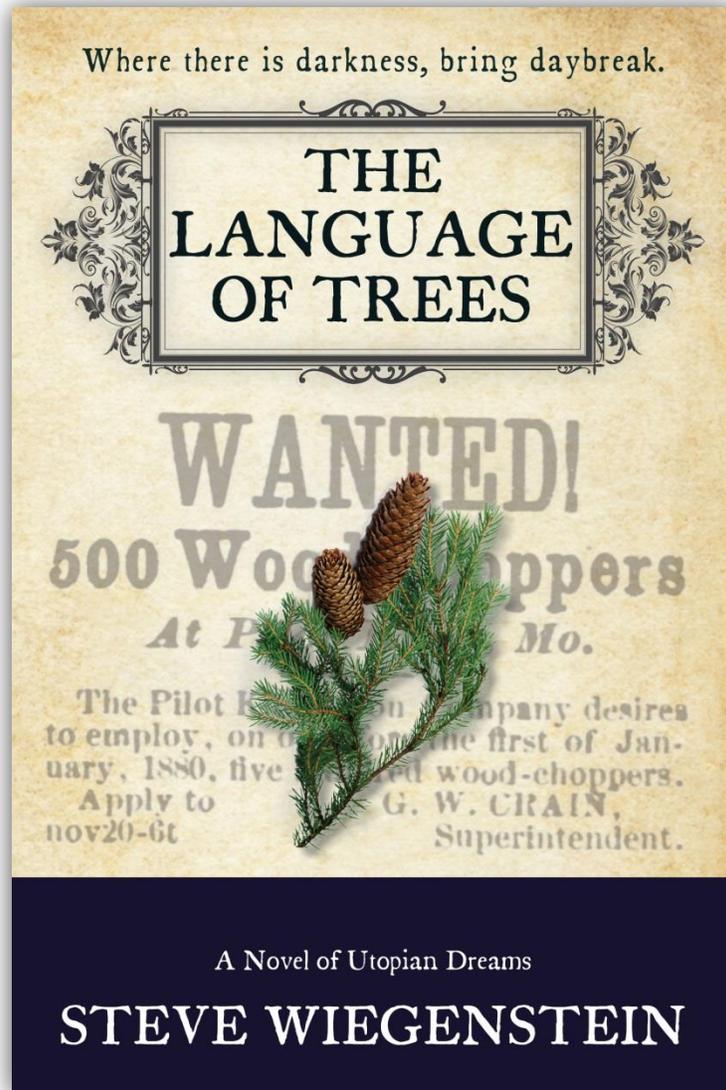


Reading Group Guide

THE LANGUAGE OF TREES

By Steve Wiegenstein



*Blank Slate Press; ISBN 978-1-943075386; 286 pages; 6 x 9; \$16.95, Fiction
Distribution: Midpoint Trade*

PRAISE FOR *THE LANGUAGE OF TREES*



“In Steve Wiegenstein's new novel, *The Language of Trees*, a stunning balance of love and power occurs, between women and men, between wilderness and human ambition, and between the varied machinations of the body and the multivalent clarion of the spirit borne by those who people this fine work of historical fiction. *The Language of Trees* is aware of transcendent love, wise and clear-eyed with regard to human greed, and thrilling in its descent into both and emergence into greater life.”

—**Shann Ray**, National Endowment for the Arts Fellow and American Book Award winning author of *American Copper*, *Balefire*, and *American Masculine*

“At thirty, the utopian community of Daybreak, Missouri, again faces challenges from outside and within. Capitalist industry threatens Daybreak’s communal principles—and its lands. Buried passions roil the town’s calm façade; the few remaining founders struggle to retain their vision of a better world; and nature itself resists the assault of miners and loggers. In *The Language of Trees*, third in the Daybreak Series, Steve Wiegenstein explores, with a deft touch and an unerring sense of the rhythms of nineteenth-century life, the intertwined fates of a complex and delightfully human cast of characters.”

—**C. P. Lesley**, author of *The Swan Princess* and other novels

“What an Ozarks miracle Steve Wiegenstein has conjured in Daybreak—a communal hamlet, then a utopian community nearly as intricate in its generations and personalities as Stay More or West Table! Yet Daybreak seethes with its own raw idealisms, yearnings, ambitions, and loves. In *The Language of Trees* you will fall head over heels for Josephine Mercadier. And like Ozarks heroines in those unforgettable, fabled places she, and Daybreak, will ever be inviting you back.”

—**Steve Yates**, author of *The Legend of the Albino Farm*, the Knickerbocker Prize-winning *Sandy and Wayne*, and the Juniper Prize-winning *Some Kinds of Love: Stories*

Guest posts & essays on Reading the Past, Nicole Evelina blog, & more!

KUDOS & PRAISE FOR THE WRITING OF *STEVE WIEGENSTEIN*



Runner-up, Langum Prize in American Historical Fiction

Finalist for the M.M. Bennetts Award in Historical Fiction

“ . . . makes for good reading.”—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“I read *This Old World* without having read the first volume of the trilogy, [*Slant of Light*](#). However, Wiegenstein’s subtle references to the earlier time and past relationships are woven skillfully into this new volume so new readers are not left in the dark, but are enticed to go back to flesh out the original inspiration for *Daybreak* and make acquaintance with its young and hopeful leaders in the first volume.”—*Lens & Pen blog*

“His novel is an exciting and original take on the history of America becoming America, full of complex characters and rich, realistic dialogue. *Slant of Light* is the perfect summer read for any fan of historical fiction.”—*Southern Literary Review*

“ . . . excellent A thoroughly American story with more than regional appeal, *Slant of Light* is intellectually involving from the outset, and its flawed characters have a way of latching onto readers’ emotions.”—*Reading the Past*

“ . . . a fantastically great book. I rarely read historical fiction set around the Civil War, and this book's time span -- 1857 - 1862 -- was unique, fascinating, and compelling. Wiegenstein's writing is vibrant and engrossing, his characters uncomfortably real, and I was immediately plunged into a time and world that frightened and fascinated me. . . . a philosophical armchair escape that is grounded, accessible, and real.”—*Unabridged Chick*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How much did you know about Utopian communities in America before reading this novel?
2. How do you see Utopian communities fitting into the larger lens of American history as a whole? In what ways is this novel, though historical fiction, current?
3. Newton Turner has to lead because he is male, even in a Utopian community. Discuss.
4. Though Newton is in charge, Josephine and Charlotte seem to be the real leaders of the community. Why?
5. What is special about Josephine Mercadier, beyond her looks?
6. Discuss the role of outsiders in this novel.
7. How is faith important to the characters in this story? What kinds of faith do the characters have?
8. Daybreak survived the divisions created by the Civil War. Do you think Daybreak will survive the rise of the timber industry?
9. Is this an environmental novel?
10. In what ways does the theme of justice play out in THE LANGUAGE OF TREES?
11. Is this a love story?
12. How important is place to this novel? Could this novel have taken place anywhere? Why or why not?

Speaking with
STEVE WIEGENSTEIN



- 1. Though THE LANGUAGE OF TREES is set in the Missouri Ozarks, its themes are universal and speak to a broader American audience: our independence as a people and our need to live on our own terms, the consistent battle between those who value land itself and captains of industry, the desire to press forward for the next frontier. How well known is the Ozark history in our larger public narrative? Is it included in stories and studies of American history?**

Ozark history is not well known, even among Ozarkers. The more I learn of American history, the more I appreciate all the lesser-known byways and stories that make up the national fabric. As a product of the rural Midwest myself, I find that the popular image of the region's history is framed in expansionist, urban-centric terms; hardy pioneers heading westward, and only the ones lacking courage stopped off in Indiana or Illinois or what have you. Then a century later, here comes the big urban migration, and again the story is that the ones with gumption get up and leave. As a novelist, it's not my job to revise history, but I definitely enjoy writing stories that embrace the diversity and richness of this part of the American experience.

As for the Ozarks themselves, the common image is of them as a cultural backwater, but there's some excellent scholarship that tells us Ozarkers were as aware of larger trends in American culture as they chose to be. The Ozarks are littered with old opera houses and lyceums built in the nineteenth century. Their real backwardness, like that of other parts of America, has been economic. This dates back to the French in the late 1600s. They've always been a place to come to, extract something desirable, and get out, whether it's lead, iron, timber, electric power, or today, pretty pictures. This extractive cycle has shaped the landscape, and it's shaped the people. If Ozarkers have a reputation for being suspicious of outsiders, it's a reputation they come by with some reason.

- 2. What are the Ozarks like today?**

I think they're a fascinating place. They've seen a great influx of retirees, because of their natural beauty and low cost of living; as I said, we're a great exporter of pretty pictures. But actually living an entire life there--making a living, raising kids--is very hard. Like much of rural America, it's a region that has been gutted of the ordinary necessities of comfortable existence, like grocery stores, pharmacies, hospitals, reliable internet service, and the like. Those things are becoming concentrated in the small- to medium-sized cities, like Springfield and Bentonville, while the more rural places are losing their economic viability. So you see some areas that are very high-tech and vibrant, and other areas where you have to drive thirty miles to visit the only doctor in the county. And that

inaccessibility does attract some people who want to be inaccessible, like Trappist monks, paranoid millionaires, and drug dealers. For a novelist interested in social flux and American rural life, it's paradise.

3. This novel is actually part of a trilogy but was written to be a stand-alone. What were the challenges in writing a stand-alone that has “siblings”?

First, I try to wipe my mental slate with the beginning of each book, so that I'm not relying on knowledge a new reader wouldn't possess. That task takes some mental trickery I have to play on myself. Then there's the basic challenge, which is keeping everybody's storyline straight--their ages, their inter-family relationships, and so forth. I've taken some characters from their twenties into their fifties, and some from birth to adulthood, so keeping them consistent while allowing room for growth is a continual challenge. But more important, and more thrilling, is the challenge of letting the characters develop emotionally while still developing the long-term themes that I want to explore. There's a constant tension between being character-focused and theme-focused, so I feel a little bit like a juggler at times, but it's a great feeling. I have a view of these novels as pieces within a larger cycle, so I try to keep that larger picture in mind all the time.

4. What kind of research did writing this novel require? Did you have to learn about the lumber and mining industries?

Having grown up in the Ozarks with a sawmill just down the road, I learned a lot about logging by osmosis. I never worked in the timber myself, but a lot of my high school classmates did, and some still do. My dad was a quarry foreman, so mining was discussed around the dinner table a lot--blast patterns, time delay triggers, the properties of rock. But I did have to research the history of the early industries, and that was marvelous! I modeled my mill town on Grandin, which at its peak was one of the largest lumber producers in America, with two mills that could produce more than 200,000 board feet of lumber per day between them. It was one of the nation's first truly industrial approaches to natural resource extraction; imagine a sawmill of that era, powered by nine boilers running three steam engines around the clock, capable of cutting ninety railcars' worth of lumber every day. That's what the big mill at Grandin could do. And then imagine the degree of deforestation that kind of operation would cause. The cutting over of the Ozarks mirrored the cutting over of other great timberlands of America at that time, and it precipitated one of our first environmental catastrophes. Thankfully, Missouri forests recovered from that devastation, and the timber industry today is much more focused on sustainability, but there are some powerful lessons to be learned from that era.

5. What interests you about utopian movements in American history? Do we still have some?

Utopianism is part and parcel of the American mind, and it has never left us. The American experiment itself can be envisioned as a utopian project, if we define utopianism as the idea that humans will improve if placed into the right social conditions.

We're a country that just won't let go of the notion of our own perfectability. Today there are hundreds of social-experiment communities around the country, though the term "utopia" has fallen out of favor; nowadays we call them "intentional communities," but they are driven by the same noble desire--to improve human nature by improving our surroundings. And of course, utopian experiments can slide quickly toward cults, as history tells us. So for that reason we look askance at them. But I am struck by the incredible degree of optimism and self-sacrifice they so often demonstrate.

6. How hard is it to write the story of a community and then to pull specific characters out for greater emphasis? How did you decide which characters to feature?

I tend to write intuitively, which means that characters often take unexpected turns as my unconscious mind guides the story. The character of Charlotte, for example, was originally intended as a kind of co-main character in the books with her husband James, but she kept getting more and more interesting. So the whole story line bent in her direction. If it's possible to say you fell in love with one of your own characters, I certainly fell in love with Charlotte. I've had readers tell me the same thing about Adam Cabot from the first book, that they just fell in love with him.

7. In actual American utopian communities post-Civil War, did women have equal footing with men?

Sadly, that's a principle that was honored more in the breach than the observance, although there were some notable exceptions, such as the Shakers. But even in ideal societies, old ways of thinking die hard. Another remarkable group that had an unorthodox social structure was the Koreshan settlement in Florida. Although its founder was male, the day-to-day business of the community was overseen by a council of seven women called "The Seven Sisters," who lived together in a house called the Planetary Court. Of course, they also believed the earth was hollow, so their progressive ideas were balanced out by the nutty ones, I guess.

8. What caused those communities to fail?

Most utopian communities fall into two categories: those founded by a charismatic leader and those founded by a religious group. With leader-driven communities, once the leader dies or loses the confidence of the community, the community fades away quickly. Communities that have some sort of larger denominational background have a better chance of survival. We've seen some spectacular breakups of communities when a charismatic leader goes over the line!

9. Female characters are the primary movers in this novel, Josephine and Charlotte being key to the plot. Newton and Gardiner are important as well, but it is the women who seem to drive the story. Why did you focus on the women?

I have had the good fortune to have some powerful and influential women in my life from an early age, so I suppose the portrayal of women's minds and struggles is a subject I've always been interested in. Nineteenth-century utopias often talked such a good game when it came to the equality of the sexes, but rarely lived up to those ideals. So the challenges to a woman of being an intelligent, realistic, complete human being, in a society that was supposed to foster such things, would have been felt even more sharply than in mainstream society, I think. From that perspective, life in a utopian community resembled life in the outside world: the men would make the speeches, but the women made them work. How could a writer not find that situation irresistible?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Photo credit: Kaci Smart

[Steve Wiegenstein](#) is the author of *Slant of Light* (2012) and *This Old World* (2014). *Slant of Light* was the runner-up for the David J. Langum Prize in American Historical Fiction, and *This Old World* was a shortlisted finalist for the M.M. Bennetts Award in Historical Fiction. Steve grew up in the Missouri Ozarks and worked there as a newspaper reporter before entering the field of higher education. He now lives in Columbia, Missouri.

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Steve enjoys meeting with book groups and often speaks at libraries and for other organizations. Please contact him through his website.

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