

NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



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. He reluctantly joined the war effort, enlisting in the Army Air Corps, and managing to write a draft of his first novel while there. Once home, Williams found a small publisher for the 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 was to remain on the staff of the writing program at the University of Denver until his retirement in 1985. During these years, he was an active guest lecturer and writer, publishing two volumes of poetry and three novels, *Butcher's Crossing* (forthcoming from NYRB Classics), *Stoner*, and the National Book Award—winning *Augustus*.

JOHN McGAHERN (1934–2006) was one of the most acclaimed Irish writers of his generation. His work, including six novels and four collections of short stories, often centered on the Irish predicament, both political and temperamental. *Amongst Women*, his best-known book, was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and made into a popular miniseries. His last book, the memoir *All Will Be Well*, was published shortly before his death.

STONER JOHN WILLIAMS

Introduction by John McGahern NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS New York



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Introduction

On the opening page of this classic novel of university life, and the life of the heart and the mind, John Williams states bluntly the mark Stoner left behind: "Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound that evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers." In plain prose, which seems able to reflect effortlessly every shade of thought and feeling, Williams proceeds to subvert that familiar worldly judgment by bringing Stoner, and everything linked to him—the time, the place, the people—vividly to life, the passion of the writing masked by coolness and clarity of intelligence.

Stoner's origins were as humble as the earth his parents worked. In the beginning they are shown as hardly more animate than their own clay, but in vivid scenes, such as their attendance at Stoner's wedding to a banker's daughter, their innate dignity and gentleness contradict that easy judgment, and towards the novel's end Stoner himself seems to acquire their mute, patient strength.

Stoner was an only child, and though good at school had no other expectation than to one day take over the fields he was already helping to work. One evening after the day's toil his father said, "Country agent came by last week ... Says they have a new school at the University of Columbia. They call it a college of agriculture. Says he thinks you ought to go."

At the university he earns his bed and board by working on a nearby farm owned by a first cousin of his mother. This is bare board and hard, brutal work, but he gets through it stoically, in much the same way as he gets through the science courses at the university. "The course in soil chemistry caught his interest in a general way … But the required survey of English

literature troubled and disquieted him in a way nothing had ever done before."

The instructor Archer Sloane changes his life. He abandons science to study literature. At the prompting of his mentor, he stays on at the university, laboring on the cousin's farm while obtaining his Master of Arts. At his graduation he tries to tell his parents that he will not be returning to their farm when they come to attend the degree ceremony. "If you think you ought to stay here and study your books, then that's what you ought to do," his father concludes towards the end of that moving scene.

The novel then details the outwardly undistinguished career of an assistant professor of English within the walls of the university: his teaching, his reading and his writing, his friendships, his falling in love with an idealized woman, his slow and bitter discovery of that person once they marry, and how their gentle, pliable daughter becomes the wife's chosen battleground. Outside the marriage, Stoner's affair with a young teacher becomes entwined in bitter, vindictive university politics.

This love affair between two intelligent people is brought to life with a rare delicacy. A healthy sensuality is set against their vulnerability as they discover the glory of the first day of the world. "The life they had together was one that neither of them had really imagined. They grew from passion to lust to a deep sensuality that renewed itself from moment to moment." They study, they converse, they play. "They learned to be together without speaking and they got the habit of repose." Not only did they find pleasure in one another but meaning, which is drawn with playful, affectionate irony. "Like all lovers, they spoke much of themselves, as if they might thereby understand the world which made them possible."

Integral as it is to the plot, the love affair serves more importantly in the overall vision as a source of light in the darkness of Stoner's marriage, a powerful suggestion of the happiness that might have been.

Stoner's wife is a type that can be glimpsed in much American writing, through such different sensibilities as O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Faulkner, Scott Fitzgerald—beautiful, unstable, educated to observe the surfaces of a

privileged and protected society—but never can that type of wife have been revealed as remorselessly as here:

She was educated upon the premise that she would be protected from the gross events that life might thrust in her way, and upon the premise that she had no other duty than to be a graceful and accomplished accessory to that protection, since she belonged to a social and economic class to which protection was an almost sacred obligation ... Her moral training, both at the schools she attended and at home, was negative in nature, prohibitive in intent, and almost entirely sexual. The sexuality, however, was indirect and unacknowledged; therefore it suffused every other part of her education, which received most of its energy from that recessive and unspoken moral force. She learned that she would have duties towards her husband and family and that she must fulfill them ... Her needlepoint was delicate and useless, she painted misty landscapes of thin water-color washes, and she played the piano with a forceless but precise hand; yet she was ignorant of her own bodily functions, she had never been alone to care for her own self one day of her life, nor could it ever have occurred to her that she might become responsible for the well-being of another ... Upon that inner privacy William Stoner now intruded.

They marry without knowledge of one another and with nothing in common but desire. Their sexual incompatibility is described with the same chasteness as the deep sensuality of the lovers:

When he returned, Edith was in bed with the covers pulled to her chin, her face turned upward, her eyes closed, a thin frown creasing her forehead. Silently, as if she were asleep, Stoner undressed and got into bed beside her. For several moments he lay with his desire, which had become an impersonal thing, belonging to himself alone. He spoke to Edith, as if to find a haven for what he felt; she did not answer. He put

his hand upon her and felt beneath the thin cloth of her nightgown the flesh he had longed for. He moved his hand upon her; she did not stir; her frown deepened. Again he spoke, saying her name to silence; then he moved his body upon her, gentle in his clumsiness. When he touched the softness of her thighs she turned her head sharply away and lifted her arm to cover her eyes. She made no sound.

Her sexuality then changes violently when she decides she wants a child and ceases completely as soon as she is pregnant. Soon after their daughter is born, the child becomes the focus of the mother's inner turmoil, her unresolved hatred of Stoner. If the portrait has a flaw, it is in its remorselessness, yet such is the clarity of the understanding that we come to accept it simply as the way things are, in the same way as the love affair becomes the way things ought to have been.

In the many minor portraits the touch is equally sure and psychologically astute: "Like many men who consider their success incomplete, he was extraordinarily vain and consumed with a sense of his own importance. Every ten or fifteen minutes he removed a large gold watch from his vest pocket, looked at it, and nodded to himself." There are Stoner's friends, the brilliant David Masters, who gives voice to some of John Williams's own views on the nature of a university, goes to the war and is killed in France; the worldly Gordon Finch who returns from the war with military honors to the university, where he rises to be dean of the faculty. Finch remains Stoner's loyal if sometimes exasperated ally and protector within the university, and his uncomplicated friendship is there for the whole of Stoner's life. We witness, too, the slow decline of Stoner's mentor, Archer Sloane, and the rise of his replacement, Hollis Lomax, who becomes Stoner's implacable enemy. In a novel of brilliant portraits, that of Hollis Lomax is the most complex. Some of the scenes of conflict are almost unbearable in their intensity.

Stoner is also a novel about work, the hard unyielding work of the farms; the work of living within a destructive marriage and bringing up a daughter

with patient mutability in a poisoned household; the work of teaching literature to mostly unresponsive students. How Williams manages to dramatize this almost impossible material is itself a small miracle.

In a rare interview given late in life, John Williams says of Stoner:

I think he's 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. He had a better life than most people do, certainly. He was doing what he wanted to do, he had some feeling for what he was doing, he had some sense of the importance of the job he was doing. He was a witness to values that are important ... The important thing in the novel to me is Stoner's sense of a *job*. Teaching to him is a job—a job in the good and honorable sense of the word. His job gave him a particular kind of identity and made him what he was ... It's the love of the thing that's essential. And if you love something, you're going to understand it. And if you understand it, you're going to learn a lot. The lack of that love defines a bad teacher ... You never know all the results of what you do. I think it all boils down to what I was trying to get at in *Stoner*. You've got to keep the faith. The important thing is to keep the tradition going, because the tradition is civilization.

John Williams is best known for his novels, *Nothing But the Night, Stoner, Butcher's Crossing*, and *Augustus*, for which he won the National Book Award in 1973. He also published two volumes of verse and edited a classic anthology of English Renaissance poetry. The novels are not only remarkable for their style but also for the diversity of their settings. No two novels are alike except for the clarity of the prose; they could easily pass for the work of four different writers. In the course of the long and fascinating interview that Williams gave to Brian Wooley from which I have quoted his remarks about Stoner, it grows clear that of the four novels *Stoner* is the most personal, in that it is closely linked to John Williams's own life and career, without in any way being autobiographical. The interview was given

in 1985, the year Williams retired as Professor of English from the University of Denver where he had taught for thirty years. Pressed towards the end of the interview he complains about the change away from pure study within the universities, the results of which cannot be predicted, towards a purely utilitarian, problem-solving way of doing things more efficiently, both in the arts and sciences, all of which can be predicated and measured. Then, more specifically, Williams complains about the changes in the teaching of literature and the attitude to the text "as if a novel or poem is something to be *studied* and *understood* rather than *experienced*." Wooley then suggests playfully, "It's to be exegeted, in other words." "Yes. As if it were a kind of puzzle." "And literature is written to be entertaining?" Wooley suggests again, "Absolutely. My God, to read without joy is stupid."

There is entertainment of a very high order to be found in *Stoner*, what Williams himself describes as "an escape into reality" as well as pain and joy. The clarity of the prose is in itself an unadulterated joy. Set a generation back from Williams's own, the novel is distanced not only by this clarity and intelligence but by the way the often unpromising material is so coolly dramatized. The small world of the university opens out to war and politics, to the years of the Depression and the millions who "once walked erect in their own identities," and then to the whole of life.

If the novel can be said to have one central idea, it is surely that of love, the many forms love takes and all the forces that oppose it. "It [love] was a passion neither of the mind nor of the heart, it was a force that comprehended them both, as if they were but the matter of love, its specific substance."

—JOHN McGAHERN

Stoner

This book is dedicated to my friends and former colleagues in the Department of English at the University of Missouri. They will recognize at once that it is a work of fiction—that no character portrayed in it is based upon any person, living or dead, and that no event has its counterpart in the reality we knew at the University of Missouri. They will also realize that I have taken certain liberties, both physical and historical, with the University of Missouri, so that in effect it, too, is a fictional place.

William Stoner entered the University of Missouri as a freshman in the year 1910, at the age of nineteen. Eight years later, during the height of World War I, he received his Doctor of Philosophy degree and accepted an instructorship at the same University, where he taught until his death in 1956. He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses. When he died his colleagues made a memorial contribution of a medieval manuscript to the University library. This manuscript may still be found in the Rare Books Collection, bearing the inscription: "Presented to the Library of the University of Missouri, in memory of William Stoner, Department of English. By his colleagues."

An occasional student who comes upon the name may wonder idly who William Stoner was, but he seldom pursues his curiosity beyond a casual question. Stoner's colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now; to the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers.

He was born in 1891 on a small farm in central Missouri near the village of Booneville, some forty miles from Columbia, the home of the University. Though his parents were young at the time of his birth—his father twenty-five, his mother barely twenty—Stoner thought of them, even when he was a boy, as old. At thirty his father looked fifty; stooped by labor, he gazed without hope at the arid patch of land that sustained the family from one year to the next. His mother regarded her life patiently, as if it were a long

moment that she had to endure. Her eyes were pale and blurred, and the tiny wrinkles around them were enhanced by thin graying hair worn straight over her head and caught in a bun at the back.

From the earliest time he could remember, William Stoner had his duties. At the age of six he milked the bony cows, slopped the pigs in the sty a few yards from the house, and gathered small eggs from a flock of spindly chickens. And even when he started attending the rural school eight miles from the farm, his day, from before dawn until after dark, was filled with work of one sort or another. At seventeen his shoulders were already beginning to stoop beneath the weight of his occupation.

It was a lonely household, of which he was an only child, and it was bound together by the necessity of its toil. In the evenings the three of them sat in the small kitchen lighted by a single kerosene lamp, staring into the yellow flame; often during the hour or so between supper and bed, the only sound that could be heard was the weary movement of a body in a straight chair and the soft creak of a timber giving a little beneath the age of the house.

The house was built in a crude square, and the unpainted timbers sagged around the porch and doors. It had with the years taken on the colors of the dry land—gray and brown, streaked with white. On one side of the house was a long parlor, sparsely furnished with straight chairs and a few hewn tables, and a kitchen, where the family spent most of its little time together. On the other side were two bedrooms, each furnished with an iron bedstead enameled white, a single straight chair, and a table, with a lamp and a wash basin on it. The floors were of unpainted plank, unevenly spaced and cracking with age, up through which dust steadily seeped and was swept back each day by Stoner's mother.

At school he did his lessons as if they were chores only somewhat less exhausting than those around the farm. When he finished high school in the spring of 1910, he expected to take over more of the work in the fields; it seemed to him that his father grew slower and more weary with the passing months.

But one evening in late spring, after the two men had spent a full day hoeing corn, his father spoke to him in the kitchen, after the supper dishes had been cleared away.

"County agent come by last week."

William looked up from the red-and-white-checked oilcloth spread smoothly over the round kitchen table. He did not speak.

"Says they have a new school at the University in Columbia. They call it a College of Agriculture. Says he thinks you ought to go. It takes four years."

"Four years," William said. "Does it cost money?"

"You could work your room and board," his father said. "Your ma has a first cousin owns a place just outside Columbia. There would be books and things. I could send you two or three dollars a month."

William spread his hands on the tablecloth, which gleamed dully under the lamplight. He had never been farther from home than Booneville, fifteen miles away. He swallowed to steady his voice.

"Think you could manage the place all by yourself?" he asked.

"Your ma and me could manage. I'd plant the upper twenty in wheat; that would cut down the hand work."

William looked at his mother. "Ma?" he asked.

She said tonelessly, "You do what your pa says."

"You really want me to go?" he asked, as if he half hoped for a denial. "You really want me to?"

His father shifted his weight on the chair. He looked at his thick, callused fingers, into the cracks of which soil had penetrated so deeply that it could not be washed away. He laced his fingers together and held them up from the table, almost in an attitude of prayer.

"I never had no schooling to speak of," he said, looking at his hands. "I started working a farm when I finished sixth grade. Never held with schooling when I was a young 'un. But now I don't know. Seems like the land gets drier and harder to work every year; it ain't rich like it was when I was a boy. County agent says they got new ideas, ways of doing things they teach you at the University. Maybe he's right. Sometimes when I'm working the

field I get to thinking." He paused. His fingers tightened upon themselves, and his clasped hands dropped to the table. "I get to thinking—" He scowled at his hands and shook his head. "You go on to the University come fall. Your ma and me will manage."

It was the longest speech he had ever heard his father make. That fall he went to Columbia and enrolled in the University as a freshman in the College of Agriculture.

He came to Columbia with a new black broadcloth suit ordered from the catalogue of Sears & Roebuck and paid for with his mother's egg money, a worn greatcoat that had belonged to his father, a pair of blue serge trousers that once a month he had worn to the Methodist church in Booneville, two white shirts, two changes of work clothing, and twenty-five dollars in cash, which his father had borrowed from a neighbor against the fall wheat. He started walking from Booneville, where in the early morning his father and mother brought him on the farm's flat-bed, mule-drawn wagon.

It was a hot fall day, and the road from Booneville to Columbia was dusty; he had been walking for nearly an hour before a goods wagon came up beside him and the driver asked him if he wanted a ride. He nodded and got up on the wagon seat. His serge trousers were red with dust to his knees, and his sun- and wind-browned face was caked with dirt, where the road dust had mingled with his sweat. During the long ride he kept brushing at his trousers with awkward hands and running his fingers through his straight sandy hair, which would not lie flat on his head.

They got to Columbia in the late afternoon. The driver let Stoner off at the outskirts of town and pointed to a group of buildings shaded by tall elms. "That's your University," he said. "That's where you'll be going to school."

For several minutes after the man had driven off, Stoner stood unmoving, staring at the complex of buildings. He had never before seen anything so imposing. The red brick buildings stretched upward from a broad field of green that was broken by stone walks and small patches of garden. Beneath

his awe, he had a sudden sense of security and serenity he had never felt before. Though it was late, he walked for many minutes about the edges of the campus, only looking, as if he had no right to enter.

It was nearly dark when he asked a passer-by directions to Ashland Gravel, the road that would lead him to the farm owned by Jim Foote, the first cousin of his mother for whom he was to work; and it was after dark when he got to the white two-storied frame house where he was to live. He had not seen the Footes before, and he felt strange going to them so late.

They greeted him with a nod, inspecting him closely. After a moment, during which Stoner stood awkwardly in the doorway, Jim Foote motioned him into a small dim parlor crowded with overstuffed furniture and bric-abrac on dully gleaming tables. He did not sit.

"Et supper?" Foote asked.

"No, sir," Stoner answered.

Mrs. Foote crooked an index finger at him and padded away. Stoner followed her through several rooms into a kitchen, where she motioned him to sit at a table. She put a pitcher of milk and several squares of cold cornbread before him. He sipped the milk, but his mouth, dry from excitement, would not take the bread.

Foote came into the room and stood beside his wife. He was a small man, not more than five feet three inches, with a lean face and a sharp nose. His wife was four inches taller, and heavy; rimless spectacles hid her eyes, and her thin lips were tight. The two of them watched hungrily as he sipped his milk.

"Feed and water the livestock, slop the pigs in the morning," Foote said rapidly.

Stoner looked at him blankly. "What?"

"That's what you do in the morning," Foote said, "before you leave for your school. Then in the evening you feed and slop again, gather the eggs, milk the cows. Chop firewood when you find time. Weekends, you help me with whatever I'm doing."

"Yes, sir," Stoner said.

Foote studied him for a moment. "College," he said and shook his head.

So for nine months' room and board he fed and watered the livestock, slopped pigs, gathered eggs, milked cows, and chopped firewood. He also plowed and harrowed fields, dug stumps (in the winter breaking through three inches of frozen soil), and churned butter for Mrs. Foote, who watched him with her head bobbing in grim approval as the wooden churner splashed up and down through the milk.

He was quartered on an upper floor that had once been a storeroom; his only furniture was a black iron bedstead with sagging frames that supported a thin feather mattress, a broken table that held a kerosene lamp, a straight chair that sat unevenly on the floor, and a large box that he used as a desk. In the winter the only heat he got seeped up through the floor from the rooms below; he wrapped himself in the tattered quilts and blankets allowed him and blew on his hands so that they could turn the pages of his books without tearing them.

He did his work at the University as he did his work on the farm—thoroughly, conscientiously, with neither pleasure nor distress. At the end of his first year his grade average was slightly below a B; he was pleased that it was no lower and not concerned that it was no higher. He was aware that he had learned things that he had not known before, but this meant to him only that he might do as well in his second year as he had done in his first.

The summer after his first year of college he returned to his father's farm and helped with the crops. Once his father asked him how he liked school, and he replied that he liked it fine. His father nodded and did not mention the matter again.

It was not until he returned for his second year that William Stoner learned why he had come to college.

By his second year he was a familiar figure on the campus. In every season he wore the same black broadcloth suit, white shirt, and string tie; his wrists protruded from the sleeves of the jacket, and the trousers rode awkwardly about his legs, as if it were a uniform that had once belonged to someone else.

His hours of work increased with his employers' growing indolence, and he spent the long evenings in his room methodically doing his class assignments; he had begun the sequence that would lead him to a Bachelor of Science degree in the College of Agriculture, and during this first semester of his second year he had two basic sciences, a course from the school of Agriculture in soil chemistry, and a course that was rather perfunctorily required of all University students—a semester survey of English literature.

After the first few weeks he had little difficulty with the science courses; there was so much work to be done, so many things to be remembered. The course in soil chemistry caught his interest in a general way; it had not occurred to him that the brownish clods with which he had worked for most of his life were anything other than what they appeared to be, and he began vaguely to see that his growing knowledge of them might be useful when he returned to his father's farm. But the required survey of English literature troubled and disquieted him in a way nothing had ever done before.

The instructor was a man of middle age, in his early fifties; his name was Archer Sloane, and he came to his task of teaching with a seeming disdain and contempt, as if he perceived between his knowledge and what he could say a gulf so profound that he would make no effort to close it. He was feared and disliked by most of his students, and he responded with a detached, ironic amusement. He was a man of middle height, with a long, deeply lined face, cleanly shaven; he had an impatient gesture of running his fingers through the shock of his gray curling hair. His voice was flat and dry, and it came through barely moving lips without expression or intonation; but his long thin fingers moved with grace and persuasion, as if giving to the words a shape that his voice could not.

Away from the classroom, doing his chores about the farm or blinking against the dim lamplight as he studied in his windowless attic room, Stoner was often aware that the image of this man had risen up before the eye of his mind. He had difficulty summoning up the face of any other of his

instructors or remembering anything very specific about any other of his classes; but always on the threshold of his awareness waited the figure of Archer Sloane, and his dry voice, and his contemptuously offhand words about some passage from Beowulf, or some couplet of Chaucer's.

He found that he could not handle the survey as he did his other courses. Though he remembered the authors and their works and their dates and their influences, he nearly failed his first examination; and he did little better on his second. He read and reread his literature assignments so frequently that his work in other courses began to suffer; and still the words he read were words on pages, and he could not see the use of what he did.

And he pondered the words that Archer Sloane spoke in class, as if beneath their flat, dry meaning he might discover a clue that would lead him where he was intended to go; he hunched forward over the desk-top of a chair too small to hold him comfortably, grasping the edges of the desk-top so tightly that his knuckles showed white against his brown hard skin; he frowned intently and gnawed at his underlip. But as Stoner's and his classmates' attention grew more desperate, Archer Sloane's contempt grew more compelling. And once that contempt erupted into anger and was directed at William Stoner alone.

The class had read two plays by Shakespeare and was ending the week with a study of the sonnets. The students were edgy and puzzled, half frightened at the tension growing between themselves and the slouching figure that regarded them from behind the lectern. Sloane had read aloud to them the seventy-third sonnet; his eyes roved about the room and his lips tightened in a humorless smile.

"What does the sonnet mean?" he asked abruptly, and paused, his eyes searching the room with a grim and almost pleased hopelessness. "Mr. Wilbur?" There was no answer. "Mr. Schmidt?" Someone coughed. Sloane turned his dark bright eyes upon Stoner. "Mr. Stoner, what does the sonnet mean?"

Stoner swallowed and tried to open his mouth.