



Growing Older, Growing Wiser Book List

"Growing Older, Growing Wiser" was developed in June, 2000, by Dr. Jeff Fox, assistant professor of English and Japanese and currently (2008) Executive Vice President/Chief Academic Officer of College of Southern Idaho. Book selections were made by the 1998 Idaho Let's Talk About It theme development committee.

Books:

Crossing To Safety by Wallace Stegner (1987)

Having Our Say by Sarah L. Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth (1993)

Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom (1997)

Balsamroot: A Memoir by Mary Clearman Blew (1994)

The Stone Angel by Margaret Laurence

The Memory of Old Jack by Wendell Berry (1974)

Balsamroot: A Memoir by Mary Clearman Blew

In this autobiographical novel, Blew writes of her Aunt Imogene's gradual disorientation at age 81. Over a period of months, Imogene becomes infirm, and Blew sells Imogene's home in Washington, relocates her in Idaho to be near, and then has to put her in an institution for patients suffering from advanced dementia and Alzheimer's. But the journey with Aunt Imogene is also a journey for Blew, and her attempts to understand who her aunt has become lead her to examine Imogene's and her own past, the joys and triumphs, the frustrations and heartbreaks over the years. In some ways, discovering her aunt's story helps Blew resolve her own life. Part of this growth involves Blew's own daughters, Elizabeth and Rachel, and their growing together through the struggles of helping Imogene.

Author Information

Mary Clearman Blew grew up in Montana and is a professor of English and creative writing at the University of Idaho in Moscow. Her works include the award-winning *All But The Waltz: A Memoir of Five Generations in the Life of a Montana Family*, *Runaway: A Collection of Stories*, *Bone Deep: Writing, Reading, and Place*. She is editor of *Written on Water: Essays on Idaho River by Idaho Writers* and co-editor of *Circle of Women; An Anthology of Contemporary Western Women Writers*. In discussions of her work, Blew uses the term "creative non-fiction" to describe her style. Her writing is a mixture of this creativity based in the realities of her life—her struggles to leave ranching life in Montana, her family histories, her own relationships.

1. In this novel, Blew considers the dementia her Aunt Imogene is facing. She writes:

What happens when the mind starts to wear out? I imagine the process as a dissolving of the layers between memories, like a wad of old photographs beginning to grow together...Or I imagine the process as the erasure of the line between past and present, until all experience exists simultaneously... Or I imagine my aunt falling through the hole in her mind. Coming to consciousness again in another time and place, in the smell of alkali and sagebrush, with nowhere to get out of the sun, with no sense of the future (14–15).

In what ways do these ideas relate to “growing older, growing wiser”?

2. Imogene kept herself busy, always the aunt on the fringes of family. On page 192, Blew writes of Imogene’s “fear of being alone—the fear of annihilation” in connection with the way she lived her life. Comment on this idea.

3. On page 203, Blew writes “*Hearts are not had as a gift, but hearts are earned*—for years I would have disagreed with Yeats, believed that the only heart worth having was the heart that came as a gift.” How does this sentiment tie into Imogene’s life? Into Blew’s life?

4. What function do Imogene’s diaries serve in the novel for the reader? For the narrator?

Crossing to Safety by Wallace Stegner

In the space of one day, narrator Larry Morgan tells a story of the history of friendship and marriage. The main characters are Morgan, his wife Sally, and Sid and Charity Lang. The novel moves from the present through the past in a long series of remembrances. As the story opens, Larry and Sally, now in their late 60s, have arrived at the Lang's Vermont retreat, Battell Pond. They have come from their home in New Mexico to see their close friends Sid and Charity, who is dying of cancer. As the Morgans settle in for the night in one of the guest cabins, Larry as narrator takes us back to the beginnings of this great friendship, which began in Madison, Wisconsin, during the Depression. From this point, the novel moves between the present day and the past, and using the relationship of the Langs and the Morgans, Stegner defines the value of long friendship and the tribulations and the blessings of love over time.

Author Information

Wallace Stegner was born in 1909 and died in 1993. He traveled much of his youth throughout the American and Canadian West, and many of his works contain autobiographical aspects of his early family life and childhood. He also has written histories of the northern plains, biographies, and various essays. He attended the University of Utah and Harvard, and in 1945, he became Director of the Stanford Writing Project, a position he held for twenty years and which, under his influence, turned out many important writers. He garnered many awards and recognition for his work over the years, but his crowning achievement was winning the Pulitzer Prize for Literature with his novel *Angle of Repose* in 1971. All his life he was politically and socially active in environmental conservation, especially in the American West.

About his novel *Crossing To Safety*, he says:

I wrote it as sort of a memoir more for Mary [Stegner's wife] and myself than for anything else, and I wasn't at all sure I was ever going to publish it. Those people were our very close friends, and at the same time they had some problems which were very personal; and an honest portrait of them as honest as I could make it... But it was, really, in a way that no book of mine has ever been, an attempt to tell the absolute, unvarnished truth about other people and myself. Inevitably I found myself inventing scenes and suppressing things, and bringing things forward in order to make the story work because I guess my habits are incorrigible; but my intention, at least, was the utter, unvarnished truth... And also, I suppose, I had the mule-headed notion that it ought to be possible to make books out of something less than loud sensation. I was trying to make very small noises and to make them

thoughtful... (*Stegner: Conversations on History and Literature* by Wallace Stegner and Richard W. Etulain, xi–xii)

Discussion Questions for *Crossing to Safety*

1. What is the meaning of the title, *Crossing To Safety*?
2. This is a story of four people and their relationships. Discuss each main character (Larry, Sally, Sid, and Charity) and their various relationships with each other.
3. On page 250 (Penguin edition), Sally says, “Youth hasn’t got anything to do with chronological age. It’s times of hope and happiness.” Discuss her words in terms of the characters in the novel aging. What about in terms of your own life?
4. Charity explains her dying with Sid, Larry, and Sally. “Dying’s an important event,” she said. “You can’t rehearse it. All you can do is try to prepare yourself and others. You can try to do it *right* (290). Discuss these ideas in terms of Charity’s need to control things and also in terms of your own perceptions of dying.
5. Near the end of the novel, Larry thinks the following. “If we could have foreseen the future during those good days in Madison where all this began, we might not have had the nerve to venture into it.” (340) Consider this thought, and then read from page 339 to the end of the book and discuss your ideas about the relationships in novel and also about your own life and relationships.

Having Our Say by Sarah L. Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth

Bessie and Sadie Delany were both over 100 years old in 1993 when Amy Hill Hearth interviewed them (Bessie died in 1995 at 104, and Sadie died in 1999 at the age of 109). So intriguing were the sisters' stories that this book became a *New York Times* best seller, and another book, *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*, followed in 1994. *Having Our Say* was made into a successful Broadway play in 1995 (nominated for three Tony awards) and recently presented on television, and this production received the Peabody Award. After Bessie passed away, Sadie wrote *On My Own at 107: Reflections on a Life without Bessie* in 1997.

The book is the sisters' oral history, culled from a series of interviews, and it is organized in rough chronology, beginning with the sisters' earliest memories of growing up in Raleigh, North Carolina and ending with their contemporary lives in their home in Mount Vernon, New York. Growing up in Raleigh, the sisters attended St. Augustine's School where their father (later to become the first black Episcopal bishop in the United States) was an administrator and their mother taught. The two sisters moved to New York City in 1917 to further their education. After graduating from Columbia University, Bessie became the second black woman licensed to practice dentistry in New York state in 1923; Sadie graduated in 1925 and became the first black home economics teacher in the New York City Public School system. Each sister freely acknowledges that her success was a result of the lessons and guidance of their parents and the closeness of family.

Not only is this a book about growing older and wiser, but it is also a fascinating account of family life and pride, race relations, civil rights issues, and American rural and urban life through the last century. The sisters lived through the era of Jim Crow, the Harlem Renaissance, the Great Depression, two World Wars, the Korean War and Vietnam. They were alive when women gained the right to vote, and when civil rights laws were passed and enacted. They lived through the terrors of the KKK and the assassinations of John Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. Over the years, the Delany sisters knew some of the most influential people of the day, including Booker T.

Washington, W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Paul Robeson. Though over one hundred years old, Sadie speaks for both of them when she says, “In our dreams, we are always young... Truth is, we both forget we’re old,” (229).

Author Information

Amy Hill Hearth is a journalist who contributes to *The New York Times*. In addition to working on this book, she also worked with Sadie to produce *On My Own at 107: Reflections on Life without Bessie* in 1998.

Discussion Questions for Having Our Say

1. Bessie, somewhat outspoken, and Sadie, persistent yet soft-spoken, represent two approaches to life in general and civil rights in particular. Discuss their views.
2. Bessie says, “When you get real old, honey, you realize there are certain things that just don’t matter anymore. You lay it all on the table. There’s a saying: Only little children and old folks tell the truth.” (203–204). Discuss these ideas.
3. Sadie reflects on her life, saying, “We buried so many people we’ve loved [They outlived all the members of their immediate family]. Most everyone we know has turned to dust. Well, there must be some reason we’re still here. That’s why we agreed to do this book; it gives us a sense of purpose. If it helps just one person, then it’s worth doing. That’s what Mama used to say.” (8) In what ways might this book have helped you?
4. Both sisters follow a daily routine of exercise (yoga), a proper diet, and prayer (230–231). Bessie says, “If you asked me the secret of longevity, I would tell you that you have to work at taking care of your health. But a lot of it’s attitude. I’m alive out of sheer determination, honey! Sometimes I think it’s my meanness that keeps me going.” (15). Discuss.
5. We all have access to detailed information about events in our world, and we can learn about virtually any subject through study of widely available resources. Is there a difference between this sort of knowledge acquisition and actually living it, as the Delany sisters had? Discuss.

The Memory of Old Jack by Wendell Berry

Jack Beechum is the focus of this third-person narrative. The novel, one of the “Port William membership stories,” is set in Port William, Kentucky, in 1952 when Jack is 92 years old. The narrative takes place over the chronological period of but a day; however, the present tense narrative is punctuated by Jack’s reminiscences of the major events in his life. As Jack’s life unfolds throughout these flashbacks, his character and his impact on the history of the town and its people reveal Berry’s final message. This is at once a story of Jack and his life and times, but also the effect one man’s life has on those around him.

In an interview with Jordan Fisher-Smith, Berry comments on the power of our histories.

Well, if you didn't know any of the past, you literally wouldn't know anything. You'd have no language, no history, and so the first result would be a kind of personal incompleteness... But practicalities are involved also. If you had a settled, a really settled, thriving, locally adapted community, which we don't have anywhere, you wouldn't just be remembering the dead. You'd remember what they did and whether it worked or not. And so you'd have a kind of lexicon of possibilities that would tell you what you could do, what you could get away with, and what penalty to expect from what you couldn't get away with... So the memory that a community has of its dead, and of the pasts of the living would be a precious sort of manual—a kind of handbook, a kind of operator's manual for the use of the immediate place. That's the only kind of operator's manual for the world that we're going to have... It would be extremely local and extremely particular at its best, because it would consist of information about the history of various fields and patches of forest and that sort of thing. It would be too local to need to be preserved for any but the local posterity.

Concerning intergenerational connections and responsibilities, Berry (himself a grandfather) says,

The obligation is very great and moves two ways. The old have an obligation to be exemplary, if they can—and since nobody can be completely exemplary, they also have an obligation to be intelligent about their failings. They're going to be remembered in one way or another, so they have an obligation to see that they're remembered not as a liability or a great burden, but as a help. And of course the young, the inheritors, have an obligation to remember these people and live up to them—be worthy of them. So it's an obligation that goes both ways, and it's inescapable. Once you become involved in this sequence of lives, there is no way to escape the responsibility. You inherit, and in turn you bequeath an inheritance of some kind.

Jack Beechum spends all his days in the same place, never once venturing outside the area of Port William. The value of place has great meaning to him. Berry notes,

And if you stay in a place and make connections, make relationships, you experience losses that are difficult to bear... What we're really talking about is faith, the faith being that if you make a commitment, and hang on until death, there are rewards. The rewards come. Nobody has ever said that this was easy to do, but I think that everybody who has done it has done it out of this faith that there are rewards. My experience suggests very powerfully to me that there are rewards. (Qtd. in Fisher–Smith interview,

www.envirolink.org/enviroarts/interviews_and_conversations/WendellBerry.html)

Author Information

Contemporary author Wendell Berry has written over thirty-two books including novels, collections of poetry, and occasional essays. He is also a teacher (formerly a professor of English at Kentucky State University), a preserver of local lore, an environmentalist, and a futurist in the sense that he understands the critical needs of communities (rural and by extension urban) as the platform for the future. Since 1965 he has farmed in rural Kentucky. He has received many awards and recognitions, including the 1999 Thomas Merton Award, fellowships in both the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations, an award from the National Institute and Academy of Arts and Letters (1971) and the T.S. Eliot Award.

Discussion Questions for The Memory of Old Jack

1. The novel takes place mostly in Jack's head, remembrances of his life leading up to the present. Comment on some important people and events that he recalls and their effect on him. You might consider Ruth, Will Wells, Rose, Ben, Clara, Andy, his "triumph" over McGrother (in acquiring the neighboring property), and the barn burning.
2. Discuss how Jack, even in his current situation, deeply impacts those around him. How do Mat and Jack's friends take his death? His daughter Clara?
3. Chapter Seven deals in large part with Jack's great-nephew Andy Catlett (106–127, Counterpoint edition). Discuss Andy's place in the story.
4. Reviewers of this book have noted that Jack is the last of his kind, and that his passing is a metaphor for the death of a way of life. Comment on this concept.
5. Berry provides a keen insight into the nature of reminiscence and aging. Read pages 24–25 (Chapter Three) and comment on these ideas.
6. On page 12, Berry draws a scene in which Mat and his family visit former employees who now live in the city. Review page 12 and comment on Berry's view of uprooting and leaving "home."

The Stone Angel by Margaret Laurence

The story centers around ninety year-old Hagar Shipley, an aging woman living with her son and his wife. Hagar is forgetful, spiteful, remorseful by turns, but always evincing an indomitable spirit. Born and raised on the prairies of Manitoba, Hagar is of the pioneer generation. Her father was one of the early settlers of the town, the fictional Manawaka, and she has inherited his stubborn Scottish resolve and temper which have dogged her all her life.

Laurence skillfully reveals Hagar's past through a series of flashbacks, and the reader is taken on a tour of this woman's life as she struggles with her present failing condition (she suffers from mild dementia, like a child at times in her manner, and she is diagnosed with what appears to be cancer—her precise disease is never mentioned in book) and her angers and resentments about the past. In her memories Hagar sees her childhood and her relationships with friends and family in that small prairie town. She remembers her stubborn streak and her marriage that flew in the face of all her father had hoped for her. She remembers those times when she could not “live and let live,” but instead meddled and coerced, resulting in a lifelong series of disappointments and grief. Hagar has always prided herself on being independent and self-sufficient, and in these last days of her life, she realizes what a price she has paid over the years.

The present action of the novel concerns Hagar as she becomes increasingly unable to care for herself and therefore becomes an intolerable strain on her son and his wife. Hagar is full of recriminations and anger, but she is childlike and illogical. She needs assistance with most everything, yet she angrily refuses help; she is incontinent, yet she denies it; she knows she is a burden, yet she denies it even to herself. She is alternately lucid and clouded in her mind, moving back and forth between the present and the past, between her stubborn resolve and the fear and disorientation brought on by her age.

Author Information

Margaret Laurence (1926–1987) is one of Canada's finest authors. She has received many awards for her work, including the prestigious Governor's Award for two of her novels, *The Diviners* and *A Jest of God*. She was made a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1971, and has received honorary degrees from several Canadian universities. *The Stone Angel* is the second in Laurence's Manawaka series.

A documentary, "Margaret Laurence – first lady of Manawaka" was produced by the National Film Board of Canada in 1979. Many of her works have been adapted for radio and television and many of her books have been translated into other languages.

She was born in Neepawa (the town on which Hagar Shipley's Manawaka is loosely based). Her first writing job was as a reporter and book reviewer for the *Winnipeg Citizen*. She married John Laurence in 1947, and they moved to Africa in the early 50's where he worked as a civil engineer. Margaret Laurence has lived in England, Canada, Somaliland, Ghana, Greece, Crete, Palestine, India, Egypt, and Spain. In general her early work deals with her travels in Africa, while later works are often set in the Canadian West. Her later novels (including *The Stone Angel*) often include the theme of women struggling for self-realization in a male-dominated world. In her final years, she served as Writer in Residence at the Universities of Toronto and Western Ontario and Trent University, and was appointed Chancellor of Trent for the years 1981 – 83.

Discussion Questions for *The Stone Angel*

1. What is the significance of the title, *The Stone Angel*?

2. When Hagar is visiting the old age care facility (against her will), she has a conversation with a Mrs. Steiner who lives there:

“Do you get used to life?” she says. “Can you answer me that? It all comes as a surprise. You get your first period, and you’re amazed—*I can have babies now—such a thing?* When the children come, you think—*Is it mine? Did it come out of me? Who could believe it?* When you can’t have them anymore, what a shock—*It’s finished—so soon?*” I peer at her, thinking how peculiar that she knows so much. “You’re right. I never got used to a blessed thing.” (104)

How does she mean this? Discuss what things Hagar never got used to and what effect it has had on her life.

3. Hagar’s daughter-in-law Doris tries to care for her in many ways, and she invites the local minister, Mr. Troy, to visit. On page 120, Troy asks if Hagar believes in “God’s infinite mercy.”

I blurt a reply without thinking. “What’s so merciful about Him, I’d like to know?” We regard each other from a vast distance, Mr. Troy and I.

“What could possibly make you say that?” he asks.

Pry and pry—what does he want of me? I’m tired out. I can’t fence with him. “I had a son,” I say, “and lost him.”

“You’re not alone,” says Mr. Troy.

“That’s where you’re wrong,” I reply.

In what ways does Hagar feel alone? What do her comments about God reveal about her beliefs?

4. Hagar has struggled all her life to be independent and “right,” no matter the cost. When her son John dies (she knows in her heart that she drove him to it), she closes up. When a well-meaning nurse tries to comfort Hagar, she responds with the old resolve.

She put a well-meaning arm around me. “Cry. let yourself. It’s the best thing.” But I shoved her arm away. I straightened my spine, and that was the hardest

thing I've ever had to do in my entire life, to stand straight then. I wouldn't cry in front of strangers, whatever it cost me. But when at last I was home, alone in Marvin's old bedroom, and women from the town were sitting in the kitchen below and brewing coffee, I found my tears had been locked too long and wouldn't come now at my bidding. The night my son died I was transformed to stone and never wept at all. When the ministering women handed me the cup of hot coffee, they murmured how well I was taking it, and I could only look at them dry-eyed from a great distance and not say a single word. All the night long, I had only one thought—I'd had so many things to say to him, so many things to out to rights. He hadn't waited to hear. (242–243)

Comment on this passage.

5. While she is in the hospital, near the end of the book, Mr. Troy comes to visit. He is surprised that she asks him to sing a version of the doxology. He does, and she has this reaction:

I would have wished it. This knowing comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always have wanted that—simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? I know, I know. How long have I known? Or have I always known, in some far crevice of my heart., some cave too deeply buried, too concealed? Every good joy I might have held, in my man or any child of mine or even the plain light of morning, of walking the earth, all were forced to a standstill by some brake of proper appearances—oh, proper to whom? When did I ever speak the heart's truth?

Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear. I was alone, never anything else, and never free, for I carried my chains with me, and they spread out from me and shackled all I touched. Oh my two, my dead...Dead by your own hands or by mine? Nothing can take away those years. (292)

Discuss her revelation.

Tuesdays with Morrie by Mitch Albom

Author Mitch Albom writes of his relationship with his old college teacher, Morrie Schwartz, who is dying of Lou Gehrig=s Disease (ALS). The title comes from the idea that Albom always visited Morrie on a Tuesday. But more than a simple recounting of their final days, the book is an analysis of Morrie=s life and the things he has learned about living and dying now that he is faced with the nearness of his own death. It is also a book about Mitch and his own journey, the lessons he learns still from his old teacher, friend, and mentor.

Author Information

Mitch Albom is a successful sports writer for the *Detroit Free Press* and has been voted #1 Sports Columnist by the Associated Press ten times. He has written the sports books *Bo* and *Fab Four* as well as several collections of his columns. He has appeared frequently on TV sports programs and also has a radio show in Detroit. In addition, he is a composer, a professional pianist, nightclub singer and an amateur boxer.

Morrie Schwartz was born in Chicago of Russian Jewish immigrants and brought up in a New York ghetto. He attended New York City College and then studied sociology at the University of Chicago. After graduation, he worked in a nontraditional psychoanalytic mental hospital. In the introduction to *Morrie: In His Own Words*, Paul Solman writes, A

He was watching the troubled and tormented, observing the staff and their relationships with patients. What struck him was the huge influence the attitudes of those around them had on the patients. Morrie was there to observe and talk with everyone--even those patients crouching alone in the corners. He related to them civilly, humbly. He opened his heart as best he could. Gradually, he got them to respond. The importance of opening oneself to others, no matter who they are, and the impact of community on the individual became clear to him.

From this experience, Schwartz co-authored *The Mental Hospital*. Soon after, Schwartz accepted a position at Brandeis University where he taught for nearly 40 years. His widely known wit and his penchant for aphorism attracted attention of a friend who contacted the *Boston Globe* newspaper which carried some of Morrie=s words. This in turn spurred the now-famous *Nightline* interviews with Ted Koppel. Morrie died peacefully at his home on November 4, 1995.

1. Discuss Morrie's words: "When you learn how to die, you learn how to live."
2. Morrie faced his death honestly; sometimes he was confident and resigned, but at other times, he was afraid and resentful. Do you think that since he had time (the disease, ALS, took years to end his life) to think and work through it all that he was wiser than if he had suddenly died?
3. Morrie tells Mitch that it is never too late to forgive (164–168). Discuss Morrie's ideas here: 1) that forgiving *ourselves* is important, and 2) that forgiveness is healing (and not forgiving is painful).
4. In an interview with Koppel, Morrie refers to a letter he had received (71–72). He tells Koppel that he lost his mother when he was very young and that he was so lonely. "Morrie, Koppel said, "...that was seventy years ago your mother died. The pain still goes on?" "You bet," Morrie whispered. (72). This points powerfully to how death feels like a taking away. Discuss these ideas.
5. Comment on Morrie's ideas "that as long as we can love each other, and remember the feeling of love we had, we can die without ever really going away. All the love you created is still there. All the memories are still there. You live — the hearts of everyone you have touched and nurtured while you were here... Death ends a life, not a relationship." (174)