



Courtesy of Nancy Williams

BIOGRAPHY

John Williams (1922–1994) was born and raised in Northeast Texas. Despite a talent for writing and acting, Williams flunked out of a local junior college after his first year and reluctantly joined the war effort, serving in the United States Army Air Force in China, Burma, and India from 1942 to 1945. Once home, Williams found a small publisher for his first novel and enrolled at the University of Denver, where he was eventually to receive both his B.A. and M.A., and where he was to return as an instructor in 1954. Williams founded the creative writing program at the University of Denver and remained on its staff until he retired to Arkansas in 1985. His other novels—amazingly varied in plot and setting—are *Butcher’s Crossing*, about a buffalo hunt in the 1870s and “one of the finest novels of the West ever to come out of the West” (*The Denver Post*), and the National Book Award–winning *Augustus*, a historical novel of ancient Rome.

STONER

by John Williams

Introduction by John McGahern

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“A masterly portrait of a truly virtuous and dedicated man.”

—*The New Yorker*

“An exquisite study, bleak as a Hopper, of a hopelessly honest academic at a meretricious Midwestern university. I had not known. . . that the kind of unsparing portrait of failed marriage shown in *Stoner* existed before John Cheever.” —D. T. Max, *Los Angeles Times*

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Stoner is the story of a man and his fate: his pursuit of love and his faith in the value of honest work. In beautiful, clear prose, John Williams writes a remarkably original, thoughtful, and moving variation on the classic American story of the “self-made man.”

William Stoner is the only son of a dirt-poor Missouri farmer who is sent to college to study agriculture and discovers there the life of the mind. He makes his first friends there, is mentored by an English professor who awakens in him a deep love of teaching and learning, and decides never to go back to his old way of life. But it is not so easy to leave the past behind—Stoner is haunted by the distance that opens between him and his parents—or to find a way into the future. He falls in love with and marries Edith, a girl from a far more privileged background, but he is mystified when their marriage turns cold and uncommunicative, while the birth of their one child only divides them further; soon there is nothing of his home life left.

Stoner takes refuge in his work but has battles to wage there too. Charles Walker, a coniving and unqualified student, has the support of Professor Lomax, a powerful member of the department; when Stoner upholds the principles of academic rigor and seriousness by refusing to pass Walker, Lomax begins a lifetime of professional retaliation and personal revenge against him. Later in life, when Stoner finds genuine love in the company of Katherine Driscoll, a graduate student, it is Lomax who makes sure to subvert their connection.

Stoner tells a seemingly simple story of ordinary life, of disappointment, compromise, and endurance. The magic of John Williams’s novel is that it transforms what would appear to be a chronicle of failure into a tale of unexpected triumph, the triumph of a man’s stoic determination and dignity in spite of the destructive agencies of the world.

FOR DISCUSSION

1. The first page of the book gives away the whole story, in a way, and yet it also draws you in. Is this a different approach than you’re used to? What are you curious about while you read the rest of the novel? Do you think back to Stoner’s fate while you’re reading, and does that change your feelings about what’s happening in the story? Do you like this kind of opening or not?

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Samuel Butler, *The Way of All Flesh*

Willa Cather, *My Ántonia*

Willa Cather, *The Professor's House*

F. Scott Fitzgerald, *Tender Is the Night*

Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections*

Richard Sennett, *The Hidden Injuries of Class*

Wallace Stegner, *Crossing to Safety*

OTHER NYRB CLASSICS OF INTEREST

Butcher's Crossing

John Williams
(introduction by Michelle Latiolais)

The Middle of the Journey

Lionel Trilling
(introduction by Monroe Engel)

We Think the World of You

J. R. Ackerley
(introduction by P. N. Furbank)

Mary Olivier: A Life

May Sinclair
(introduction by Katha Pollitt)

2. What do you think about Stoner's relationship to his parents? Why does his father encourage him to go to school, and do you think Stoner's decision to stay at the university is a disappointment to his father or not? How is Stoner affected by the death of his father?

3. Edith is described as doing many unsympathetic things, but the novel also describes her own lonely, unhappy childhood [pp. 54–55], and at the end Stoner forgives her [p. 272]. Is he right to forgive her? Do you sympathize with Edith or not? Does her character seem realistic? Do you think the descriptions of her "war" against Stoner are fair or unfair?

4. In one of Stoner's few confrontations with Edith, she says that she loves her husband and child, and he realizes that she means it [pp. 125–126]. Is she telling the truth? In what way? Does that make the whole situation better or worse?

5. When Edith's father commits suicide, her mother says mysteriously, "They were very close...much closer than they seemed" [p. 116]. What do you think she means by this? How is Edith like her father?

6. Do you think Stoner is a good father to Grace? Why or why not?

7. In the book there are many beautiful descriptions of places, both outdoors and indoors, to which Stoner feels closely connected. He builds his study, for example, to define "an image that was ostensibly of a place but which was actually of himself" [p. 100]. Are there other places that have such important meaning for him? Which places do you see in that way in your own life?

8. What happens to turn Stoner into a good teacher, and why is this such a deep change for him [pp. 112–113]? Are there connections between this description of authentic, enthusiastic teaching and Williams's style in the book as a whole?

9. Why does Stoner, in spite of all the consequences, insist on opposing Walker? What values is he trying to uphold? Is he right to be so stubborn, or should he have given in?

10. Two of the most important characters in the book, Charles Walker and Dr. Hollis Lomax, are physically deformed. Why do you think Williams chose to make them deformed? Do you think this deformity has a deeper meaning? Later, when Stoner is in love with Katherine, "it occurred to him that he had never before known the body of another; and it occurred to him further that that was the reason he had always somehow separated the self of another from the body that carried that self around" [p. 196]. Is this related? What is Stoner's own body like? Edith's? Grace's?

11. Stoner says that his relationship with Katherine made him look closely at the familiar, ridiculous figure of a man having a midlife crisis and an affair with a younger woman, "but the longer he looked, the less familiar it became. It was not himself that he saw, and he knew suddenly that it was no one" [p. 202]. Does Stoner's story change your view of this cliché as well? Are there people it really does apply to? If it is true of no one, then where do clichés like this come from?

12. Why doesn't Stoner run away with Katherine? Do you think he should have? Why? What do you think would have happened?

13. Much of the fate of the characters in this book seems determined by their childhood. In what way are people free to change or escape their upbringings? Stoner, Edith, Grace: do they define themselves or are they determined by their pasts?

14. John Williams said in an interview that "I think [William Stoner] is a real hero. A lot of people who have read the novel think that Stoner had such a sad and bad life. I think he had a very good life." Do you agree? In what ways is Stoner's life successful or heroic?