



“ARSON SUICIDE IN THE SIERRAS—THREE DEAD”

The headline screams up at me from the concrete stoop and at first I can't bring myself to pick up the paper. It's insane, but I feel if I leave it there, what I fear to be true will remain just that, a fear.

Child psychologist Will Border retreats to the summer of his thirteenth year after a traumatic event forces him to reexamine childhood events and the choices he made in becoming a man. A period piece set in 1950s rural America, *Morgan's Pasture* guides young adult readers in examining their own roles in life as they develop into loners, followers, or even reluctant leaders like Will. With one eye on child psychology and the other on plain common sense, *Morgan's Pasture* offers a unique perspective on the growth of a boy and the longing of a man for a mythic peaceful pasture, not as a place to live, but as a reason to.

About the Author



Wallace J. Swenson.
Photo credit: Max Swenson.

Employed from the age of twelve, **Wallace J. Swenson** swept floors and cleaned pool hall spittoons during his rural Idaho boyhood, and was a meteorologist and computer systems specialist during his twenty years in the U.S. Air Force. He supervised a 911 center for a few years and then designed, built, and managed an Emergency Operations Center at a nuclear testing facility for another half-dozen years. An award-winning poet, novelist, and short-story writer, he lives and works where he grew up. *Morgan's Pasture* is Swenson's first published novel.

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MORGAN'S PASTURE

Interview with Wallace J. Swenson

October 2, 2008, in honor of Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) - Teen Read Week

1. You've held many interesting and unusual occupations during your life. Does your life influence your written work, and if so, how?

Writing good stories demands a foundation in reality, and to accurately describe the back-and-heart-breaking labor of gold prospecting, for instance, you have to experience it.

What I've done in my life allows me to include the details I need to bring a reader along on the journey. While working many jobs I've met all sorts of people, from the lowliest laborer to highly educated scientists and skilled engineers, and this personal contact allows me to portray them more accurately as characters. For sure, I am only conveying my perception of them, but that in itself is reality, too.

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2. Where did the story for *Morgan's Pasture* come from? Is any part of it similar to your own life?

What we learn from any incident makes it either an event or an experience, and an incident that we can't immediately comprehend has a way of burrowing into our brain. So it was with the suicide of a boy I knew growing up; I knew what had happened but couldn't cope with the reason why. It therefore remained an event.

Since then I've seen some tragic losses, wasted lives, and shattered dreams. These episodes, of course, are subsequent to that suicide, but they always seemed to trigger an image fixed forever in my brain: a young man, cold and alone, as alone as a creature can be. I've closely examined what I feel now, and I've tried many times to recall exactly how I felt at the time of his death. *Morgan's Pasture* is the story of how I felt, how I've come to accept what happened and maybe, just maybe, telling it will prevent another young person from feeling as lost as Trailer must have and as confused as I know Will was.

All my writing will contain pieces of me, the image of what I know I am, what I want to be, what I fear I might be, and most frightening, the image of how I'm perceived by others. And to confuse the issue, the character may be an amalgam of all four.

3. *Morgan's Pasture* has lots of detail about daily life in 1950s rural America. Do you consider this detail an embellishment or an important element of the plot?

What an odd question. Life, if it has any meaning, is ALL about details. The details are what make the scenes real and by extension, the boys. The details are what allow the reader to sense the frustration Will felt when leadership was foisted on him, to know the envy Charlie suffered, and to feel deep inside the angst Trailer endured. When Trailer's mother rejected him and his fish, it was the tears clearing the dust from his cheeks and Will and Charlie not wanting to see them that made Trailer's despair so complete. Tears need to be acknowledged and they didn't do that; as boys, they could not. The 1950s setting is almost irrelevant to the story. It could, sadly, take place tomorrow. But to get the details precise, it had to be told as I lived it: in the '50s.

4. In another interview, you mentioned that your dad is your muse, the person who inspires you to write. Why is that?

I was fortunate to have a father who demanded that I do my own thinking; a father who taught me that everything I did had consequences, that the consequence were usually a matter of free will, and could be good or bad. Therefore, he rarely gave a direct answer to my questions, asking instead that I consider something else, and sometimes that "something else" was so obtuse that the answer didn't come for hours, days, years even. To this day one of his "points to ponder" will pop into my head and I'll finally see the answer to a nearly forgotten question, a question that has been raised anew in my current life and whose answer had been maturing for decades.

And therein is the secret of my muse. He doesn't come to me, he's always been right there. When I need something, or I can't decide on an issue (meaning a character can't; same thing, right?), I wait for one of Dad's questions to be answered. And he obliges. Unanswered questions don't go away because we choose to ignore them.

5. Did you originally set out to write "Young Adult" fiction? Some elements in your work, such as discussions of penis envy, mortality, and suicide, are controversial or dark and might be considered too explicit for teenagers.

Another odd one. I'll ask you; which is the more sensitive question: facing death, contemplating suicide, or the comparative study of penis size? We'll do the penis first. Only half of the population (roughly) can answer that question and that half does not include the fairer sex.

That issue has been dealt with at swimming holes and in locker rooms since Cain noticed Abel's, and vice versa. It's not something that boys talk about; it's simply something that is. To a young girl, it's nonsensical. They will see it clinically, in much the same vein as the boys did: bigger is...bigger, and the girls will never really connect with the psychological nuances of it; they simply cannot. If the story is written correctly, as I think *Morgan's Pasture* is, they will get a tiny glimpse into how a boy thinks, clear up a bit of the mystery, and not be offended. A boy would laugh at you if you asked if he took exception to the scene and probably refuse to acknowledge he has even made a comparison at all.

On mortality: most teens, if they think about it, do so only briefly and without much conviction. It is, after all, something that happens to old people, and sometimes other people, but it most certainly cannot happen to them personally. They will see Trailer's near death from heatstroke as only that; Trailer could have easily died and though tragic and sad, it's not something that could happen to them. The story is actually about Will, and most will see it that way. The few that don't are

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the ones I particularly want to speak to because youngsters must see that suicide is entirely different from accidental death or death that comes from sickness.

The 'dark' aspect you ask about is critical to my motivation. There are secrets here that need the light of day, issues that are too often kept under wraps. This book is meant to shine a light on those issues and maybe help a struggling teenager see that there are people who care for and love them. They'll recognize the truth when that light shines because the truth casts no shadow.

6. Are you worried about censorship?

Would any thinking adult, because of some puritanical sense of decency, dismiss a book that might actually change a youngster's life for the better? Let their conscience guide them; mine guides me.

7. Do you feel you have a responsibility toward your audience? Why or why not, and in what way? What role do you think stories should have in the upbringing of our youth?

Powerful question and one I really struggled with when I approached this story. I am acutely aware of my audience. A representative in the form of personal memories of my own youth is constantly at my side, keeping me in tune with real people. Speaking to *Morgan's Pasture*, I ceased writing several times during the course of creating it because of what could be read into the characters. It comes from the "consequences" lesson my father instilled in me. I was fearful that some person would see Trailer's response to his mental anguish as reasonable and something worthy of carrying out.

It was only after talking at length to a psychologist that I decided I could adequately make the case for living. I feel that what's revealed in the story can comfort a stressed teen, show them that love surrounds them if they take the time to look. Trailer's problem came from his focusing on the negative and those negative feelings were unintentionally reinforced by his friends, the very people he should have been able to rely on. Such is the cruelty young people can exhibit; they know not what they do, but are masters at it.

Stories can be great teaching resources but only if the reader can closely identify with one or more of the characters. This is both the learning opportunity offered and the danger contained in *Morgan's Pasture*. Will is a good protagonist; he's basically kind and caring, and he is used to show how much one person can influence another and not be aware of it. Charlie is self-centered and envious of Will and, if the truth be known, was probably just as lonely as Trailer. Trailer is vulnerable, weak, and completely lost. Most readers will identify with Will, and that's positive. A few will see a lot of themselves in Charlie (but deny it if asked), and that can also be a positive motivator. Fewer yet will relate to Trailer. The hope is that those last few will see what Will learned and saw, and realize they are valuable as people.

8. What do you like best about being a writer? And least?

The surprises my characters offer me. The thrill of finding an answer to a question long unanswered. The gratification of a reader telling me that I had a positive effect on them or someone they love. The excitement of actually recording on paper what I see in my head; the rush I feel when the story is unfolding faster than I can write it down; an exhilarating race between the creative and the mechanical. The elation of reconciliation or conflict resolution and the satisfaction of knowing your reader will feel it, too. I like least the time that must be spent getting a story published. A necessary evil is no less evil.

9. What advice would you give to teen writers?

Learn how to write. The story in your head is the gift you are given, putting it down on paper is simply a matter of mechanics. You can be taught the mechanics and the sooner you start the more time you'll have to share your gift.

Read the masters: Dumas, Twain, Tarkington, Laura Ingalls Wilder, Cooper, Defoe, and London. They wrote the classics and these are classics for a reason; they are perfectly crafted. Pay particular attention to your teachers, especially in high school. They are there to freely share everything they know; all you have to do is accept their offer. And realize that you pass that way but once (high school); miss it then and you may have missed something forever.

10. What did you want to be when you were Will's age?

When I was Will's age I admired people who could produce things: mechanics, farmers, carpenters, people who make things run. These are the characters in my book, the men I admired and wanted to emulate, and I would have been happy doing what they did. My first real job was as an electrician's apprentice at age fourteen.

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11. Who were your favorite authors when you were Will's age? And now?

Tarkington, for Penrod and Sam; Frank Dixon et al, for The Hardy Boys; Zane Grey for many; Daniel Defoe for *Treasure Island*; Carolyn Keene for Nancy Drew (please don't tell anyone); James F. Cooper for *Last of the Mohicans*; Mark Twain for Huck Finn (much more interesting than Tom Sawyer); Jack London for *Call of the Wild*. The list could go on to maybe 50 writers.

Many of the writers I enjoyed as a boy, I will still read today. I am rereading Twain's *Roughing It* right now. I get very little from contemporary writers like Clancy, Grisham, and the like, and Stephen King leaves me cold. I still go back to the writers of the early 1900s up through about 1970: Ruark, Hemingway, Michener, Uris, Clavell (*King Rat* is fascinating.)

12. What books do you think are "must reads" for teenagers?

I seriously doubt there is such a thing. My advice to anyone who asks is to read something, anything. I'm a firm believer that literature will find its audience and a reader will find the works that mean something to them. The crucial first step is to get them to read a book. I try to steer young readers away from fantasy and science (?) fiction but if that's all they're interested in, it's better than not reading at all.

13. What's your favorite comfort food? Care to tell us a story about it?

Homemade Swedish sausage with homemade rye bread and real butter (also homemade when I was young). The sausage stuffing is made of ground beef (60%) and lean pork (40%), ground potatoes and onions, (hand-cranked grinder) salt, pepper and allspice. Making it was something I did with a brother.

We'd go to my mother's home where she'd have peeled and quartered the potatoes and onions. While she cleaned the casings (pork intestines), my brother and I would grind the spuds and onions into a huge steel bowl. Into that we'd mix the meat and seasoning and then use the same grinder to stuff 35 to 50 pounds of sausage. And every year we'd argue about how much salt and allspice to put in, eventually referring to a recipe that had been handed down in writing from my father's family. And always my mother's double entendre references to the long sausage as it came off the front of the grinder. Toward the middle of the afternoon, Mom would put two or three 'rings' of sausage to cook (boil), and when everything was cleaned and put away, make coffee. Enjoying the fruits of one's labor with people you love is a gift from God. I feature my mother and father in many of my books.

14. What is your favorite souvenir? (Yep, we're fishing for another story).

A small pottery wren given to me by an elderly English lady. From her I rented a bedroom at the very top of an old stone cottage in rural England. We became very close over the years I knew her, and though now gone, she visits my thoughts regularly. That petite bird, so much like Mrs. Allen, proves that the value of something has nothing to do with how much money it cost.

15. What does your family think of your writing? Do your children or grandchildren want to be writers too?

My immediate family, other than my mother (now dead), shows very little interest in what I do specifically. My son has read one of the nine novels I've written. All are excited and interested in the process and all are very talented in their own right; one is a teacher and soft toy designer, one a wood carver, one a very skilled hand crafter. All are as proud of me as I am of them. None of them have shown any interest in writing.

16. What are your favorite things to do when not writing? How do those activities influence your writing?

I'm still a builder of things. I am currently renovating an old mission church with my son. We have been engaged in it for going on five years with maybe one more to go. We are doing it right, retaining the atmosphere and the architecture while at the same time making it a place he can use for his artwork. It's a very relaxing task. I like to see plants grow as well, but find less and less time to indulge that pleasure. And I teach: my grandchildren as they ask, fellow writers as they seek advice, high school students when I'm invited. And the interaction continues to feed my desire to become comfortable with the human condition. I carry a small shirt-pocket notebook wherein I jot down observations, overheard comments, and bits of information—the 'stuff' of life that swirls around us. These notes go into a larger compendium I keep on my computer and are grist for my story mill. My reading is less than I need and centers mostly on history and foreign policy.

Interview with Wallace J. Swenson ~ cont'd

17. What stories can we look forward to from you in the future? Will there be a sequel to *Morgan's Pasture*?

Sequels are funny things; they just happen. At the moment, I don't see a sequel to *Morgan's Pasture*, but I thought the same of *Journey to the Whiteclouds* and that story now spans five volumes and over half a million words. If I recall correctly, *Morgan's Pasture* was my sixth or seventh book, and I've written historical fiction, farce, action, coming of age (*Morgan's Pasture*), and modern life drama. I have so many more to write, only a physical disability or death will stop me; my muse is very assertive.

18. How similar do you think the issues teens faced in the 1950s are to the issues faced by teens in the 21st century?

The issue, not issues, is exactly the same now as then: doubt. The difference is that the distractions or attractions presented to young people have pros and cons that are very age dependent. Doubts can be set aside, smothered with "things," blurred by activities that take no energy and deliver saccharine and pixilated pacification in return. When there's nothing of value offered, the value attached is the same: nothing. Yet the doubt remains, dogging teens as it always has, and we adults who benefited from more substantial times help as we can.

19. Do you think teen readers and adult readers will glean different lessons from *Morgan's Pasture*?

Absolutely. Teen readers will see it as validation; adults will see it as vindication. Teens will recognize the mood if not the time. Modern teens seem not to be affected by venue; they slip from Potter to Hobbit to Dungeons with ease, taking what they need from the characters, not the times. Adults are comfortable going back to an era that they now know was truly carefree. With *Morgan's Pasture*, adults will relax and see some of the things they saw and did as youngsters with fresh eyes and a more mature view. And maybe, just maybe, the book will pass along to a needful youth something valuable but long forgotten.

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