

# Genesis Short Guide

## Genesis by Wallace Stegner

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# Characters

Rusty, the main character of *Genesis*, is only nineteen years old and eager for adventure. Almost everything about riding herd is new to him; as he learns the rules and nuances of his job, the reader gets a view of the life of Canadian cowboys in 1906. They have two kinds of horses: big ones that can endure terrible cold and smaller ponies that can maneuver around cattle easily but are not as sturdy as the large horses. There are different breeds of cattle on the range, and each kind must be kept separate from the others. Calves and yearlings are not as capable of enduring winter's hardships as older cattle, and they must be herded to the main ranch for care during the winter. As he gradually picks up on the details of cowboy life, Rusty finds a place for himself among the nine other cowboys he must work with.

At first Rusty yearns for an opportunity to do something heroic, so that the other men will accept him as a fullfledged cowboy. He is self-centered, easily annoyed, and eager for a respect that he does not realize cannot be easily earned. As he matures, he realizes that heroic acts are everyday experiences for cowboys. If they fail to look out for each other, they will not be able to do their jobs. When Rusty falls from his pony and is charged by a longhorn steer, he is saved by another rider. He feels humiliated by this, because he thinks he has looked unmanly in front of the others. Eventually, he learns that danger is always present and that helping or needing help is not a matter of concern to cowboys.

Helping each other is just part of the routine; for Rusty to be accepted by the others, he must fit into the routine. He must prove himself rugged and trustworthy through many hardships. Through three freezing blizzards—with the last one nearly fatal—he endures, does his job, saves a life, and learns humility and self-confidence.

## Social Concerns

*Genesis* focuses on the hard lives of Canadian cowboys at the turn of the century. The ranch on which they work is owned by an absentee landlord who leaves the care of his cattle to hired hands. They must ride herd on a huge ranch that is as big as some European countries. During *Genesis*, they risk their lives to bring the cattle off the range for the winter. They endure backbreaking work, long hours, sunburn, and frostbite for twenty dollars a month. Stegner presents few judgments about the rightness or wrongness of the cowboys' situation.

For instance, the absentee landlord is no villain; his absence is not good, but it is treated more as a fact of life that must be accepted than as bad. Although the cowboys endure much hardship, they are not abused; they have chosen their line of work because of its physical challenges.

On the other hand, they seem underpaid, one of the few social points Stegner makes in the novella. The growth of Lionel Cullen is the essence of the story, and *Genesis* is an educational work that teaches the reader something about a way of life even as the protagonist learns about it. Therefore, if *Genesis* has a social point, it is a didactic one—it is educational.



# Techniques

The conflicts in *Genesis* are of three types: man against nature, man against man, and man against himself. The first conflict is readily apparent; nature is a formidable opponent. The Canadian winter is merciless and unrelenting. The range in November is bitterly cold; the sun is harsh and blinding; the wind burns the skin. At first the struggle against nature involves the cowboys trying to keep their herd together and driving it to safe places before the winter makes the task impossible. Their effort to do their jobs in such an unforgiving environment tests the men to the limits of their physical endurance. Yet, nature has even more demanding hardships in store. A blizzard forces them to retreat to their tent; afterwards they must reassemble the herd.

Another blizzard forces the men to ride through snow on nearly dead ponies to again gather their cattle. A third blizzard overwhelms them, blowing over their tent and forcing them to leave the cattle to survive on their own. Through freezing temperatures and a violent wind, they hike to safety.

The man-against-man conflict is made to look petty and trivial in the story.

Rusty's grievances against Spurlock are minor. Rusty is spoiling for a fight; he wants the men to respect him and believes that fighting and beating one of them would earn that respect. He sizes Spurlock up, measuring him against his own physical strengths. Spurlock is sixteen years older and had spent several years at a desk job. Spurlock does not like him, but the older man is not cruel. He merely makes cutting remarks and indicates that he thinks Rusty is spoiled and soft. The battle against natural hazards and Rusty's conflict within himself are more important than the man-to-man conflicts, which pale beside the life threatening dangers of the range.

Inner conflict is central to the development of Rusty's character. During one of the blizzards Rusty realizes, "The fact that he was here in a tent on the freezing Saskatchewan plains, that one decision rashly made and stubbornly stuck to had taken him not only out of the university, out of home, out of England, but out of a whole life and culture that had been assumed for him, left him dazed." During the hardships of the cattle drive he wrestles first with his desire to be accepted as a real cowboy and then with his desire to run away and return to a comfortable life.

The privations caused by the winter storms force him to grow up; escape is not possible until the men reach the ranch house. He learns during the third blizzard that only by sticking together can the men survive. The conflict within himself is whether he will remain a spoiled, privileged person, or whether he will grow up and learn to respect other people. This conflict is only resolved at the story's end, when he comes to terms with his selfish desire to be the hero, to be the center of attention.



# Themes

In this rite-of-passage story, nineteen-year-old Englishman Lionel Cullen—called "Rusty" for his red hair— passes into adulthood. The rite-of-passage theme differs from the coming-of-age theme by focusing on one key event that marks the transition into adulthood.

In *Genesis*, the rite of passage is a two-week cattle drive through three terrible blizzards. At the beginning of the story, Rusty is a somewhat spoiled young man, looking for fun and adventure as a Canadian cowboy. After only a day of work, he realizes that riding herd is not an adventure; it is just grueling work. Later, he contemplates what he might be doing instead of exhausting himself in painful labors. He could be going to Oxford University or sailing in a harbor while jeering at working sailors. He traveled to Canada over the objections of his family; like a spoiled child, he became more stubborn the more his family decried his whim to be a cowboy. He discovers that the life of a cowboy is not romantic, and he yearns to be free of his obligations to the men with whom he works. He imagines himself abandoning them and heading home. Yet, by the story's end, he has learned to act like a man. He learns that saving another man's life is not heroism.

On the range, that is merely doing what is expected; anything less would be cowardice. This realization on his part marks his transition into manhood.



# 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. *Genesis* pulls together these interests in a traditional tale of man-against-nature. His respect for the natural world, both its beauties and its terrors, is reflected in his account of herding cattle in a remote area of the frontier. Discussions might focus on the realism of the tale, from its portrait of Canadian cowboy life to the different ways different cattle are handled. Another approach would be to examine it as a contribution to literature about cowboys.

Does its style, its imagery, or its characterization make it something more than just another routine story of the spoiled boy becoming a man through the hardships of cowboy life?

1. Rusty's romantic views of being a cowboy are ended by the actual experience of riding herd. Even so, is *Genesis* itself a romantic tale of adventure and a boy becoming a man?
2. What does the title *Genesis* suggest about the novella? Is there any sort of Biblical beginning in it?
3. Why does Rusty have so many silly ideas about how to prove himself a man and earn the respect of the other cowboys?
4. Do Rusty's experiences really change him? Is he truly no longer a spoiled, selfish young man by the end of *Genesis*?

Given the opportunity, would he still jeer working sailors?

5. Are there any indications for whether Rusty will continue to work as a cowboy or quit to do something else?
6. Are threats posed by nature overstated in *Genesis*?
7. Does *Genesis* tell you anything about herding practices in Canada that you did not know before? How informative is the novella?
8. The events in *Genesis* are very vividly described. Would the novella make a good basis for a motion picture? What in the narrative would you have to change to make such a motion picture appealing to a wide audience?
9. Why are experienced cowboys caught off guard by the blizzards?



10. Stegner's fiction is notable for its complex, often experimental narratives, yet *Genesis* seems to have a direct, smooth narrative. What does this tell you about the author?





## Literary Precedents

Stegner chose to go pretty much his own direction in writing his stories of the West, and they feature much more depth of characterization, setting, and storytelling than the fiction of Zane Grey and Louis L'Amour or the Hopalong Cassidy adventures. The epic grandeur of Stegner's western fiction echoes that found in *The Virginian* by Owen Wister (1902; see separate entry) and the Natty Bumppo novels by James Fenimore Cooper. As in *Genesis*, Cooper's books in particular examine how people actually lived as they moved westward and show a reverence for the natural world similar to that in Stegner's novella. Charles Portis's *True Grit* (1968; see separate entry) shares in common with *Genesis* a tone that is more realistic than romantic and characters who are self-reliant and tough. *Lonesome Dove* (1985; see separate entry) and other fiction by Larry McMurtry share the hard-bitten tone of *Genesis* and similarly idealized characters, but have point of view that is more romantic than Stegner's Modernist novella. In general, the most successful writers of the western American and Canadian experience have taken great care in the authenticity of their details, not only accurately depicting historical events, but even the smallest aspects of daily life such as eating utensils and variations in harnesses. Louis L'Amour may be unequalled in this aspect of writing westerns, but the keen-eyed reader will spot the careful accuracy of Stegner's details not only in *Genesis*, but in most of his writings.

## Related Titles

Stegner tended to view his subject matter in epic proportions, and the title *Genesis* implies through its biblical allusion an epic vision of growth and maturity.

Lionel Cullen confronts nature at its most violent; the blizzards are almost like the breath of God sweeping across the vast Canadian prairie. By confronting nature at its most elemental, Cullen finds himself stripped down to the most elemental aspects of his own personality; it is as if nature were tearing forth his latent capacity for courage and responsibility. In Stegner's westerns, characters often search for themselves or run away from themselves in the West. In *The Big Rack Candy Mountain* (1943; see separate entry) Bo flees into the wilderness whenever civilized life becomes too much to bear; he takes comfort in the elemental existence of surviving on one's own, without anyone to rely on. *Genesis* seems to be a rejection of Bo's point of view. After all, Bo does not mature from his experiences.

In *Genesis*, Cullen grows in part because of his reliance upon other men; without their need for his help as a partner in survival, he would not learn responsibility, and he would not find the courage that was buried deep within him. As in *Angle of Repose* (1971; see separate entry) in *Genesis* a person's worth is not to be measured in wealth, aristocratic birth, or in education. In *Angle of Repose*, Oliver has opportunities to become wealthy; through his wife, he could hobnob with effete, upper-class, intellectuals, but chooses the company of frontiersmen and engineers. For much of the novel—maybe all of it—his wife Susan does not understand that his manhood comes not from wealth but from his steady reliability as husband, father, and friend. In *Genesis*, Cullen changes from spoiled rich brat who made fun of working-class people to someone who is beginning adulthood through understanding that it is his caring for others and trustworthiness that make him a good man.

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