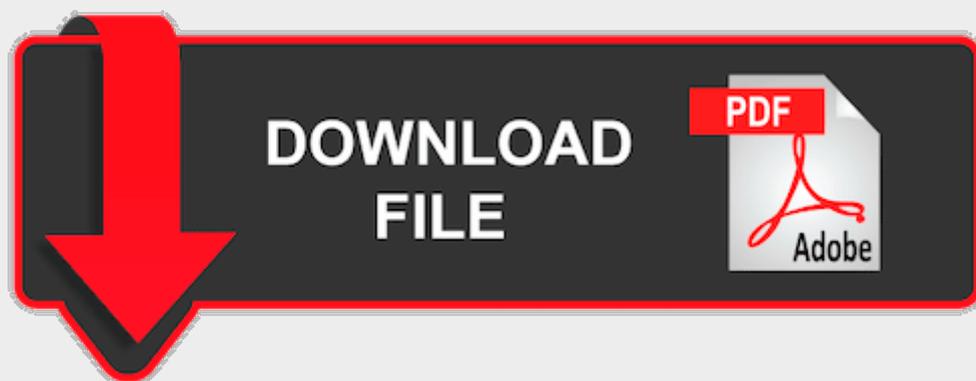
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Bo Mason, his wife, Elsa, and their two boys live a transient life of poverty and despair. Drifting from town to town and from state to state, the violent, ruthless Bo seeks out his fortune in the hotel business, in new farmland, and, eventually, in illegal rum-running through the treacherous back roads of the American Northwest.

Stegner portrays more than thirty years in the life of the Mason family in this masterful, harrowing saga of people trying to survive during the lean years of the early twentieth century.



Reviews of the [The Big Rock Candy Mountain \(Contemporary](#)

American Fiction) by Wallace Stegner

1. Kefrannan

I hesitate to write much since I am incapable of conveying how deeply this tragically intricate novel moved me. I mostly tend to read American and German literature from the first half of the 20th century. If that strikes a chord with you, I think, like me, you'll love this book as I did, from the first word to the last.

Stegner's tale is an American saga, not about gods and heroes but, much like Hamsun's *Growth of the Soil* and Laxness's *Independent People*, about common folk who pioneer and struggle to make something out of nothing in a brutal, hostile world. Much like those novels, this story provides deep insight about how collective individualities build national character and identity. I am reminded of the classic *Doonesbury* cartoon when Mike embarks on a motorcycle tour of the country as Zonker asks him to "Call me when you find America." Reading this epic would have been a good starting point for that journey.

Set in the first third of the 20th century, we follow the Mason family as they struggle to prosper and consistently fail to set roots of stability. Bo Mason drives and draws along his wife and two sons through sporadic, momentary cycles of booms and prolonged and brutal busts. Their nomadic journey takes us throughout the West during historical episodes that include frontier settlement, the Klondike gold rush, the Spanish flu of 1918, prohibition, and the advent of legal gambling.

The beauty and depth of Stegner's descriptive writing is all-consuming and overwhelming. You can feel the musty grit of the North Dakota winds; you can smell meadow flowers of a lazy Montana summer day; you can feel Bo's car struggle through an vicious blizzard; you can hear the guns go off to celebrate the end of World War I; you can smell the stench of a rotting horse carcass; you can see the dust floating in the sunbeam coming into a stuffy room; everything is a visceral experience. Most importantly, these characters are as completely human and real as any about whom I've ever read.

Bo Mason "was a man who was born disliking the present and believing in the future." His compelling drive to search for and find that mythical Big Rock Candy Mountain of contentment is constantly stymied by his violent frustrations, bluster, fears, insecurities, and dreams. Elsa Norgaard Mason is the force of stability, a loving mother of two boys who might well be one of the most sympathetic characters in American literature, whose "qualities...would get you saintliness, but never greatness." And we see

her boys Chet and Bruce grow up from infancy to childhood, constantly straining to wish them a good, happy life.

2. Modred

I can't get enough of Wallace Stegner. This book is what all writers should aspire to be like. I have now read three of his books, *Angle of Repose*, *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Crossing to Safety*. I can't say there's much action but there is so much heart and soul. While reading *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* in my bedroom I came down and was talking to my husband about the book and crying. Crying for the lost chance this couple had to love and respect each other and how happy I am that my marriage is nothing like this. Wallace Stegner shows the beauty of the world and people and the hardness of both. It's always up to us how we view and act in our world.

3. spark

This book is a classic. It is one of the best descriptions of a certain sort of American character that I have ever read. Stegner's *Big Rock Candy Mountain* is, like most of his work, a bit dense, prose-wise. It's a tough start, but repays effort after the first couple of chapters. He is very insightful about a particular type of American character, which he depicts at some length in the novel's protagonist, Bo Mason. Stegner's slightly heavy handed moralizing about this American type -- always looking for a fast buck, or the main chance, while a bit impervious to the genuine niceties of bourgeois life -- is pretty apt for our time, after the fast money of the past two decades.

In addition to depicting the kinds of thinking and action of a man like Bo, Stegner does a brilliant job of showing us the effects his behavior has on the more sensitive, less impulsive people whose lives are interwoven with his. His wife is pretty game, but ends up with little or none of what she wanted in life. His slick older son makes mistakes, and ends up dead early. Only his very smart, overly sensitive son (the Stegner character), manages to remove himself from the world in which the father's actions make some

kind of sense, and get himself on a different path through life. The book is memorable and brilliant. It should be require reading -- in college, perhaps. Too sophisticated for high school.

4. Blackstalker

Like other books I've read from this master storyteller, this one is thoroughly enjoyable. His ability to create complex characters and trace their lives is truly incredible, at least in my opinion. There is simply never a point in this and his other works when you don't have a clear mental visual image of what is occurring and an emotional connection to the characters. A wonderful book.

5. Zamo

This started out super strong then lost some momentum for me about half way through. Stegner is dealing with some heavy themes family, fathers, sons, marriage, the American dream, death and home among others so there's lot to unpack. I have a feeling I'll appreciate this more having had some time to digest. The characters and prose are stellar. My only real complaint is a tendency toward over describing certain scenes. Though some people will probably appreciate the detail I found it tedious and a distraction from the overall plotting. This book takes some time and effort but certainly rewards those willing to invest.

6. Shaktizragore

This did not disappoint. I've read most of Stegner's other novels - Angle of Repose five or six times. I'm sure this is destined to be read again so that I

can pick up on all the psychological nuances that I miss the first time I read through a story. I appreciate characters who are multi-faceted and, as most real people tend to be, complex and a bit broken, yet doing the best they can.

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