



RECAPITULATION

"Wonderful . . . one comes out aware of universal human feelings that have nothing to do with time." —The Christian Science Monitor

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Wallace Stegner

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The moving sequel to the bestselling **Big Rock Candy Mountain**. Bruce Mason returns to Salt Lake City not for his aunt's funeral, but to encounter after forty-five years the place he fled in bitterness. A successful statesman and diplomat, Mason had buried his awkward and lonely childhood, sealed himself off from the thrills and torments of adolescence to become a figure who commanded international respect.

But the realities of the present recede in the face of the ghosts of his past. As he makes the perfunctory arrangements for the funeral, we enter with him on an intensely personal and painful inner pilgrimage: we meet the father who darkened his childhood, the mother whose support was both redeeming and embarrassing, the friend who drew him into the respectable world of which he so craved to be a part, and the woman he nearly married. In this profoundly moving book Stegner has drawn an intimate portrait of a man understanding how his life has been shaped by experiences seemingly remote and inconsequential.

Recapitulation Details

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From Reader Review Recapitulation for online ebook

Greg says

I feel like this book was written for me. But that's only partially due to the fact that it's the story of a man returning to his boyhood home of Salt Lake City after a long absence, and I began reading it on my first visit to Salt Lake in nearly four years. There were so many references to the city and its surrounds and its culture that I can't imagine anyone who hadn't grown up along the Wassatch Front to even comprehend it. When Stegner describes an advancing thunderstorm as seen from the Salt Lake City Cemetery by writing, "The southern end of the Oquirrh was gone, and a wall of black rain was advancing through Murray." I not only know the scene, but I know what the air feels like, and what color the lake is, and what the slope of the mountain feels like underfoot. And I love Stegner's description of the Salt Lake Temple: "Spiney as a horned toad." I'm sure non-native readers can appreciate Recapitulation in the same way I loved Middlesex without ever having set foot in Detroit, or Love in the Time of Cholera without even knowing what Cartagena looks like. But Stegner's prose coupled with my own nostalgia made this as vivid a book as I've ever read.

Marita says

Bruce Mason spent his life carrying an awful load of emotional baggage.

Forty five years after the events in The Big Rock Candy Mountain Bruce Mason returns to Salt Lake City for an aunt's funeral. His presence in Salt Lake City unleashes a torrent of memories. The city has changed a great deal, but wherever he goes he finds himself confronted by his past.

That is as much as I'll say of the plot in order not to spoil it for those who wish to read these two novels about the Mason family. The writing is superb, so here are some quotes (within spoiler tags so that you may read it or not as you choose):

Quotes

(view spoiler)

ElSeven says

I'm not sure what to think about this book. On one hand it's as well written as anything that Stegner has written, but on the other hand reading this book feels like reading a confession. It's an intensely private book, an exposed raw nerve, and in reading it I more than once got the impression that writing this must have been a painful experience, like digging into flesh to extract a buried thorn that though it has healed over, still causes pain. In this way, it wasn't a pleasant read; too voyeuristic, too close to the bone.

That is not to say that this book was all gloom. Bruce's nostalgic rambles through Salt Lake looking for remnants of his past were equally nostalgic for me - the mountains, the suburbs, the major landmarks are places I know, and finding familiar things presented to you through different eyes is always a welcome experience. There is also the familiarity of the wedding Bruce attends in Emery County, which brings to mind countless family, and extended functions, from the reprobate youths sneaking cigarettes out of sight of the adults, to the kitchen full of aunts; the sullen children upset with each other for unknowable reasons; the ice cream coolers full of hand churned ice cream. These things are so familiar to me that I believe I was the model for that twelve year old boy who was eating like the wedding dinner would be his last square meal before the Fourth of July.

This is where the conflict lies for me. This book is at once comfortable, and unsettling, and I'm not sure how to feel about it as a whole. I'm not sure I'd recommend it, but also I don't regret having read it. Pick it up if you'd like, you might enjoy it, but if you do decided to read this, be sure to have read *Big Rock Candy Mountain* beforehand, as *Recapitulation* is a sort of coda to that book, and I don't think it works without the foundation of the first novel. But even if you don't want to read *Recapitulation* you should still read *Big Rock Candy Mountain* because it's an amazing book.

As a post script, I'd like to note that this book also contains reworkings for two of Stegner's short stories - *The Blue-Winged Teal*, and *Maiden in a Tower*. Also, what is up with the photo on the cover of this edition of the book? How hard did they have to look to find a photo of Salt Lake that they could crop the temple out of? Odd that they are at such pains to remove the traditional symbol of Mormonism from a the cover of a book in which Mormons play such a large role (is it ironic that the Church Office Building is still in frame? Some sort of oblique statement on the state of the modern church? Who could tell.). Who takes a picture looking west in Salt Lake anyway? The Oquirrhs are pretty, sure, but the Wasatch range is the proper backdrop for that city. Bad form Penguin books. Bad form.

Tracy says

This book is a sequel to *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. It was good to get some more closure on those characters. These two books are based on Wallace Stegner's real life, although they are fiction and the names are changed. His father was hard to read about in both books, because he was harsh, unloving, and abusive. His mother was a long-suffering, kind woman. Their life was dysfunctional, and it sometimes broke my heart to read about it.

I loved the part where his mom signed him up for a tennis club to try and get him to stop reading and make some friends. A boy from school ran into him there and taught him to play. The Stegner character ends up

spending most of his older teen years at that boy's house and among his family.

I also liked how the Stegner character, looking back on his teen and college years, sees things differently than he did as a youth. He can see what he did wrong, instead of just how he was wronged. He becomes a lot softer towards everyone from his past. It was a kind of redemption for them all.

This is the kind of book that stays with you in the back of your mind for a long time.

Joe says

After reading **BIG ROCK CANDY MOUNTAIN**, I read **RECAPITULATION**, which is the return of Bruce Mason to Salt Lake City after many years. There is so much history of Mason in **BIG ROCK**, that I can't say how this book would stand on its own. Having had the fortune of reading **BIG ROCK** first, **RECAPITULATION** is so compelling. It is as if the wind turned the pages for me.

Stegner reminds us that our lives, nor those of others can be judged in a meeting; rather it takes the understanding of generations to begin to understand where a person is coming from.

Our lives are so complex, and Stegner lets us know that we are not alone in all of our thoughts, actions, decisions, and compromises. Even the most confident amongst us most likely has deep conflicts as they move through life. Here we see an outwardly super successful man that entering the later years of his life is still running from the shame of his family. It keeps him an island, which separates him from humanity. Very sad indeed to not feel a part of the whole.

Wallace Stegner is a master.

Jeanette "Astute Crabbist" says

This is like a coda written forty years after the symphony. If you haven't read *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, I suggest you do so. Then, while it is still fresh in your mind, read *Recapitulation*. It fills in details left out of the first book and lets you get to know "Brucie" a lot better as he struggles through puberty and beyond in Salt Lake City. If you've grown attached to the Mason family through *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, you'll find yourself wanting even more, as I did.

Bruce Mason returns to Salt Lake City forty-five years after fleeing in anger and pain. As he passes by the old landmarks, the memories of his formative years begin to coil around him and eventually crowd his mind and haunt his dreams. The novel is floaty and dreamy and sepia-toned, taking Bruce back to events and feelings from the 1920s-30s in no particular order. Stegner's approach is very true to the nature of memory and nostalgia, including the need to whitewash experiences or downplay our culpability for things that went sour.

I thought this was going to be the one Stegner novel I'd get through without crying, but he got me on the next to last page. I'm not sorry about that. I probably would have been disappointed if I'd finished it dry-eyed.

Dan says

Thomas Wolfe wrote a novel to tell us that we can't go home again. In *Recapitulation* Wallace Stegner tells us why, when we do go home again, we're probably better off remembering the people and places and times but letting the past remain past. Bruce Mason returns to Salt Lake City 45 years after he left it as a 20 year old. Now he returns to preside over his aunt's burial. The occasion stirs to mind the past--filled with a mixture of longing and disgust. While home again Bruce intends to look up his old friend Joe. But in the end he never does. In a movingly symbolic ending Bruce decides that present and future surpass any need or desire to look back. There is closure in *Recapitulation*. And perhaps a coming to terms. Bruce is 60 something in *Recapitulation*. But by story's end Stegner suggests that Bruce has finally chosen to let go those parts of his past that have long bound him. Noted author William Faulkner once wrote to suggest that the past isn't finished with us; it hasn't even begun. Wallace Stegner's Bruce Mason might argue that the past must be finished with us or else there is no future.

Kay says

I should have liked this book more. I anticipated the sequel to "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" as I so badly wanted to know what happened to Bruce. I could certainly relate to the setting in Salt Lake City- as I could picture most of the landmarks, streets and buildings he described. I was also interested in his frequent references to the "Mormon" church and culture. I also could certainly relate to the theme of returning to where one experienced losing their first love, as I had a similar experience when I returned to the college town where I lost my first love many years after. I was completely stunned with the wash of emotion I experienced just being in that setting. It brought it all back- experiences I hadn't thought about in years. Stegner captured those emotions and feelings so well. Returning offers a closure that you didn't even know you needed. Stegner's writing and turn of a phrase gives me chills. But this book was a bit slow and trudging to me. I think that's because it was mostly flashback, so the present story was slow and it was easy to lose the story thread as it wasn't told chronologically. But I guess that's how memories come- not necessarily in order. Hey, I'm liking the book better as I contemplate and review it. What I think the problem really is: I'm not intelligent enough for this genius of a writer, so he'd lose me- sometimes for pages at a time. I'm sure if I hadn't had to hurry through to get the book back to the library, and I took time to really think through those difficult passages, I'd find depth and spine-tingling truths therein. I feel certain of that, as that has certainly been the case in every other Stegner book I have read. Overall, at least for this reading, I would rate it 3.5.

Jill says

I love Stegner and don't know why it has taken me so long to read something else of his (most likely because I feared disappointment after adoring *Angle of Repose*). His writing is beautiful and vivid and he had a gift for conveying nostalgia, longing and regret. I liked this book and enjoyed that it was set in Salt Lake City.

"The vision breaks and tears, dissolving. Below him the trees rattle and are still. Mason feels around in his mind like a blind man reassuring himself about the objects in a familiar room. The web of associations, the dense entangled feelings, are still, after an absence of two thirds of a lifetime, as intensely there as a rattlesnake under a bush. Not the girl herself; she is no more to him than a rueful shrug. But the associations, the sights and sounds and smells that accompanied her, the vivid sensuousness of that time of his life, the romantic readiness, the emotions as responsive as wind chimes--those he does miss." (p. 115-116)

Chrissie says

I feel like if I had read this right after *Big Rock Candy Mountain* I might have given it five stars. With a clearer memory of that book, I think I might have felt like this was more of a continuation/completion than a....well....a recapitulation.

But maybe that was the point. It is interesting to think about someone telling the same story at different points in their life and how the tellings would be different.

Suzanne says

I was first introduced to this wonderful author with his classic, *Big Rock Candy Mountain*. The same characters of a boy and his parents continue in this work, as the now grown Bruce Mason, returns home to Salt Lake City following the death of an aunt - the last of his living family.

Stegner is a master of prose. His lyrical writing style gently carries you into the world of Mason's past, hovering around the year 1929. Amazingly, despite the era, Stegner's foray into his character's thoughts and emotions, has the ability to strike a chord with modern readers - the subject matter being truly timeless. Mason confronts a past and people which, although painful, represent a pivotal time in his life. It's a time when he realizes that he is not doomed to repeat the sins of his father, but that his life could be much, much more. Recapitulation is a recollection of the singular events in Bruce Mason's past, but only Mason himself realizes their importance.

A beautiful work, and one which I highly recommend.

Tim says

The perfect case for a 3.5-star rating. Stegner loses focus a bit in the first half of "Recapitulation" but saves things nicely in the second half, so I bumped this up. His prose is typically fine, and late in his life Stegner wrote old characters better than just about anybody. His protagonist here, the boy from "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" now a diplomat on the down side of his life on this earth, is less crotchety than usual for Stegner but still is a fine study. Here, in contrast to several of his later books, "Recapitulation" is told in the third person.

I'm not quite sure why Penguin Books chooses not to tell us that the main character is from a book as popular as "The Big Rock Candy Mountain" and that this is a sequel of sorts. Oh, well.

There is frankly much, much less of the "here and now" in the story than I was expecting. Much of the book is Bruce Mason's reminiscences of his difficult father, or of his college days, or of his long-lost love as Bruce moves through Salt Lake City as he prepares for a funeral of a family member he barely cared about. It doesn't work all the time, but Stegner's descriptive powers and occasionally scintillating turn of phrase save the day.

All in all, fifth or sixth of the six Stegner novels I've read ("All the Little Live Things" is first) but certainly worth a try.

Ellie says

This is a good book, but not great like "The Big Rock Candy Mountain." It's only half the length, but felt twice as long. I wasn't compelled to read on like I was with the earlier book. I would definitely read "Big Rock..." first to get to know the characters. "Recapitulation" fills in gaps from the earlier book, told in flashbacks. The character has returned to Salt Lake City 45 years after leaving, looks up old haunts and the memories come flooding back. I was disappointed in the one item from Bruce's to-do list that he fails to fulfill in the end (without giving away what that was).

Petrea says

This novel was written some 35 years after Stegner wrote Big Rock Candy Mountain, and it is a return to the same characters and some of the themes of the first book. These were both based on Stegner's own family and tell the stories of his parents and brother--and himself, as Bruce. Now Bruce returns to Salt Lake in 1977 and notices all the changes since he left in 1932--also does a lot of remembering, and coming to terms with himself, his friends and especially his parents.

I don't know if he intended it to come out this way, but it seems to me that the son had developed a lot of the characteristics of the father--not so violent, but just as self centered--maybe more so. At least the father had been capable of love, even though he often didn't express it well. The son becomes a tightly restrained man who can't let anyone really get to know him, or be close to him--maybe he feared that he would cause damage if he loved someone. He's hopelessly sentimental, but only in his own mind. At least he does finally tie up some loose ends from the first book.

As always with Stegner, very well written. Lovely descriptive scenes.

Deyanne says

I savor Stegner's work and this book particularly so beautifully and aptly describes Salt Lake City which is where I was born and continue to live. Though I read it long ago, I still remember rereading sentences for their beauty and nostalgia. This is a small little book I will reread.

Craig says

Anyone choosing to read "Recapitulation" is advised to read Stegner's The Big Rock Candy Mountain first before tackling this sequel with occurs some 45 years later. Bruce Mason, the sole survivor of a dysfunctional family, returns to Salt Lake City (the city of his youth), to bury an Aunt. Before the funeral, he revisits his youthful haunts and reminisces about prior relationships: his parents and brother, school friends, his only love (Nola); he reflects on things that were and things that could have been. In a sense, Bruce is

"everyman", who in the twilight of his life searches for purpose and meaning - or maybe just reflection. Stegner is a brilliant writer and interposes different stylistic techniques as he jumps back and forth between Bruce's youth (circa 1930-1932) and the present day (1977). Stegner himself lived much of his early life in Salt Lake City and his narrative makes numerous specific references to places and events in the early 1930s. Anyone familiar with the City of the Saints (past or present) will recognize the streets and locals which bear the same names today. An interesting psychological read, and from an historical perspective, it was a very nostalgic read.

Joe Dobrow says

Favorite quotes from Recapitulation:

"But Bruce Mason walked double. Inside him, moving with the same muscles and feeling with the same nerves and sweating through the same pores, went a thin brown youth, volatile, impulsive, never at rest, not so much a person as a possibility, or a bundle of possibilities: subject to enthusiasm and elation and exuberance and occasional great black moods, stubborn, capable of scheming but often astonished by consequences, a boy vulnerable to wonder, awe, worship, devotion, hatred, guilt, vanity, shame, ambition, dreams, treachery; a boy avid for acceptance and distinction, secretive and a blabbermouth, life-crazy and hence girl-crazy, a show-off who could be withered by a contemptuous word or look, a creature overflowing with brash self-confidence one minute and oppressed by its own worthlessness the next; a vessel of primary sensations undiluted by experience, wisdom, or fatigue."

"On the merest glance, he is younger than she -- younger in years, younger in manner and self-command. He is blond where she is dark, his eyes are blue where hers are brown, he is thin and hyperactive by contrast with her composure, darkly tanned where she is golden. She makes a center, he orbits it. She smiles, he laughs. He talks with his mouth, eyes, hands, body; she listens. He whips around her as if she were egg and he spermatozoon. Utter opposites, they make a one: Yin and Yang. Their force field deflects intrusions. From the first note of the band until now, they have avoided trading a single dance."

"What could she have felt when, out of his arrogant inexperience, out of his sheer undergraduate enthusiasm for hard doctrine, or the self-pity that had made him believe he was suffering's biographer, he plucked things like this from the great grab bag of Western culture and demanded that she read and ponder them? He might as well have suggested that she learn Turkish. Her mind operated on a direct hookup with the senses, not by abstract ideas...."

"Question: Why the mule headed inertia? Answer: In the first place, he was mule-headed. He hated to back up, start over, change direction. To this day he drove that way, gerade aus like a German, despising the people who dart from lane to lane. Moreover, he was used to delayed rewards. He knew something about having to work for what he wanted, and even more about frustrations and disappointments. He was a digger, but there was a fatalist in him, too. He mistrusted the rewards that he would break his neck to win. He half expected to fail even though experience should have taught him that most of the time he did not. In his bones he knew that the world owed him nothing. Some part of him was always preconditioned to lose. And though he felt himself superior to his background, and capable of some vague unspecified distinction, he knew himself unworthy. He was a sticker because it was easier to dig in and be overrun than to attack and be repulsed."

"The quintessentially deculturated American, born artless and without history into a world of opportunity, Bruce Mason must acquire in a single lifetime the intellectual sophistication and the cultural confidence that luckier ones absorb through their pores from earliest childhood, and unluckier ones never even miss. He is a high jumper asked to jump from below ground level and without a run, and because he is innocent and has the temperament of an achiever, he will half kill himself trying."

"Both have the beaks of hawks and eyes that bore into the camera like the eyes of zealot grandfathers in old tintypes."

[He awakens just before reliving the consummation of a relationship in a dream]

"The trouble with the censor is that it knows too much. It has another, and much longer, and presumably far more important life to remember and keep under control. It is wary about accepting the illusion of wholeheartedness that would have to accompany this uncensored dream. It knows that the girl and first love are both victims, and so is the boy who took them joyriding. They cluster at the edge of consciousness like crosses erected by the roadside at the place of a fatal accident."

What truly shone out of that golden portrait, as out of Holly herself, was not glamour but innocence. Under the sheath she was positively virginal, a girl from Parowan who had made the big step to city excitements but remained a girl from Parowan. If you cracked the enamel of her sophistication you found a delighted little girl playing Life. (p. 11)

...he feels how the whole disorderly unchronological past hovers just beyond the curtain of the present, attaching itself to any scent, sound, touch, or random word that will let it get back in. As a stronger gust rattles through the tops of the cottonwoods below him, he stops dead still to listen. Memory is instantly tangible, a thrill of adrenalin in the blood, a prickle of gooseflesh on the arms. (p. 114)

Below the lawn, spread along the fossil beach terrace of the lake that thousands of years ago filled the valley, was a long hanging darkness, the playing field where in paleozoic gym-class softball games he had patrolled an invariable, contemptuous right field and batted ninth. (p. 120)

Abruptly the capitol winked out. Its afterimage pulsed, a blue hole in the darkness, and before it had faded, the temple, too, went dark, cued to the same late clock. Something invisible but palpable, some recognition or reassurance,, arced from the dark desert across the city and joined the dark loom of the Wasatch. In one enfolding instant, desert and mountains wrapped closer around the valley and around him their protective isolation.

Seen and unseen, lighted and dark, it was all effortlessly present. Here was a living space once accepted and used, relied on without uncertainty or even awareness, security frozen like the expression on a face at the moment of a snapshot. This territory contained and limited a history, personal and social, in which he had once made himself at home. This was his place – first his problem, then his oyster, and now the museum or diorama where early versions of him were preserved. (p. 120)

The provinces export manpower, yes, as surely as atmospheric highs blow toward atmospheric lows. But the brains that are drawn outward to the good schools, the good jobs, the opportunities, don't necessarily initiate their move. It can be as unavoidable as being born. They feel themselves being rotated into position. Even if they could know what they're going to find outside, all that pain, blood, glaring light, sudden cold, forceps, scissors, hands tying Boy Scout knots in their umbilicus, they could neither prevent nor delay it. Head first,

leg first, butt first, out they go. (p. 166)

Quickly he shuffled through the others. Only eight – one roll from his old bellows Kodak. One print was so over-exposed that all detail was washed out. Two were of a crowd – the wedding crowd – spread across the grass under the cottonwoods, self-conscious countrified strangers not even forgotten because never known, but once studied gingerly as potential relatives by marriage.... Buck's hard face is a younger version of his father's, curly dark hair an earlier stage of curly gray. Both have the beaks of hawks and eyes that bore into the camera like the eyes of sea lot grandfathers in old tintypes. (p. 185)

Laysee says

As an ardent admirer of Wallace Stegner, I was thrilled to learn that he has written a sequel to "The Big Rock Candy Mountain". Whereas there is no candy in his earlier book, there is a surfeit of recall in "Recapitulation".

Bruce Mason returns to Salt Lake, the city of his youth, to bury his paternal aunt, a relative he barely knows and for whom he feels no affection. He is initially "flooded with delighted recollection" but soon finds himself mired in memories of the last 45 years. The young boy Bruce, determined to flee the tyranny of his father's irascible anger and break away from the shame of his family's illegal business, has since gained an enviable social standing. But the former ambassador remains bound to his past which has a stranglehold over him.

There is no action in this story. All the drama unfolds in Bruce's recollections over the course of about a day. The trip back to Salt Lake revives implacable memories not only of the trivial and sentimental (including adolescent humiliations) but also of deep-seated pain and shame. Bruce realizes he has unfinished business and old scores to settle with his father. In this sequel, one sees events in TBRCM from Bruce's perspective and gets acquainted with Nola Gordon, the love of his life, and Joe Mulder, his one true friend.

This novel is an insightful exploration of the workings of memory. Visiting parts of the city he frequented in his youth, Bruce is struck by the realization that he is no longer the same person even as he appraises a familiar past with the same eyes. "New shapes took over from old ones. Memory had to be - didn't it? - a series of overlays."

Thematically, it reminds me of Julian Barnes's "The Sense of An Ending". What one remembers is, perhaps of necessity and self-preservation, not always a faithful account of events that actually transpired. In Bruce's experience, recalling the most challenging years of his struggles compels him to rearrange or reshape memories to render them tolerable. With Barnes, one is left in suspense and the truth is elusive; with Stegner, the truth defies attempts at reconstruction.

There are, in typical Stegner fashion, memorable lines. Of his childhood, Bruce has this to say: His childhood had been a disease that had produced no antibodies. Forget for a minute to be humorous or ironic about it, and it could flare up like a chronic sinus." Of his destiny and ours, Bruce observes rightly: "...that it

is easy enough to recover from a girl, who represents to some extent a choice. It is not so easy to recover from parents, who are fate." Of lost friendship and love, he reflects: "What they had once shared was indelible as if carved on a headstone, and was not, after so long a gap, to be changed or renewed."

Stegner is true to form in the strength of his prose style. It is always a treat to read his superb way with words. As a story this is less compelling than TBRCM largely because it is all introspective. Stegner says this of Bruce, "The feelings of that miserable time came out of the gray past and overwhelmed him." It overwhelmed me too. (view spoiler)

A Stegner fan can read "Recapitulation" with a renewed appreciation of how much he understands human nature and holds up bits of life that we cannot fail to recognize as reflections of ourselves.

Bobbi says

This was the second book in Stegner's semi-autobiographical novels and follows *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*. It was written 45 years after the first and picks up where the first one leaves off, except in flashbacks from an older Bruce Mason (Stegner) as he returns to Salt Lake City for his aunt's funeral. Although his writing is as gorgeous as usual, the story bogs down, particularly in the first half. Mason is in college and then in law school as the story progresses through a failed romance, his inability to find his purpose in life, and the ongoing trials with his family life. He finally comes close to accepting his abusive father and gets some closure. Although not as good as *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, it's still a good read for those who like Stegner.

Greg Brozeit says

Stay away from this book if you are young. I can't see a reader under 30 years of age relating to this story. But if you are in your mid-forties or older, you might like it. *Recapitulation* will certainly make you uncomfortable to learn that there are universal truths about the way we remember and interpret our own pasts. Or maybe you will find that comforting in an uncomfortable way.

Recapitulation is a sequel—if a book written more than 35 years later can be considered a sequel—to Stegner's *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, which is the best work of fiction I've read this year. The surviving member of the Mason family, Bruce, returns to his Salt Lake City "home" to take care of affairs after his aunt died. It's been 45 years since he's set foot in town. We learn that he has become a well-respected American diplomat in the Middle East since we last saw him as a student at the University of Minnesota law school. This is not a trip he wants to take; his relationship with his aunt was mostly obligatory and his memories of this place are not fond. When he arrives, he wanders around the town to see some of places he lived and where his only real friend lived. Every place conjures up memories he has long repressed or forgotten.

Bruce resolves to visit with his one good friend, Jim Mulder, the only one besides his mother who treated him with unconditional respect, who genuinely cared about him. But he keeps putting it off. After all, while he was traveling the world, his friend never left Salt Lake City and they didn't stay in touch. Would it be possible to have a reunion with Jim after all this time, after they had grown up in such different worlds, and was he even alive? Bruce remembers their times together. He even conjures up fictional conversations he

thought they might have had.

He remembers his one close girlfriend, Nola, probably the only love of his life. When he opens an old box Nola left with that his aunt 45 years earlier, the mementos, photographs, letters and ribbons bring her back to life. She was a Mormon, albeit not very strong in her faith. He was not. Even though they broke up—he wanted to escape Utah, she was bound to it—Stegner conjures up thoughts of “What if?” although Bruce never directly asks the question.

But Bruce’s strongest memories are about his father, Harry “Bo” Mason, of whom Bruce has a hate that has haunted him throughout his life, whether he was aware of it or not. Although his father has been dead for 45 years, he still has a grip on Bruce’s psyche. As different and confrontational as he and his father were, Bruce can’t help but still be intimidated or angered every time his father’s memory surfaces. Their final reckoning is arguably the most lasting memory of the story.

I didn’t know about this book until I finished reading *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* but instinctively knew I had to read it before the memories of the Mason family began to fade. It can be read as a stand-alone novel, but I think many of the nuances of Bruce’s thoughts and decisions would be lost, or more appropriately, never understood by the reader. (As an unbefitting aside, it’s kind of like jumping into the epic television series *Breaking Bad*; you have to commit to watch it from the beginning, in sequence, to really appreciate how good it is.) The sequel is not as gripping or dramatic, but it is very satisfying nonetheless. If you are starting to gray or forgot what you looked like before the gray set in, I think you will relate to Bruce’s regrets, fears and experiences. As in all great literature, the time and place of the plot is less important than the eternal truths Stegner’s writing exposes.
