



Let's Talk About ...The Western Experience

“For many the West is more than a direction found on a compass, even more than a geographical location found on a map. The word carries connotations, snippets, and images from a host of sources that all go into making up an imaginative collage of the West. The works chosen for this series add to and enrich the picture by giving us different, and perhaps even new, experiences. Within this diversity, a common thread runs through the books: the ways in which individuals confront and deal with an alien culture and a sometimes inhospitable land. Whether depicting the pursuit of the American dream, attempts to start a new life, or struggles to hold onto traditional ways, the books in this series help create a fuller, more complete picture of the complexities, ambiguities, and contradictions that ultimately make up the West.” – James Hadden, Boise State University, for the Idaho Let's Talk About It, Mapping the West theme, 1986

Featured book: *Angle of Repose* (1971) by Wallace Stegner is a novel about faith, trust, and the "continuities of history." It is one of Wallace Stegner's most ambitious and complex novels. Geographically, it spans the continents from east to west: historically, it spans four generations of the Ward family. Lyman Ward is a history professor, who to escape the traps and betrayals of the present, explores the lives of his grandparents: Oliver Ward, an uncultivated and financially unsuccessful engineer; and Susan Ward, a cultivated easterner who was transplanted to the West. Part of the story is set in Idaho in the Boise Valley. Through his exploration of his family history, Ward is finally brought full circle: he must live in his own present because, he discovers, the past was not any simpler or more secure or more idyllic than the present.

Discussion Questions: [compiled from Let's Talk About It program scholars]

- Whom does Lyman like best—his grandmother or his grandfather? Do his sympathies change as he studies their lives? As the reader, do yours?
- Is Oliver Ward's story one of success or failure? Was he "too honest?" Is it possible to have too much integrity?
- Was Susan Ward's destiny determined by the era in which she lived and the limitations that era placed on a woman's freedom? Do you think of her as a woman ahead of her time? How does Susan's life in the West compare to her life in the East?
- Are there differences today between people living in the West and the East? What is it that makes one a "Westerner?"
- Bonus question: What does the term "angle of repose" mean?



Let's Talk About It is a partnership between the Idaho Commission for Libraries and the Idaho Humanities Council with generous support from U.S. Bank