

# The Problems of Sabrina Castro

A Shooting Star.  
By Wallace Stegner.  
Viking. 443 pp. \$5.00.

Reviewed by Richard Elman  
Author, 'A Coat for the Tsar';  
contributor, "Paris Review," "Saturday Review"

WALLACE STEGNER, a professor of American literature and creative writing at Stanford University, has won many major literary awards. Some years ago he wrote a best-selling novel entitled *The Big Rock Candy Mountain*, and he has since devoted himself to works of American history and short story writing. Stegner's latest novel, *A Shooting Star*, described by his publisher as the work of his "maturity," comes equipped with a glowing endorsement from C. P. Snow.

*A Shooting Star* is a large, glossy, obsessively sexual account of a family of affluent, powerful and somewhat despicable northern Californians, transplanted from Boston, for whom the past is more real than the present. It is a novel with a very limited point of view, struggling to seem as if it has many points of view.

Thus, to demonstrate that he doesn't like the Hutchens family any better than we do, Stegner presents within a contrived subplot the modest domestic joys and sorrows of a suburban high school teacher, Leonard MacDonald. Toward the end of this predictable novel, middle-class virtue triumphs when Leonard rejects an offer to bed down in his "Eichler home" (while his wife is in the hospital having a baby) with the most attractive of the Hutchenses, his wife's best friend, who bears the unlikely name of Sabrina Castro.

Sabrina is Stegner's heroine. She is one of those wild-eyed, brittle, childless women common in women's magazine fiction. Beautiful, glamorous, "randy" and compulsive, she is a gal with lots of problems. She talks about them interminably, and they are all patently psychological to everybody except the author—who tries to worry them into a metaphysic. Sabrina, Stegner continually tells us, in searching for her "true" identity.

When the novel opens in Pasadena, Sabrina is having a spat with her husband, Burke—a doctor right out of "Stella Dallas" who is ambitious, efficient and, therefore, sexually cold and sterile. Burke is annoyed because Sabrina had an affair in Oaxaca with Bernard, a buyer in a San Francisco department store.

It is not hard to see why Burke is chagrined: He hasn't read *Madame Bovary*. The trouble is Sabrina has and she claims, as does Emma Bovary, that it was all her husband's fault for shutting her out of his life and career. When Burke still won't kiss and make up, Sabrina peremptorily hops inside her Chrysler and drives 400 miles in one evening to the family estate near San Francisco without so much as packing a suitcase.

This is hard enough to believe, but Stegner would also have us sympathize with Sabrina, and that makes the situation more ludicrous. From her disturbed point of view, all experience is equally incoherent; yet, since she dominates the narrative the result can only be that it becomes incoherent, incredible and rather trite. What is more, Sabrina's hysteria seems to affect strongly the other central characters.

It develops, for instance, that

Bernard wouldn't mind having Sabrina around again for weekends and holidays, but he doesn't feel obliged to give up his family just for that. Then there is Mrs. Hutchens, Sabrina's mother, who is buried so deeply in memories, guilt, lilac water and old lace that she really cannot get interested in her daughter's marital difficulties. The third major transparent figure is brother Oliver, a tanned, handsome devil of a fellow who spends all his time scheming to get his mother's power of attorney while lurking about the family swimming pool in order to seduce the old lady's secretary-companion.

Here, then, is an especially crass and shallow group of people. They are such crashingly self-conscious bores and so agonizingly uncomplicated that no amount of argumentative long-distance telephoning between Sabrina and Burke, no amount of recitation from the family diaries and no amount of psychologizing by Stegner's other characters can impart to Sabrina or her relatives the taint of reality. Although we observe Sabrina go to pieces from a front row seat; see her try nymphomania, alcoholism, pregnancy, suicide and reconciliation; hear her scrap with mother and brother; and, at one point, observe that she seems to be falling in love with her own dog—she remains throughout as sullenly acrobatic as a performer in a pornographic movie. And she has to labor under the added disadvantage of Stegner's editing, which never allows her to perform her most interesting stunts on camera.

The only thing "mature" about this novel is the sense that one gets of the author's weariness at having to devote so many words to such a

## CHANGING YOUR ADDRESS?

At least three weeks' notice is required for all changes of address. Include your old address—or address label.

Subscription Department

**THE NEW LEADER**  
7 E. 15th St., New York 3

dreary group of people. In all other respects, the book is about as cluttered and disordered as a ninth grader's pocketbook. Stegner's prose is so busy describing and making up far-fetched metaphors about the world in which Sabrina lives that it can never get around to the specifics of an experience, and it dare not be

expository or concrete. For example: "Yet she went *as* mindlessly *as* a plane on automatic pilot, and through a traffic pattern *as* compulsive *as* the structure of atoms. Her mind was clenched *like* a fist." Or, "It was *as if* he [Burke] applied a pump: she could feel the contents of her insides, discolored and poisonous, being ex-

posed to his laboratory scrutiny.  
(Italics mine. R. E.)

All one can say in defense of Stegner's prose in *A Shooting Star* is that he knows the landscape, the food and drink, the institutions, the street names and the atmosphere of northern California well enough to have written a book about them.