



JOHN WILLIAMS

Stoner A NOVEL

BY JOHN WILLIAMS

NEW YORK • THE VIKING PRESS

TITLE PAGE FROM THE FIRST EDITION OF *STONER*,
1965, NEW YORK, THE VIKING PRESS.

Seven Notes of Advocacy and Affection For John Williams' *Stoner*

By Robert Day

An Essay-Review: *Stoner*, a novel by John Williams. New York Review Books Classics, 2006. Original trade cloth from Viking, 1965.

1. Description

Remember the scene in Conrad's "The Secret Sharer" where our narrator/Captain stops to detail his cabin? How careful Conrad was to draw the blue-prints of the floor plan. Or Melville's description of London's Temple-Bar, its microcosm of the world, in "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids." And there is William Maxwell in *So Long, See You Tomorrow*: the houses built and Giacometti unbuilt. The streets and shops of a Midwestern town. The country around that town and those farms. The lanes and roads. These writers and others: Cather. Porter. Then there is John Williams who, in *Stoner* (as well as his novel *Butcher's Crossing*), might have written the finest descriptive prose in the late 20th century.

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Read: *It was dark outside, and a spring chill was in the evening air. He breathed deeply and felt his body tingle in the coolness. Beyond the jagged outline of the apartment houses the town lights glowed upon a thin mist that hung in the air. At the corner a street light pushed feebly against the darkness that closed around it; from the darkness beyond it the sound of laughter broke abruptly into the silence, lingered and died.*

"Lingered and died," you can be sure, will turn out to describe more than laughter.

2. The Story

Plot is one thing, story something else. John Williams knows the difference. His account of William Stoner, a beleaguered but quietly and steadfastly triumphant professor, is not an academic

novel, even though its syllabus is the hedged-in world of the university: bitter, petty food fights among colleagues; truculent students; dreary talking-of-Michelangelo receptions; the required teacher/student affair.

Stoner is a love story. More than one. For plot, it does not substitute intrigue. The novel is not “thrilling” or “titillating,” or even “gripping” in the sense those blurb-words are used. It is as careful with its multiple loves (wife/daughter/friends/literature and the life-of-the-mind) as the main lovers (William Stoner and Katherine Driscoll) are with each other. Careful and passionate at once. Again, read:

In the morning they awoke to find themselves twined together, their bodies warm and luxuriant beneath the heavy blankets. They poked their heads out of the blankets and watched their breath condense in great clouds in the cold air; they laughed like children and pulled the covers back over their heads and pressed themselves more closely together. Sometimes they made love and stayed in bed all morning and talked, until the sun came through the east window; sometimes Stoner sprang out of bed as soon as they were awake and pulled the covers from Katherine's naked body and laughed at her screams as he kindled a fire in the great fireplace. Then they huddled together before the fireplace, with a blanket around them, and waited to be warmed by the glowing fire and the natural warmth of their own bodies.

3. “As” and “As If”

Those who find our dorsal hairs standing along the backs of our necks when we read the fine habitual formulations of writers like John Williams (the habit of being for writers), will take special pleasure in the reach of his comparisons: neither too far nor too close. And rich beyond what they compare. John Williams has the touch that not even talent (much less technique) can explain. There must be a muse after all:

His mother regarded her life patiently, as if it were a long moment that she had to endure.

At school he did his lessons as if they were chores only somewhat less exhausting than those around the farm.

It was the force of public tragedy he felt, a horror and a woe so all-pervasive that private tragedies and personal misfortunes were removed to another state of being, yet were intensified by the vastness in which they took place, as the poignancy of a lone grave might be intensified by a great desert surrounding it.

4. Backdrop as Scrim

All through *Stoner*, wars rage and take their tolls on young lives; near the start of the novel, William Stoner decides not to sign up for the folly that was to be World War I (a good friend will be killed in that folly; another will survive and become dean of the university). By the time World War II consumes the planet, Stoner is too old for service; and toward the end of the novel it is the Korean War that drains the student body of men.

The years of the war blurred together, and Stoner went through them as he might have gone through a driving and nearly unendurable storm, his head down, his jaw locked, his mind fixed upon the next step and the next and the next. Yet for all his stoical endurance and his stolid movement through the days and weeks, he was an intensely divided man. One part of him recoiled in instinctive horror at the daily waste, the inundation of destruction and death that inexorably assaulted the mind and heart; once again he saw the faculty depleted, he saw the classrooms emptied of their young men, he saw the haunted looks upon those who remained behind, and saw in those looks the slow death of the heart, the bitter attrition of feeling and care. War as Backstory:

But in the hands of John Williams, it is more than that. The wars that document the time of the novel in United States history become part of the tapestry of the novel. They are both the backdrops in stage productions and in photographs of the old West, and the scrim through which we look to see the threads of the

love stories. The English poet Philip Larkin notes that we should not ask about the meaning of great poetry but say, My God, that's splendid: How did he do it? In *Stoner*, scrim to backdrop to tapestry is seamless, and Larkin's question cannot be answered.

5. Mortality Warning

Those readers who are Recovering Academics, Practicing Academics, or even Nubile Academics, should not read *Stoner* unless they are willing to face the abyss of their own mortality. No matter how good a teacher you are or have been, no matter how much you know and love your subject, no matter . . . no matter . . . no matter . . . you, too, shall pass and be forgotten with the rest.

6. The Love of Learning

He wanted to work in the period of the English Renaissance and to extend his study of classical and medieval Latin influences into that area. He was in the stage of planning his study, and it was that stage which gave him the most pleasure—the selection among alternative approaches, the rejection of certain strategies, the mysteries and uncertainties that lay in unexplored possibilities, the consequences of choice. . . . The possibilities he could see so exhilarated him that he could not keep still.

7. The Stages of Man

It all ends badly. As it began. And as it was in the middle: Stoner's parents had sent him to the university so he might come back to the farm and help. He did not. His marriage was a wreck that left only shards of bones and bits of flesh. His daughter gets pregnant (this is the 1950s) by one of Stoner's students, and there is a shotgun wedding.

A hundred or so words later the husband is killed in Korea. A few thousand words more and Stoner's daughter is a drunk. The mean-spirited chairman of the English department gives him a five-day schedule teaching bonehead English (thus depriving Stoner of his favorite courses), and forces the love of his life (*In his forty-third*

year William Stoner learned what others, much younger, had learned before him: that the person one loves at first is not the person one loves at last, and that love is not an end but a process through which one person attempts to know another), Katherine Driscoll, out of town.

The wars of the world, the misery of the university wars, his bad marriage, the wasted life he sees his daughter living are added to the loss of Katherine, and the result is described near the novel's end at Stoner's bedside by his wife, Edith: "*Oh, Willy,*" she said, "*You're all eaten up inside. . . . The doctor said it has spread all over. Oh, poor Willy.*"

P.S. Still, there is love and dignity in this: [*Stoner and Katherine*] *were both shy, and they knew each other slowly, tentatively; they came close and drew apart; they touched and withdrew, neither wishing to impose upon the other more than might be welcomed. Day by day, the layers of reserve that protected them dropped away, so that at last they were like many who are extraordinarily shy, each open to the other, unprotected, perfectly and unselfconsciously at ease. That will be the way you feel about John Williams' Stoner as you read it.*

—Robert Day