

# The Big Rock Candy Mountain Short Guide

## The Big Rock Candy Mountain by Wallace Stegner

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# Characters

The main figures in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* are Bo, Elsa, and their younger son, Bruce. Bo is big, strong, and athletic. He played professional baseball for a time and was a candidate for the major leagues before a knee injury ended his career. He is bright and gregarious, with an easy manner that wins friends. He also has a quick mind; he uncovers cheats easily and can swiftly adjust to a dangerous situation. A man of the world, he is wise in the ways of earning money in the underworld — by gambling and by selling illegal liquor. He is also insecure and obsessed with a fear of failure.

Elsa is at first taken with his charm, but she becomes alarmed when she sees him punch a vagrant. Bo is coldly merciless when protecting his interests, and the vagrant had been putting slugs into his hotel's slot machine.

Bo's charm eventually wins Elsa over. She has escaped an oppressive family situation and wants to make a life of her own. Dashing, handsome, and generous, Bo seems to be the husband who could help her build a new life. When she learns that her family wants her to stay away from him, Elsa becomes defiant. Her relationship with Bo resembles the marriage of Oliver and Susan in *Angle of Repose* (1971) in an important way. Like Susan, Elsa represents civilization; like Oliver, Bo represents the natural or untamed man.

Elsa does not like moving about. She wishes to stay in one place, settle in, and make her roots in a community.

She wants this stability for her children as well as for herself. Yet Bo cannot settle in one place. He is forever getting in trouble with the law, and he unconsciously seeks a frontier where he needs to answer only to nature, not to society. His quest is futile; wherever the frontier goes, society follows and settles in. By the time he has a family, the old West is gone; the new West is more Elsa's world than his. Elsa's desire for a peaceful, quiet, settled life, and Bo's hunger for a frontier life are in conflict. Unlike Oliver and Susan, Bo and Elsa do not reach a compromise.

Elsa is the focus of the conflict between Bo and Bruce. Bo wants to please her and, like a schoolboy, shows off for her. He initially wins her love through his courtesy and generosity.

When she is outraged at his treatment of the vagrant, he leaves her gifts of wildfowl that he shot while hunting.

His ability to hunt and his other frontier skills make him seem a fine, strong man. But he is also rigid and unable to adjust to a changing world. His generosity of the moment is offset by the pain he causes by moving Elsa frequently around the West.

Bruce, the weak son — a crybaby and mamma's boy — loves Elsa. Feeling rejected by a father he believes is insensitive and cruel, he emphasizes the kindnesses of his



mother, devoting himself to her. When she falls terminally ill and his father disappears, he is triumphant. He has her all to himself.

The return of his father is difficult for him to accept. Although *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* can be seen as a bildungsroman, Bruce does not really grow up. Sensitive, and intelligent, he fails to realize how his obsession with his mother leaves him spiritually stunted.

At the novel's end, Bruce is still immature.



## Social Concerns

The Big Rock Candy Mountain focuses on the ending of the western frontier. Through the character of Bo Mason, the novel shows what happened to a society of people whose temperaments were suited to a wide-open frontier, but who had to adapt to the constraints of a settled society. In an interview Stegner said, "People like Bo Mason ... grow up without history, and they live without history, without any sense of history. They're trapped in the present." This reflects Stegner's view of the American and Canadian Wests; each is without history — their people have to make their own history in the present. Bo Mason wanders about trying to escape from the need to create his own life, to make his own history.

His wife Elsa yearns to settle in one place, but she is tied to a wandering frontiersman. The story of Bo, Elsa, and their children is the story of the people of the West who were born into a society with frontier traditions, but who had to live in the settled society of the twentieth-century West. The novel suggests that these people were displaced, without a time or locale to call their own.

The theme of abuse and familial violence is important to the relationships of the characters. Bo Mason is carefully developed; Stegner shows how he and his brothers were relentlessly brutalized by their father, Fred Mason. One after another, the brothers run away from their horrible home, making new lives for themselves wherever they can. Bo, the brightest of the children, acquires the most education, making it to the eighth grade. Properly educated, he might have become a poet. Instead, he must use his cleverness to make his way in the world. By running away from home, he gains some peace; it is a lesson he never forgets — when life is bad, run away. He wanders with his wife and children from one difficult situation to another.

When Elsa falls terminally ill, he disappears for a time. In addition, as much as he detests his father, he cannot help reflecting him in his own abuse of his son Bruce. Stegner handles this material with sensitivity, showing how family life teaches children how to behave toward their own children, a fact that often produces frustrated, confused, and angry adults.



# Techniques

Some critics object to the shifting point of view in *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. The story is told from the perspectives of the different characters, shifting from one to another. To these critics, this technique is confusing.

They would prefer the steadier view that the character Lyman Ward gives Angle of Repose. On the other hand, this shifting point of view allows the characters to reveal how they see their own lives. Without the scenes revealing Bruce's complex emotional life, he could seem only an annoying crybaby.

Like his father, he is partly a product of his family life. His anger at his father seems natural, even sympathetic when seen from his point of view. After all, his father is sometimes brutal and cruel. Yet, Bo can be a sympathetic character. His horrible childhood is worse than what he inflicts on his children, and from his perspective he is being easier on them than his father was on him. He sees Bruce as a stubborn, disobedient child. When seen from Bo's perspective, Bruce seems provoking and selfish. Thus the shifting views help to build the psychological realism of the novel and help create a tone of fairness.

Stegner is open about the autobiographical elements of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and a tone favoring one character over another might make all his observations in the novel seem untrustworthy. Stegner based the character Bruce on himself, admitting that he was something of a crybaby when he was young. Bo and Elsa represent Stegner's parents. Like the Mason family, the Stegner family moved often.

The father was tough and cold; the mother was clinging. In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner works out some of his own anguish over his difficult childhood, and he develops an understanding of his parents. Yet one should take care not to overemphasize the autobiographical elements of the novel. Stegner uses his own family's life to provide a realistic background for the novel's events and to create psychologically believable characters, but ultimately the novel is a work of fiction. The events in the novel are not a literal transcription of Stegner's life.

Further, the characters are not exactly like Stegner's family. For instance, Bruce does not quite grow up; in the sequel *Recapitulation* (1979), he has remained unmarried through a long life.

In real life, Stegner matured and made a place for himself in his career as college professor, author, and conservationist; his marriage has lasted over fifty years, and he raised a family of successful children.



## Themes

The Big Rock Candy Mountain is the story of a spiritual quest. Each of the three principal characters is searching for his or her own Eden. Bo seeks the freedom of wide-open spaces with few social constraints. He pulls his family around with him as he searches for the big opportunity that will make him financially independent. He seems unaware that he is as much running away as he is searching. His brutal childhood chases him wherever he goes; his father's beatings have made him an angry man who is seldom sure of what he is angry about. His Eden would allow him to dissipate his angry energies in hunting and competing against nature for survival. Attracted by a frontier that no longer exists, pushed by a past he cannot escape, Bo is a tragic figure.

Elsa's Eden would be a nice house in a quiet town where she could set down roots. She wants to be respected in a community and to share her time with friends. Her dream is one that American families have long cherished: healthy children, a house of their own, community service, long-lasting friendships, and good educations for the children. Life with a frontiersman does not fulfill such dreams. She ends up focusing on her children, trying to give them a good family life. Perhaps she smothers Bruce's personality, who as a weak child seems to need extra care. Although Elsa's failure to achieve her dream makes her a melancholy figure, she at least knows what she wants.

Neither Bo nor Bruce is sure of what his goal is; Elsa's certainty makes her the emotional core of the novel. It is always clear how far her actual life is from the life she hoped for.

By the end of The Big Rock Candy Mountain, Bruce is still unsure of what he wants. His Eden seems to be one in which he is the center of attention and where his dynamic and overbearing father is absent. Bruce is overshadowed by his father's powerful physical presence and strong personality. He wants to escape his father's influence and to stand on his own.



## Key Questions

Because of its topical subject matter and superior prose style, Stegner's fiction usually provokes stimulating discussions. In general, his fiction reflects his interests in history, the natural world, social values, and how environment affects what people become as they age. In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, he explores lives blighted by abusive childhoods; not only is Bo's life forever marred by the brutality he endured as a child, but as a result of the abuse he endured, he mars the lives closest to him, those of his wife and son. A vigorous discussion of Stegner's portrait of child-abuse and its consequences could evolve out a discussion of the principal characters of the novel.

A key point to remember is that Stegner is discussing child-abuse about forty years before it became a trendy social issue. Therefore, his views on the issue are likely to vary from present-day ones. Further, for him it would be a serious social issue, not just a way to capitalize on a fad .

1. In *Angle of Repose*, Lyman has been abandoned by his wife because of his illness. In *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Bo abandons Elsa for a time when she becomes ill. Do these abandonments have anything in common beside having been precipitated by the illness of a spouse? Do Elsa and Lyman cope in similar ways?
2. More than thirty years after writing *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Stegner returns to its subject in *Recapitulation*. What was there to recapitulate after thirty years? How has Stegner's point of view changed from one novel to the other?
3. Is Bo a victim of his circumstances, or is he responsible for his own misery?
4. How much does the relationship between Bo and Bruce resemble Freud's ideas about Oedipal conflicts? Is the psychology of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* Freudian?
5. Does the novel accurately portray what happened to frontiersmen as the West became settled?
6. Are there still people like Bo who need a wild frontier in order to vent their anger and be happy?
7. Why does Elsa not divorce Bo?
8. Is Bruce just a big baby, or does he have legitimate emotional needs?
9. Is Bo a brutal father? Should Bruce forgive his faults?
10. Is Elsa a passive character? Does she have a hand in determining her own fate?
11. Is Elsa a domineering mother?





12. How should Elsa have coped with her husband's waywardness? Was there ever any hope of his calming down, of his making peace with his urges?

## Literary Precedents

The great, wandering epic structure of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* resembles that of Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884). Each novel tries to capture the essence of its society while the main characters travel from place to place. Stegner himself compares his novel to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1865-1869), suggesting that each novel has a loose structure that allows for the coverage of large social issues.

## Related Titles

In *Recapitulation*, the sequel to *Big Rock Candy Mountain*, Bruce Mason returns to Salt Lake City and tries to sort out his childhood and youth. He is well off, successful in his line of work, and yet insecure. His having remained unmarried suggests that he never quite let go of his obsession with his mother — that he never quite grew up. In this novel, he tries to understand his parents and reconcile their world with the one in which he lives forty years later.



# Copyright Information

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