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Photograph by George Sakkestad

Character Counts: Lynn Stegner in the garden of her Santa Cruz home. "The older you get, the more you realize one of the most important things you can bring to the book, you can bring to the task at hand, is humility."

A Sense Of Place

Local writer Lynn Stegner's third novel hits the stands in nine months. Will she finally get the notice she deserves?

By John Yewell

LEST YOU THINK a famous name buys automatic entrée to the literary tribe, here's a cautionary tale. Fearing her name would be more hindrance than help, Santa Cruz novelist Lynn Stegner--daughter-in-law of the late Wallace Stegner, famed author of *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* and *Angle of Repose*--resorted to an assumed name when shopping her first novel to publishers.

"Publishing a book with the name Stegner on it, that's not easy," she says. "In fact, *Undertow* [her 1993 first novel] I sent out without the name Stegner on it because I thought it might make it

more difficult to get it published."

Why?

"Because I think there's an automatic ascension in standards," she explains. "They weren't reading the first novel of a 35-year-old woman, they were reading Wallace Stegner's daughter-in-law.

"I'm not afraid of high standards," she hastens to add, "but they may have made them a little too high."

And there was another consideration. Forget greased skids, connections or even presumed marketability. The game afoot here was straight out of *How to Marry a Millionaire*: Lynn Stegner wanted her work to be appreciated for what it is, not who she is--or might be perceived to be. Finally, she got a bite, but then an odd twist occurred. The publisher, Baskerville, found her "name" somehow ... *unappealing*.

"I sent it out under Lynn Marie, my first name and my middle name, and they replied, 'We really want to take your book, but your last name ...,'" she recalls with a chuckle. "And I said, 'That's not really my last name; my last name is Stegner.' They thought that was really fantastic."

Stegner says that *Undertow*, like many first novels, suffers from being "overwrought," but that didn't prevent it from being nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, the National Book Award and the First Fiction Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. It was followed in 1995 by her novel *Fata Morgana*--also nominated for a National Book Award.

Fine Examples

STEGNER--who, with husband, writer and former UCSC literature professor Page Stegner, splits her time between Santa Cruz and Vermont--needn't have worried about being judged too harshly. In conversation, I quickly realize that there is only one candidate for the role of toughest critic in

Lynn Stegner's literary life: herself.

Those high standards are revealed in the carefully drawn and living portraits of her books, in which plot is subordinated to people and the places in which they live. She calls her work "character driven" and expresses little patience for writers who try to impress readers with their command of cultural references and icons at the expense of a good story.

"That's the kind of writing in which they want you to see and feel and appreciate all the stitch work," Stegner says. "I think a writer whose aim is understanding some new truth about the human condition wants to let the story take the stage and let the story arrive at some bright or well-lit understanding that wasn't there in the darkness of the beginning of the story. That's why it's important to stay as a writer in the background and not try to display your skills with language or your skills with plot."

Lynn Stegner credits her much-honored father-in-law (*Angle of Repose* recently made the Modern Library's list of the top 100 novels of the 20th century) for setting a "fine example" both as a writer and as a human being. In an essay on "Wally" published after his death, Lynn Stegner described "his beliefs, his methods ... his disposition to affection" and how these things were employed in the service of "larger concerns, a debt to honesty and truth" in both his life and his art. She could just as easily have been describing her own work.

Husband Page, who has written three novels but now concentrates on nonfiction, serves as an invaluable editor and sounding board.

"He does read everything, usually after I've written quite a lot of it. I don't rush in with every page," she explains. "We really respect each other's editing. He may grumble about what I say, or I may be depressed all morning because he's told me

I have to rewrite a whole scene, but I know on some visceral level he's right, and he knows I'm right, so it works."

Carrier of Change

THE PROOF IS the work itself. Lynn Stegner's just-completed third novel, *Pipers at the Gates of Dawn*, will be published in August 2000 by the University Press of New England. Written as three interlocking novellas, "Hired Man," "Pipers at the Gates of Dawn" and "Indian Summer," the book takes as its title a modified chapter heading from Kenneth Grahame's *The Wind in the Willows*. Stegner says the "pipers" refer to "the illusions that all of us create in order to get through the day or get through our lives."

The stories all take place in the same year and in the small town of Harrow, Vt., where, she writes, "things have a way of weaving through people and lives, and the longer you're in a place the tighter the weave gets." That's not a bad description of the novellas themselves and how they work together--sharing some characters and places, yet each distinct. Stegner achieves a fine narrative balance.

"What I intended to do was to try to talk about community and the loss of community in this country--in New England and in Vermont particularly," Stegner says. "Into this village comes a stranger, who is a hired man in the first novella. He is the man from nowhere, a man from the global village, as it were. He's a carrier of change, but it's negative change, or it's indifferent change. In each of the novellas, he catalyzes events in a way that partially undoes the community that's been stable for 200 years--[by] his self-interest, his complete lack of a participatory attitude toward the town."

The man, Sam Chase, does bring change to the village by becoming, as one character calls him, "a human chameleon" who adapts to people's weaknesses. In one case, he feeds a man's need for

alcohol, which contributes to a paralyzing accident; in another, he weakens an already crumbling marriage through seduction; in the third, he impregnates a young girl who plays an important role for male characters in two of the novellas.

Stegner achieves a startling success in her language, her portrayal of the character of Vermont. This is especially true in the novella "Hired Man," which is written from the point of view of a 17-year-old boy. This is where that old saw about inspiration vs. perspiration comes into play, because that achievement was purchased through hard work and research--she spent a year milking cows, among other things, to make the material authentic.

"I felt so presumptuous trying to write about a culture that wasn't mine," she says admiringly of her subject. "Vermont is such a distinctive, unique culture. The people are taciturn, big-hearted, independent, liberal, long-suffering, stoical."

Stegner can turn a phrase on a dime, and the character of the prose suits the locale--part of her purpose. It is clipped, crisp and clear, sometimes dark, but with an obsidianlike edge.

"[T]he Vermont book is very lean, very pared down and just as stark as a Vermont winter landscape," she explains, "because that's the culture in which the story's alive. I wanted the language and the form of the story to be married to the content."

The story is told, to paraphrase one character, as much by the length or quality of a character's silences as by what he says. Take, for example, this description, as her 17-year-old protagonist in "Hired Man" becomes flustered in the presence of a girl he has fallen for:

Not one thing suitable for saying materialized in Ray Rinaldi's mind; it felt like a padded cell up there--nothing could get in, and there was nothing in it to get out except bizarre images having to do with Heidi's

clean skin. In desperation, he indulged in a long elaborate stretch, giving the back of his neck a vigorous rub, then he began a close study of his fingers--which only brought back to mind her skin.

Or this description of a Harrow kitchen, which as a town hosts a mix of summer residents and old-time Vermonters:

[I]tems of cookery hung, most of it dented or stained in ways that were attractive to visitors from the cities down country where perfection was a burden not unlike a second job. In Harrow, it was the plain flawed thing that charmed, and perfection a tactless error of judgment.

Or this shot at the clash of styles in Harrow voiced by a female character. You can almost hear Stegner herself squirming at her own early foibles in Vermont:

I had forgotten how uncomfortable I always felt trying to engage the locals in conversations, how chatty and foolish and vaguely puppylike a Westerner came off sounding in the presence of the grave and observing Vermonter.

And in matters of the heart, Stegner's vision is crystal clear:

Why didn't it last, why had happiness so little endurance, why had they as a couple so few reserves? Why were they always tripping on the best of their feelings for each other, and allowing the worst to pool around them like a shallow brackish water that could not find its outlet, the way clogged, the way lost?

Finally, she has even nailed clipped Yankee speech. Witness how a character describes a hat he's considering buying--and ends up saying more about himself than about the hat: "Saw a brown one I might sneak 'bout in."



Photograph by George Sakkestad

Publishing Sins

AS WITH HER FIRST BOOK, publication of *Pipers at the Gates of Dawn* did not come easy. Despite winning the Faulkner Award and receiving an honorable mention in the New Millennium Awards for the first novella, "Hired Man," Stegner says the length of time it took her to find a publisher nearly caused her to give up writing.

"I did the best I could, and it wasn't being taken. So I was thinking that I wouldn't write anymore," she says. It turned out to be a test of faith.

"A week later, they [University Press of New England] called and said they really wanted this book. So it was good that it happened in that order. Sometimes it's important for writers to be tested, so they know they're writing for the right reasons."

The experience clarified for Stegner the right reasons but also reinforced many of the wrong reasons some books get published in this country. Publishers, says Stegner, would rather market self-indulgent books requiring no reader involvement than quality fiction.

"Maybe [publishers] think it's easier to sell a dumb book than it is to sell a smart book. And they're just wrong," Stegner insists. "It doesn't cost any more to market a good book than it does to market

a bad book.

"And I think it has a lot to do with the culture of narcissism, which we're still suffering under, because so much contemporary fiction concerns itself with the writer's own angst and raw material. Of course the writer has to do that, but there are ways to deal with that on the story level. I really do wonder how many writers anymore are just writing good stories, and not just trying to make whatever they have work into a story.

"It's the homogenization of the American public's reading taste. Five publishing industry groups buy fewer and fewer books paying larger and larger advances to a decreasing number of writers so that pretty soon instead of 50 choices on the bookshelf we're going to have 20 choices on the bookshelf. And it's all going to be the same writers. And the choices are going to be generated by vast machines in the basement of Barnes and Noble."

The true sin of the chains is not their size, Stegner says, but the ways in which their sales volume dictates taste to the publishers--effectively squeezing out quality fiction. "A lot of writers move to Europe because the publishing industry [there] isn't engaged in cultural lobotomy."

Stegner's books require the reader to participate by paying attention. Her characters are complex and the prose rarefied and true, and a careless reader will be lost in the ingenuity. But when it came to finding a publishing home for *Pipers*, Stegner had an even bigger problem than taste.

"The problem is they're novellas," Stegner admits. "And from a marketing point of view nowadays, publishing houses are afraid of novellas. There isn't any reason for them to be, but they are. They'd rather market a novel."

Getting at the Truth

BORN IN 1957, Lynn Stegner grew up in the Santa Clara Valley, attended Cabrillo College, and later became Page's student at UCSC. They were married in 1986--his second, her first--and had a child in 1988. For a number of years, Lynn worked in the wine business and did some ghost writing. About the time their daughter was born, and with the help of her father-in-law, Lynn escaped debt, quit the wine business and started writing full time.

"I was working full time, and I had a baby, and I was trying to write a novel," she says. "I was oversubscribed."

With *Pipers* on its way to the presses, Stegner is just starting her fourth novel, a three-part book that she calls "extremely ambitious."

"It's about a woman who is both contained by and contains her part of this last century," Stegner explains. "She's sort of shoved along by the movement of the Irish to western Canada during the wheat boom. It's been a life that's been just one sell-out after another and a wake of destruction that's been inspired by ignorance about the country, ignorance about the land and illusions about what was a reasonable expectation in terms of a living and a family."

Stegner has applied for a Fulbright to go to Ireland, which she believes she has a good chance to get. If not, she says, she'll limit the novel to two parts.

"I can't invent Ireland," she admits.

But she invents much--and with great success. Her sense of place is married to a reflection of things and people that make place, and she has a knack for getting at the truth. Lynn Stegner is hitting her stride as a writer, and it shows in the respect she has gained for the craft.

"I think young writers tend to say, 'I have this to say, I have this material that I'm going to write about, and a lot of it has to do with me,' " Stegner

says. "I think it's important for a good writer to efface himself with the material, so that the material can be on its own as much as possible, and you're just a lens for the material in the way that Ansel Adams tried to achieve a clear statement of the lens. That's what I would like to do with these books, and why I don't really feel I have a narrative style. It's the material that determines what the voice is going to be. It's the point of view that's really important.

"The older you get, the more you realize one of the most important things you can bring to the book, you can bring to the task at hand, is humility."

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From the November 3-10, 1999 issue of Metro Santa Cruz.

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