



# Stoner

*John Williams , John McGahern (Introduction)*

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William Stoner is born at the end of the nineteenth century into a dirt-poor Missouri farming family. Sent to the state university to study agronomy, he instead falls in love with English literature and embraces a scholar's life, so different from the hardscrabble existence he has known. And yet as the years pass, Stoner encounters a succession of disappointments: marriage into a "proper" family estranges him from his parents; his career is stymied; his wife and daughter turn coldly away from him; a transforming experience of new love ends under threat of scandal. Driven ever deeper within himself, Stoner rediscovers the stoic silence of his forebears and confronts an essential solitude.

John Williams's luminous and deeply moving novel is a work of quiet perfection. William Stoner emerges from it not only as an archetypal American, but as an unlikely existential hero, standing, like a figure in a painting by Edward Hopper, in stark relief against an unforgiving world.

## Stoner Details

Date : Published 2006 by New York Review Books (first published 1965)

ISBN : 9781590171998

Author : John Williams , John McGahern (Introduction)

Format : Paperback 278 pages

Genre : Fiction, Classics, Literature, Novels

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## Orsodimondo says

### UN DIFETTO DI LUCE\*\*

*Shakespeare le parla attraverso tre secoli di storia, Mr Stoner. Riesce a sentirlo?... Cosa le sta dicendo, Mr Stoner? Cosa significa questo sonetto?*

*Stoner alzò lo sguardo con lentezza, riluttante. "Significa", disse... "Significa", ripeté, e non riuscì a terminare la frase.*

William Stoner era all'università per studiare agraria e tornare in campagna ad aiutare suo padre nei campi e, magari, grazie allo studio, riuscire a far rendere meglio la terra avara.

Un sonetto di Shakespeare lo folgora, come san Paolo sulla via di Damasco. Un'autentica epifania.

Ed è l'inizio di una vita nuova: basta con l'agricoltura, la letteratura e la lingua diventano la passione che lo accompagna fino alla fine.

### Norman Rockwell

In realtà, di Stoner occorre dire qualcos'altro, di ben diverso.

Ma questa parte, all'inizio del libro, ho dovuto sottolinearla, perché io di fronte a questo libro sono rimasto letteralmente folgorato, senza parole, con tante lacrime, ma nessuna parola – e solo una è emersa dalla nebbia umida, "significa", appunto, proprio questa.

Che per me vuol dire, è bello, è bellissimo, questo libro è magnifico.

### Yann Kebbi

Chi è William Stoner?

Un uomo senza qualità, viene da pensare, un mediocre.

Eppure, è pieno di qualità: è un uomo gentile, che conosce la Bellezza; ha un tenero rapporto con sua figlia, conosce l'amore più appassionato (ma esiste una storia d'amore più avvincente nella storia della letteratura?); non prova odio, né risentimento, né violenza; nutre una passione sempiterna per la letteratura e la lingua inglese.

Però: accetta, non si ribella, non dice, no, questo no, non lo farò, subisce, è passivo, inerme, si rassegna, si adatta - si sente fallito, e la sua vita brilla proprio come il perfetto fallimento di un'esistenza che a parte qualche settimana, qualche breve mese, è trascorsa in solitudine.

Stoner muore sostanzialmente solo: e questo credo sia il suo più vero fallimento (ma esiste una morte più trasparente di quella di Stoner nella storia della letteratura?).

### Edward Hopper

Eppure Stoner è un uomo con principi, con idee, mantiene la sua passione per la letteratura, non è infelice, è tutto meno che una pietra: è come se non fosse davvero tangibile, come se fosse su un'altra dimensione, straniero a casa sua.

Una vita minima: dopo l'incipit viene da dire, no, basta, come si può riempire trecento pagine sulla vita di

quest'uomo così insulso? Io non voglio essere lui, e per lui non ho interesse.

Ma ci vuole pochissimo per sentire che siamo in presenza della verità umana, come succede nella grande letteratura, che si tratta di una fuga nella vita.

### **Roberta Montaruli alias K.D**

In qualche strano modo, durante la lettura, ho sentito Flaubert vicino, più di John Williams, che non conoscevo affatto.

E proprio come Flaubert con la sua Madame Bovary, mi viene da dire, Stoner sono io.

Scrittura bisbigliata, lineare, semplice, chiara, limpida, trasparente come una superficie di vetro, si vede attraverso, si capisce...

Un piccolo miracolo, che illumina: proprio come Stoner rimase illuminato dal sonetto 73 di Shakespeare.

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Un difetto di luce, o meglio, A Flaw of Light, era il titolo originale di questo romanzo quando Williams lo consegnò alla sua agente, Marie Rodell. Fu la casa editrice Viking, dopo infiniti rifiuti, a pubblicarlo cambiando il titolo.

97 likes

**Ed ecco Stoner: sarà Casey Affleck a interpretarlo. Joe Wright a dirigere il film, regista dal quale purtroppo non c'è da aspettarsi granché.**

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### **Glenn Russell says**

For the hardworking men and women living in the open, windswept farm country of the American Midwest during the late 19th and early 20th century, day-to-day existence was frequently harsh and occasionally downright hostile, a stark, demanding life chiseling character as can be seen above in artist Grant Wood's *American Gothic*. If you take a good look at this painting and then envision a son, an only child, working the fields alongside his father, you will have a clear image of the starting point of *Stoner*, John Williams' classic novel of quiet perfection.

The novel follows the life of William Stoner from his boyhood on a Missouri farm through his years as a faculty member of the English Department at the University of Missouri. William Stoner is a good man, a man of integrity, a man, as we eventually find out through his relationship with a fellow faculty member, Katherine Driscoll, capable of profound intimacy and tenderness of heart. William Stoner is also a lover of literature, an accomplished scholar and a dedicated teacher.

But all is not well in the life of Professor Stoner, particularly in his home life. As a beginning instructor right out of graduate school, he marries a woman barely twenty years of age from St. Louis, the daughter of a banker, a young woman by the name of Edith Elaine Bostwick. Turns out, young Edith is what we term

nowadays as emotionally abused. And right from the start of her marriage, Edith inflicts emotional abuse on her husband Stoner and eventually on their daughter Grace. Personally, I found reading those parts of the novel involving Edith particularly wrenching bordering on painful.

Indeed, as readers we live through the pain of Stoner dealing with Edith's wall of emotional frigidness and coldness, which includes being relegated as a husband in his late twenties to sleeping on the parlor coach at night. Through all the years of isolation and alienation, including Edith's wedging a wall of separation between Stoner and Grace, there is one particularly poignant scene where we read, "Once, while Edith was upstairs, William and his daughter passed each other in the living room. Grace smiled shyly at him, and involuntarily he knelt on the floor and embraced her. He felt her body stiffen, and he saw her face go bewildered and afraid. He raised himself gently away from her, said something inconsequential, and retreated to his study." For a child to become bewildered and afraid when a parent expresses such tenderness and affection speaks volumes to the level of emotional abuse at home.

Rather than dwelling on the grimness of Stoner's family life, I will conclude with a one final observation: Grace gives birth to a baby boy but after one brief visit did not return to the home of her parents with her son since, as Stoner realizes on his own and Grace tells him in so many words at one point during her whiskey drinking (and, yes, a grim fact: she has turned to alcohol), she got pregnant in the first place to escape from the prison of his mother's presence. Well, my goodness – as readers we have a good idea what it would mean for a sensitive man like William Stoner to be deprived of a relationship with his grandson.

Turning to Stoner's professional life, there are serious cracks within the halls of academe. He is a man of integrity and honesty and the political infighting within academic departments is famous for being vicious and nasty. I wouldn't want to say any more so as to spoil for a reader, but I can assure you Dr. Stoner is on the receiving end of a large dose of viciousness.

But through it all, our main character remains strong. One memorable paragraph from the novel: "But William Stoner knew of the world in a way that few of his younger colleagues could understand. Deep in him, beneath his memory, was the knowledge of hardship and hunger and endurance and pain. Though he seldom thought of his early years on the Booneville farm, there was always near his consciousness the blood knowledge of his inheritance, given him by forefathers whose lives were obscure and hard and stoical and whose common ethic was to present to an oppressive world faces that were expressionless and hard and bleak."

Incidentally, when I was a 12 year old boy I joined me father, mother and sister as we took a trip in our car from the New Jersey shore across the American Midwestern heartland of farms to pay a visit to my grandmother. On the way out and also in my grandmother's town, I heard a number of harrowing tales of farm life, especially for the children of farmers. I reflected on those tales of physical hardship and unending toil when I wrote this surreal micro-fiction a number of years ago:

#### DOWN ON THE FARM

Before he leaves the city they tell him how the country doctor drives a buggy made from the flesh and bones of his former patients.

"Nothing goes to waste," is the way they put it when he finally arrives, "we're all farmers around here."

He joins the doctor on his first visit to a farmhouse to attend a sick woman. Instead of a thermometer, the doctor sticks his middle finger under the woman's tongue and says, "I've done this enough times to know when someone has a fever."

He looks over the doctor's shoulder out the farmhouse window. Beyond a skeleton tied to a pole, he sees the

farmer plowing his field using his younger son harnessed as a beast of burden.

“Doesn't that take superhuman strength?” he asks the doctor.

The doctor answers, “His older son wasn't quite as strong, but still makes a fine scarecrow.”

American author John William (1922-1994)

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## Camille Stein says

The Thinker: Portrait of Louis N. Kenton \* Thomas Cowperthwait Eakins (1844-1916) - <http://ow.ly/BTMT302ZgKN>

*William Stoner se sintió vinculado a él de una manera que no hubiera sospechado; sabía que Lomax había pasado por una especie de conversión, una epifanía de conocimiento a través de las palabras que no podía ser explicada con palabras, como a Stoner le había sucedido una vez, en la clase de Archer Sloane.*

*El amor a la literatura, al lenguaje, al misterio de la mente y el corazón manifestándose en la nimia, extraña e inesperada combinación de letras y palabras, en la tinta más negra y fría... El amor que había ocultado, como si fuese ilícito y peligroso, empezó a exhibirse, vacilante en un principio, luego con temeridad y finalmente con orgullo.*

...

Sí, 'Stoner' puede parecer un elogio de la inutilidad, una reivindicación de lo imposible, del placer sensual e intelectual del viaje, de la fidelidad al propio destino, de la impermeabilidad ante las borrascas que devastan el mundo y a las personas que en él habitan... Y quizá lo sea. Desde luego que sí.

Pero muy pronto advertimos la deriva, descubrimos que en realidad William Stoner es rehén de una fragilidad radical y de una amarga represión interior. Entonces sabemos más todavía: que en ese proceso de depuración personal, de desprendimiento, late también el desarraigo y la tristeza, el discurso de las lágrimas, la pornografía de la soledad y el sufrimiento, la indiferencia y la claudicación.

Y al final es probable que volvamos a recordar el soneto LXXIII de Shakespeare, el soneto del despertar, aquel que tanto apreciaba el profesor: 'amar bien aquello que debes abandonar pronto'.

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## **Maria Headley says**

Devastating novel of academia, unfulfilled hope, and a life not-entirely-lived. Gorgeous writing, heartbreaking plot, and if you're a fan, as I tend to be, of stories set in the dark halls of libraries and universities, this is one to read. The love story within this book is suddenly out-of-nowhere rapturous, and the marriage is brittle, delicate, insensible and perfectly done. The book feels so modern, though the bulk of the action is set in the 30's and 40's. I kept stopping to check that this was true - the love affair, in particular, feels like something that might be happening this moment in an office at, say, Middlebury. Stoner's marriage, in contrast, is painfully frozen in time and in the cultural expectations of women in the early part of the last century, but even so, Stoner's wife's personality feels very real to me, and the way it is written about feels revolutionary. Speaking of revolutionary: I don't know why this book doesn't stand with, say, *Revolutionary Road*, as a massive classic. By the end, I was holding a hand over my mouth, because I kept moaning in sympathy for poor Stoner. I never felt that way reading Yates - whose characters, though foiled totally by their self-involvement, seem somehow to deserve what they get. Reading this felt more like reading someone like Andre Dubus - full of people making destructive choices, but nevertheless, you feel for them, and feel their humanity the whole time you're reading.

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## **Bookdragon Sean says**

### **THIS WAS MY BEST BOOK OF 2016!**

It was a hard decision; it was a choice between this and *The Vegetarian* by Hang Kang. But I had to think which book taught be the most, and which book helped me the most. I enjoyed them both immensely, I loved them, but this one set me on my path in life; thus, I will always be grateful for John Williams and his *Stoner*.

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*He opened the book; and as he did so it became not his own. He let his fingers rifle through the pages and felt a tingling, as if those pages were alive. The tingling came through his fingers and coursed through his flesh and bone; he was minutely aware of it, and he waited till it contained him, until the old excitement that was like horror fixed him where he lay.....*

William Stoner has a terrible life: his marriage is a disaster; his daughter resembles her damaged mother; his teaching career is hindered by an argument with a fellow faculty member, and he is subjected to continual waves of misery. All in all, it's a sad life: it's his life. However, through all the shit times, and the occasional glimpses of happiness, one thing keeps him animated; it's a thing every reader knows: a love of words, a love of books and a love of the wonderment of literature. I will never forget the journey I shared with Stoner in these pages.

He is a flawed man. When he was a student he had no real ambition or drive. He didn't know what he wanted to do, but he knew what he didn't want to do: he didn't want to be a farmer like his farther. A university lecture inspired him with the marvels of Shakespeare; he asked him a question, a question that changed Stoner's life. The result was a switch in academic discipline and an enthusiastic perusal of everything literature based. Stoner became engrossed with his work; he quickly forgot about the outside world, and refused to take part in the war effort. This is a feeling I know all too well. When one is completely engrossed in reading, obsessed even, it becomes difficult to pay attention to reality. If you've made it this far into my review, then I probably don't need to tell you that. Stoner had what he needed: he had his books. But, life isn't always that simple.

*“He had come to that moment in his age when there occurred to him, with increasing intensity, a question of such overwhelming simplicity that he had no means to face it. He found himself wondering if his life were worth the living; if it had ever been.”*

A profound question to ask oneself, and I truly think this helped to consolidate his decisions. Student life comes to an end for most folk. For Stoner there is no end. University is his home; it is his life; it is his passion and his drive: it is the one and only constant in his existence. So why would he ever leave it? Why would he ever give it up? The student becomes the teacher, and Stoner extends his stay for a lifetime. He has nothing else to cling to, only a love for his field of scholarship. I cannot quite express how much I sympathise with this character here. As a student of literature, and a huge hobby reader, sometimes there seems to be little else on the horizon but to peruse one’s passion. For Stoner though, his choice was the only one he could ever have made. His existence is only really for one purpose, and because of this he realised very early on his consequential fate.

*“It’s like it just all goes around and around and keeps on going. It makes you wonder.”*

As Stoner gets older his peers begin to die. In this he sees what awaits him; he has the stark realisation that he, too, will die. This may seem trivial and an obvious fact of life, though a realisation of such magnitude can really alter character. Stoner has a midlife crises; he has a glimpse of what his life could have been like had he married his soul mate: his love and intellectual equal. It is a shame for Stoner that such a thing came when he was already settled, but, again, that’s just life. This problematic relationship sets him even further on his course. I don’t need to tell you about the ending. It is an obvious conclusion for such a book, though I will say that its delivery was nothing short of perfection. Never before have I read a book in which the entire thing is embodied in its final few words. I’m amazed. I’m shaken. I’m stunned. I’m numb.

>**Why you should read this:** I don’t often go as far as to explicitly state something like this in a review. Reading is personal and subjective. My reviews are just my opinion; they may not be shared by others. With this, however, I would go as far as to say that this **should** be read by every reader, every reader who has felt the sharp pangs that literature can evoke. Here is a man who is completely lost; here is a character that has nothing really to live for: here is a man who is lost in the words, and it’s his salvation. And this is his life story. This is not a simple novel. It is a bildungsroman that is tragic, emotive and even inspiring. This book opened my eyes to many things. I learnt a great deal about life and myself in the process. Trust me, fellow bibliophiles, go read it. This is something really special.

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## Ilse says

### **Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach.**

What to do when everything goes wrong? Work, marriage, parenthood, eventually health? Plenty of benevolent advices and platitudes will whizz around your ears, to help you to bounce back . Remember, it is all in your mind. Happiness is the result of your approach to life, not of what happens to you. Revolt, anger, complaining or denial won’t change anything. Focus on what is instead of on what should be. Accept, accept, accept. Take one step at time, keep moving, keep working to what you want in life.

In our times of voluntarist belief in shaping our own destiny, only fools refuse or refrain to act or at least to try to take control of their own life .

But perhaps the only sensible thing to do is keep breathing. Minimal action, minimal reaction. Just embrace plain and simple old-fashioned and untimely Stoicism. Like Stoner. Wisdom lies in tuning our lives to the divine order of the universe and to want what actually is the case. As emotions have an external source, as we are being moved, touched, affected, impassioned, be the Master of Yourself and control your emotions. Do not strive for pleasure. Be un-touched. Only a fool tries to impose his own selfish desires upon reality and is the plaything of his emotions and desires. The consolations of philosophy applied to ordinary life.

Amongst the teachers I know, there is a bittersweet running joke, when talking about the essence of their profession. Why does someone chooses to become a teacher? And, bursting with self-mockery laughter, they sing in unison *Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach*. Stoner's friend Dave Masters, could probably agree with it, when he is partly ironically speaking about the true nature of universities: *"It is an asylum or — what do they call them now? — a rest home, for the infirm, the aged, the discontent, and the otherwise incompetent."*

This novel strongly reminisced academic life, its seclusion and petty machinations. Not having Stoner's gift of endurance, I fled, abandoning the dream of a life of learning and science after 6 years of struggle, as university was not the refuge and source of wisdom this naive working class daughter hoped for, but a ruthless, almost egotistic habitat crushing me – a place where teaching didn't really matter. As Ian trenchantly points out, if we empathize with Stoner's dire life, couldn't it be because of our own wounds and experiences too?

Imagine yourself living together with Stoner. However wise and admirable his stoicism, there is also a solipsistic aspect to it. According to his creator, Stoner is altogether a happy man: *"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."* But what about the effect of his stoic attitudes on the lives of the others in his life? His parents, wife, daughter, lover? Does he really care? I disliked Williams's portrayal of Edith, Stoner's vicious battle-axe of a wife – I guess I am not conversant enough with the perception of American women in that part of history, but her one-dimensional depiction hardly exceeds the caricature image of the neurotic frigid female, like the Madge in Frank Zappa's *Harry you're a beast* (You paint your head - Your mind is dead -- You don't even know what I just said - THAT'S YOU: AMERICAN WOMANHOOD! You're phony on top - You're phony underneath - You lay in bed & grit your teeth. MADGE, I WANT YOUR BODY! HARRY, GET BACK! MADGE, IT'S NOT MERELY PHYSICAL! HARRY, YOU'RE A BEAST!).

Coming no further than these personal musings, I feel not able to do justice to this poignant novel, hitting a little too close to home, for more than one reason. Yes, Stoner is as unforgettable a character as many reviews point out. Yes, in many respects, I have known a Stoner. We were married for 16 years. He was, like Stoner, the most stoic person I ever met. He illustrated his philosophy lectures with a cartoon from D. Palmer's *Looking at Philosophy: The Unbearable Heaviness of Philosophy Made Lighter* ; afterwards showing it to our children to teach them equanimity when things didn't work out as they would like they did. As I am not that stoic like he was, because of its ending, I didn't have the heart to pass the book to him.

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### Jeffrey Keeten says

**"In his extreme youth Stoner had thought of love as an absolute state of being to which, if one were lucky, one might find access; in his maturity he had decided it was the heaven of a false religion, toward which one ought to gaze with an amused disbelief, a gently familiar contempt, and an**

**embarrassed nostalgia. Now in his middle age he began to know that it was neither a state of grace nor an illusion; he saw it as a human act of becoming, a condition that was invented and modified moment by moment and day by day, by the will and the intelligence and the heart."**

William Stoner grew up on a farm, a hardscrabble farm too small to provide more than just subsistence living. They were an undersized family for that time period, just his father and mother and himself. It took all of them to keep up with the backbreaking work of a farm in the early 20th century. His father, in his own way, a visionary man could see that farming was on the cusp of great changes. He sent Stoner to the University of Missouri to find out what the future was going to be for agriculture. Stoner wasn't an inspired student. He still had to work on a relative's farm to pay for his tuition and found the more work he did the less help he got from his relatives. He still had to go back to the family farm and help his father whenever he had spare time. He was almost too busy to worry too much about school

The first pivotal moment for Stoner is when he is sitting in an English class taught by his future mentor. The professor puts him on the spot asking him to explain a Shakespeare Sonnet. Stoner was dumbfounded not only with embarrassment, but by the language of the English bard. He switched majors from the department of agriculture to the department of English literature.

I grew up on a farm about 80 years after Stoner, as anticipated by Stoner's father, production agriculture took great leaps forward replacing a lot of backbreaking labor with machines. Farmers were able to increase their land holdings as tractors and threshers allowed them to maximize daylight hours. I stacked a lot of hay, feed cattle in subzero weather, pulled calves (you've never been properly slimed until you've spent time up to your elbow in a cow's uterus.), fixed fence, rode tractors listening to Royals baseball games to keep from dozing off, drove trucks full of grain, and every minute I wasn't doing something for the farm or playing sports I was reading books. My parents don't know how it happened. It must have been an aberrant gene. Nobody I knew read books, except for the good book, which most of the time I couldn't tell they'd grasped many of the concepts of that book either.

The 1980s farm crises hit just as I was coming of age. Land values had jumped up and many farmers had expanded their operations. Then land values plummeted and bankers started realizing that the loans they had made to these farmers were no longer secured with enough equity. They started calling their customer's notes due. Thousands of farmers were forced to sell out. My Dad survived by the skin of his teeth. He decided there was no future in farming and told me I was going to college. My younger brother was a better fit for farming anyway. My Dad knew that I wasn't really cut out to be a farmer (my nose in a book all the time might have been the tip-off). A crises for many created an opportunity for me. Like Stoner I majored in English Literature.

Stoner becomes a teacher. He decides not to go to war with his friends and suffers from the stigma of swimming against the tide. This is a theme for Stoner, going his own way, ignoring the odd looks, and the snide remarks. He meets a demure young woman named Edith and pursues her doggedly believing that his kindness would be recognized and appreciated by someone so fragile. The description of the consummation of the marriage is one of the grimmest most agonizing that I have ever read.

*"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."*

For a man so sensual and in need of romantic love he unfortunately married the wrong woman. He hoped for a partner, but found himself roped to a woman that embraced invalidism and waged nasty little wars against him that by his nature made him incapable of defending himself. He finds solace in books and spends more and more of his time at the University in Jesse Hall reading.

### **Jesse Hall at the University of Missouri**

Stoner makes enemies of some of his coworkers. He is so unsuited for office politics that it proves to be a detriment to him. Though I was so proud of him towards the end of the book when he cleverly outflanks a department chair intent on driving him from the profession.

He meets a woman, a very special woman as if molded by the gods to be the perfect mate for him. Her name is Katherine Driscoll and the gymnastics involved with the misinterpretations, missteps and miscues of their burgeoning relationship left me emotionally drained. There are movies sometimes or television shows where the audience is on the edge of their seat waiting for the moment when the characters finally realize they are meant to be together and kiss for the first time. Well it wasn't a kiss that became that epic moment for William and Katherine.

*"He found himself trembling; as awkwardly as a boy he went around the coffee table and sat beside her. Tentatively, clumsily, their hands went out to each other; they clasped each other in an awkward, strained embrace; and for a long time they sat together without moving, as if any movement might let escape from them the strange and terrible thing that they held between them in a single grasp."*

Stoner's enemies leap at an opportunity to destroy him. Even the liberal community of a university has its limits. Stoner for the first time in his life is becoming the person he always wanted to be, but the heady days of joy are under assault, and he is trapped by his own sense of honor. He suffers for love just as he is starting to understand it.

*"In this 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."*

This is such a deceptively simple novel. The sparse, powerful prose give this book so much depth. Stoner gets under your skin. He is so stoic in the face of continued and unremitting harassment from the people around him that I found myself sharing the pain with him. The author John Williams grew up on a small farm in Texas and had a similar escape to the University as Stoner and I. He ended up developing the writing program for the University of Denver. In the introduction by John McGahern he relates something that Mr. Williams said that resonates with me as well.

*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**."*

### **John Williams**

I'm a reader that likes to be told a story. I don't want to break books down to their mathematical or scientific structures. I want the mysticism, the emotion of a journey that expands my understanding of humanity.

William Stoner is as real to me as the mailman that delivers my mail or the publisher that signs my checks. If I ever run into him I will shake his large, farm hardened hand and ask him if he has a little bit of time to talk to me about a certain sonnet written by a man by the name of Shakespeare.

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## Jimmy says

Spoiler alert: read at your own peril.

### UPDATE December 2010:

I just submitted this to Better Book Titles. I hope they accept it.

### Original Review October 2009:

This is the most straight-forward linear narrative type of novel I've read in the past year. So at first, I was not impressed. But I soon realized that the novel is impressive precisely because it is able to be so damn linear, the writing style so damn plain, and the characters so damn dull and yet... and yet it manages to make me continue reading on, driven by what I don't know. There is a constant melancholy through the book, but also its points of light.

So that was the first 100 pages or so. Then it gets good. I mean, really good. But I don't know why. Nothing that much changes, it is just events in the life of this guy. But I start to really care about him, or really understand him... or something. Let me just put it out there: this is a depressing novel. It is a devastating novel. It made me cry. But it is not one where horrible thing after horrible thing happens to good people. Many of the things that happen are... yes, horrible, but also very normal... they are more like small dissappointments.

John Williams is able to kill you softly with his immovable patience, his prose which is like the most patient thing in the world, and which builds and builds by inching closer and closer to the precipice. Precisely because he is not flashy. Precisely because he is so restrained in his prose, that you never realize it when you're right on the edge of the cliff and you're like "wait, how did I get here?"

Also: I don't mean to suggest that his prose is boring. His prose is beautiful. But straight forward. And very functional. It is in service to the subject matter. And the fact that it is not flashy 95% of the time makes it all the more devastating the other 5% of the time, when he floors it as in this passage:

"Years later it was to occur to him that in that hour and a half on that December evening of their first extended time together, she told him more about herself than she ever told him again. And when it was over, he felt that they were strangers in a way that he had not thought they would be, and he knew that he was in love." p53

or in this passage:

"It was a passion neither of the mind nor of the flesh; rather, it was a force that comprehended them both, as if they were but the matter of love, its specific substance. To a woman or to a poem, it said simply: Look! I

am alive." p 250

I've rambled long enough. Let me just say a few more things, because I'm a bit delirious. The characters. They are complex and blameless. That is part of the devastation. You can't blame them for the decisions they make. Each one, even the ones that make our protagonist's life hell, you can't blame them because the writer makes you understand (slowly) why they are the way they are. What drives each character to drive each other mad. I read on one of these goodreads reviews someone said "It only troubles me that every single thing that Stoner thinks and says and does seems so incredibly right, or at least perfectly understandable, on first reading." That's what I mean. He didn't do anything wrong. Everything he does is understandable. He was just being himself the best way he knew how. And so was every character in this book.

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## David says

I was going to start out this review of *Stoner* by feigning comic incredulity that the former conductor of the Boston Pops wrote a novel about potheads, but that is far, far too obvious and unsatisfying even for the likes of me. Instead, I am going to confess that I read only half of it (and, thereby, my ignorance has been properly disclaimed) but that this aborted reading filled me with such unmitigated contempt for the author that I plan on mounting every soapbox (if soapboxes haven't been technologically obviated by now) from here to the Great Barrier Reef condemning this plodding, tiresome, amateurish book with an antagonistic passion that literature hasn't evoked in me since Cambridge's *A Concise History of France* (wherein concision meant excising significant historical events in favor of agricultural data and a dimly Marxist perspective, but I digress -- as always).

I shouldn't blame John Williams for my rising blood pressure because in fact YOU are to blame. Yes, you. Perhaps not individually, but in the general sense of Goodreads voters and reviewers, of which you are presumably a constituent. As of this moment, *Stoner* has an average rating of 4.39 stars out of five on the basis of 531 Goodreader ratings. This is a remarkable score, to be sure, but as with many averages, it is complete and utter bullshit -- obviously contaminated by the spurious opinions of the ardent fans of graceless, tedious prose. You know who you are.

Let's parse the data, shall we? 459 people gave this turd four or five stars; whilst only eleven people were courageous enough to call a spade a spade and, against the grain of general opinion, to award it only one or two stars. I consider these eleven people *heroes*. You and your ilk can eulogize the armed forces, the pigs, the schlubby, mustachioed rescue workers, with your tearful montages of wars, standoffs, and celebrity house fires, all assembled to the reactionary tunes of 3 Doors Down or Nickelback; I prefer a subtler form of heroism -- you know, the lone voice who amid the Russophilic, ostentatiously intellectual acclaim for Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* dares to raise an eyebrow at this dry Goethe wannabe...

I therefore am a great hero because, fighting the insidious cabal of 'respectable' opinion, I offer my head to the rabble in order to warn you what a lifeless stinkbomb *Stoner* is. John Williams, I suspect, was an author who was better suited to actuarial work or fumigating. Something more prosaic. His main problem is that he wants desperately to tell you everything. He's adamant that you know this or that about his main character William Stoner's psychological make-up, habits, and proclivities, but unfortunately he'd rather put Mr. Stoner behind a glass wall at the zoo and recite a bunch of vague adjectives and banal activities relevant to him. In placing Stoner in the zoo and preparing a dry summation about him, he deprives Stoner of life, abbreviates him into a concept...

This is one of the worst kind of all writers, in my opinion. He's committed to telling us and not to showing us. He wants to control your attitude toward the characters by completely demystifying them. Williams lays

everything on the table, as if he's handing you a psychological abstract. More than a few times, I wished that John Williams were not dead and were ready-at-hand, so I could give him a chocolate swirlie. And then I pulled back in my condemnation for a moment... I rethought my rage... There are literally jillions of shitty writers on this planet, and a not-insignificant number have had their works published. Why should I blame John Williams for having a dream -- a grand ambition? I wish for nothing less myself. The intended repository for my rage and general ill-will should be those who have applauded this crapfest -- the ones who've elevated it to the status of minor classic of 20th century American literature.

The straw which broke the *etc.* came midway through the book when Stoner's wife, until then a mousy, retiring, sickly sort, adopts a new attitude after the death of her father. She bobs her hair (it's the 1920s) and throws out her old clothes and buys some of those shapeless flapper-type shifts, and -- more consequentially -- she declares war on her husband. The psychology might as well be written in neon. She resents the dull (and not very affluent) academic life her husband provides. The switch is so abrupt and ridiculous that all of the author's explanations and expositions do nothing to make it palatable, even in his stubbornly distanced and abstract telling. I've read better character development when we got in small groups to discuss our first stories in Creative Writing 101.

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### **Jim Fonseca says**

I read Stoner after I saw that almost all my friends on GR had read it. It's an impressive work which I finished months ago but had a hard time figuring out what to say about it with thousands of reviews already out there.

Stoner is the life story of an unremarkable man and the consensus seems to be "he did his best." He came from a Missouri farm family and a poor background but manages to become an English professor at the university. One theme is the 'loneliness' and 'distant courtesy' of many of the characters, which I think applies to Stoner himself. This may be a trait of many academic folks who have some kind of social disability and turn to books as a substitute for social interaction.

He's awkward around women but finally marries. Then we get I think, the most tragic lines in the book: "Within a month he knew that his marriage was a failure; within a year he stopped hoping that it would improve."

His wife is constantly exhausted and at the edge of hysteria. After they have a child (a girl) his wife seems so uninterested in the child that Stoner becomes mother and father. His wife deliberately takes away any pleasures he has, such as converting his den to her "art studio" so that he can't spend time alone with his daughter while he works as she does her homework. Let's put it this way: his wife is "nucking futs."

His life at the university offers limited respite to his hell at home. He gets into what is initially a trivial dispute with his department chair. The chair becomes his sworn enemy and punishes Stoner by taking away his graduate seminar courses. To a large extent Stoner is "an academic novel" highlighting all the backbiting and pettiness we've come to expect in these stories.

One faculty member says: "It's for us that the University exists, for the dispossessed of the world; not for the students, not for the selfless pursuit of knowledge, not for any of the reasons that you hear."

Stoner lets himself become a little crazy in the classroom. He loses the notes and becomes a good teacher, but this takes him several years "He suspected that he was beginning, ten years late, to discover who he was; and the figure he saw was both more and less than he had once imagined it to be. He felt himself at last

beginning to be a teacher..." His younger colleagues recognize him as "a 'dedicated' teacher, a term they used half in envy and half in contempt..."

He has contradictory feelings about his life. On one hand: "He was forty-two years old, and he could see nothing before him that he wished to enjoy and little behind him that he cared to remember." And yet, and yet.... "Except for Edith's absence from it, his life was nearly what he wanted it to be."

"He found himself wondering if his life were worth the living; if it had ever been. It was a question, he suspected, that came to all men at one time or another..." "Dispassionately, reasonably, he contemplated the failure that his life must appear to be."

He thinks "What did you expect?" and that becomes his mantra as he lies on his death bed. Is he heroic? Or is he a loser?

It's easy for an outsider to look back at Stoner's life and tell him where he went wrong. Just as we can imagine a good friend or a brother or a sister telling us "you should have done this, Jim; you should have done that." It's obvious to them where we went wrong; yet they can't see all the things we think and feel at the time; they can't live our lives for us and despite all the advice and evidence that we should have done THIS or done THAT, instead we DON'T do that or we DO something entirely different. So as I look at Stoner's life, here's where I think he went wrong. Easy for me to say. I'll put this in a spoiler in the unlikely event that there is anyone still out there who has not yet read Stoner:

(view spoiler)

Well, Stoner, "What did you expect?" How did that work out for you?

photo of the author from [thefriendlyshelffiles.wordpress.com](http://thefriendlyshelffiles.wordpress.com)

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## Cecily says

After 63 pages: "Stunned by Stoner. This is agonisingly wonderful."

At the end: "Finished. Him and me. Exquisite but exhausted."

Then I immediately started rereading - something I have only previously done with children's picture books.

It is, without question, my joint favourite book ever. The other, utterly different ones are Titus Groan/Gormenghast (which I reviewed [HERE](#)) and the Heaven and Hell trio (which I reviewed [HERE](#)). But it's hard to explain its mesmerising power in a way that does it justice.

## What Sort of Story?

It opens with a page of downbeat, but carefully crafted spoilers, rather like an obituary, after which, the story is told straightforwardly and chronologically, from William Stoner's last days at school and on his parents' farm, to life as a university student, then university faculty member, marriage, parenthood, affair, and finally his death. His main joy is literature, and the university that enables him to share that love with others,

reflected in simple but heartfelt words on his retirement, “Thank you all for letting me teach”.

It sounds dull, banal or both, but it's not. It's heartbreakingly beautiful, without being sentimental, and because Stoner is never without hope, I didn't find it a depressing.

### **Contrasts: Eloquence and Inarticulacy, Strong and Weak, Success and Failure, Gain and Loss**

It's a book about language and literature, and yet inarticulacy is a recurring theme: it is the direct cause of most of the pain, but also the trigger for his main happiness: in a compulsory literature review, it is his inability to understand, or perhaps to explain his understanding of Shakespeare's Sonnet 73 that triggers a life-long passion and career. This reticence or inability to talk about innermost thoughts is perhaps one reason why the causes of Edith's behaviour are only hinted at: anything more explicit would set the wrong tone (and might not have been appropriate when published).

Almost all Stoner's dreams come true, but happiness is always elusive and ephemeral. The good things are lost or, worse still, taken away by someone he had hoped would be his love or friend (Edith and Lomax, respectively). Both antagonists are sensitive, damaged people (as is Stoner) and Lomax even shares his love of literature for similar reasons (escape).

One message of the book is “carpe diem” (seize the day, or in youth speak: YOLO), which is also reflected in Sonnet 73's focus on decay, death, and enjoying what we have while we can.

Stoner can be brave, such as swapping from an agricultural degree course with its predictable future to an English literature degree, inspired by a sonnet he struggled to explain – and yet he doesn't have the courage to tell his parents until after they've attended his graduation.

### **What Sort of Man?**

Some see Stoner as passive and weak. Certainly there are many times when I wanted him to act differently, or just to act at all - in particular, to stand up for his daughter and his lover.

Instead, he is quietly stoical, which is apt, given his areas of interest include classical Greek literature. His quiet stoicism, born of parental fortitude and nurtured by habit and habitat runs too deep for him to act as others would.

He loses everything he values (even the rapport with his students and the ability to enjoy his books) and in many respects, he is a failure as son, husband, father, lover, even scholar – but he keeps going, never bearing a grudge, trying his best. So sad, and yet curiously inspirational.

### **Time and Place**

Unlike some readers, I find Stoner entirely believable, especially when you consider the much higher social cost of divorce back then.

Would the story be any happier if it were set today? It would certainly be different, but flawed people raise flawed people. Tolstoy famously wrote “All happy families are alike; each unhappy family is unhappy in its own way” and that would be just as true of one unhappy family transplanted from one period in history to another.

In a contemporary setting, even if he had married Edith (unlikely?), she would surely have got help (bi-polar abuse survivor?), though maybe too late to fend off divorce. Either way, matters would turn out better for

Katherine and Grace, and Lomax and Walker would probably not have got away with as much as they did. I'm sure it's no coincidence that Williams set it more than a generation earlier than the time he was writing.

## Speaking to Me

Why did this book move me in such a direct and personal way? I'm not a man, not American, wasn't born at the turn of the 19th/20th centuries and have never been a farmer or a professor. But I do love books, I do need escape sometimes, and I did spend much of my childhood on a family farm, though there was never any expectation that I would be a farmer.

The farm is part of it though: in some ways, Stoner reminds me of my beloved grandfather, who died when I was 14. Although he had a happier life than Stoner, he had the same quiet but dogged resilience, and always tried to make the best of what life or wife threw at him.

The other aspect that poured from the pages, especially second time round, was the emotional damage caused by bad parenting (albeit sometimes with good intentions), caused or exacerbated by poor communication. I was repeatedly reminded of Larkin's famous lines "They fuck you up your mum and dad... But they were fucked up in their turn" (see below). Although I had a largely happy childhood, there were odd, complex and problematic aspects that have left their mark on the sort of adult and parent I am, and although I'm the mother of a wonderful 20 year old, I'm very conscious of things my husband and I could, and perhaps should, have done differently. (I think we're doing better than the Stoners, though.)

## Other Themes

Soil. Stoner is a son of the soil and there are many allusions to its power to spread and bind, whether seeping through the floorboards or being ingrained in the skin or mind. Soil chemistry is the only agricultural course mentioned by name, and Stoner enjoyed it – until he discovered his greater love: literature. He is transplanted from the countryside to the university, where he puts down roots, and stays – no matter what.

The university is the setting for almost all of the novel and arguably a character in its own right. Early on, one of the characters muses whether it is a path to self-fulfillment, an instrument for social good, or just an asylum. The novel quietly demonstrates that it is all three.

"Lust and learning... that's really all there is" says one character, but both of those need an outlet. The insularity of most of the main characters and their unwillingness or inability to discuss or even show their feelings means they are lonely outsiders who can't relish life. That aloneness exerts a high price that manifests itself in different ways; the saddest outcome is for Grace, Stoner's daughter. We need to reach out to each other, communicate, and seize the day.

At times, Stoner is like Don Quixote, with Gordon Finch as a brighter and more influential sidekick than Sancho. This friendship is the one enduring human relationship. Finch repeatedly takes risks to help his friend, and yet it is a very understated friendship, that is not especially close. An area to explore further on a reread?

## Problematic Aspects

There are three troubling aspects, but that conflict is part of what makes the book compelling:

- Two characters are self-described "cripples". Times and vocabulary have changed, so that's not the issue. What is harder is the fact that both characters are unpleasant and both use their disability to make false and malicious claims of prejudice to their own advantage.

- What are the issues around consent for (view spoiler)
- The emotional abuse and manipulation of children is ghastly – but sadly credible. (view spoiler)

## Edith

Edith lurks in the shadows, pouncing occasionally. She is seen indirectly, in relation to Stoner and their daughter and it's easy to revile her for the slow and calculated cruelty she inflicts. I think Edith is meant to be closed and to some extent unknowable (because of her childhood) and because it puts the reader in Stoner's shoes.

I wondered if she was bi-polar. Such a term is never used, and I'm no expert, but her regular alternation between extreme industriousness and prolonged periods of being helpless and bedridden for no outwardly visible reason suggest something like that to me.

Another factor is surely her cold and repressive childhood, and (view spoiler). So it comes back to Larkin. Maybe that's why she marries a virtual stranger (Stoner), saying "If it's to be done... I want it done quick", softening it by adding "I'll try to be a good wife to you".

## Reminiscent Of

Apart from Larkin, aspects of this brought to mind:

- The father-daughter relationship in Williams' **Augustus**, reviewed [HERE](#).
- Ian McEwan's honeymoon novella **On Chesil Beach**, reviewed [HERE](#).
- Any of the **Richard Yates novels** I've read, reviewed [HERE](#).
- Stoicism, solace in literature, and connection to the soil in **Cold Mountain**, reviewed [HERE](#).
- Another stoical, solitary, bookish, thoughtful man, embedded in his environment, though this one is almost faultless, is **Jayber Crow**, reviewed [HERE](#).
- And the delightful, but less perfect **Ebenezer Le Page**, living his whole life on the little island of Guernsey, reviewed [HERE](#).
- The paintings of Edward Hopper such as Room in New York: <http://www.artexpress.ws/painting-img....>
- If Stoner had followed his expected path through life, he would have been almost indistinguishable from the wonderful Harold and Raymond McPherson in Kent Haruf's two books, reviewed [here](#):  
Plainsong 5\*  
Eventide 5\*

## Williams' Four Novels, Compared

See the end of my review of his first (disowned) novel, **Nothing But The Night**, [HERE](#).

## Quotes

- "It was a lonely household... bound together by the necessity of its toil."

- “Dust daily seeped up through the uneven floorboards.”
- In the library, “inhaling the must odor... as if it were an exotic incense”.
- “Don’t you understand about yourself yet? You’re going to be a teacher” because “you are in love”.
- “He conceived himself changed in that future, but he saw the future itself as the instrument of change rather than its object.”
- “He felt his love increased by its loss.”
- “He felt the urgency of study. Sometimes, immersed in his books, there would come to him the awareness of all that he did not know, of all that he had not read... he realized how little time he had in life to read so much, to learn what he had to know.”
- “He moved outward from himself into the world which contained him.”
- “He had never got into the habit of introspection.”
- “He thought he felt the gaze of the young woman brush warmly across his face.”
- “From the curtained window, a dim light fell upon the blue-white snow like a yellow smudge.”
- “Each footstep crunched with muffled loudness in the dry snow.”
- “In that [first] half hour... she told him more about herself than she ever told him again.”
- “Her moral training... was negative in nature, prohibitive in intent, and almost entirely sexual. The sexuality, however, was indirect and unacknowledged; therefore it suffused every other aspect of her education... She was ignorant of her own bodily functions, she had never been alone to care for her own self one day of her life.”
- “Like many men who consider their success incomplete, he was extraordinarily vain.” (Not Stoner.)
- “She entered [her wedding] ... slowly, reluctantly, with a kind of frightened defiance.”
- “Edith moved into the apartment as if it were an enemy to be conquered.”
- “Within a month he knew that his marriage was a failure; within a year he stopped hoping it would improve.”
- Spring, “caught up in the somnolence of a new season”.
- “He watched with amazement and love... as her face began to show the intelligence that worked within her.”
- “The cost exacted... by the soil... they were in the earth to which they had given their lives... It would consume the last vestiges of their substances. And they would become a meaningless part of that stubborn earth.”
- “The love of literature, of language, of the mystery of mind and heart... the love which he had hidden as if it were illicit and dangerous, he began to display, tentatively at first, and then boldly, and then proudly.”
- “They seldom spoke of themselves or each other, lest the delicate balance that made their living together possible be broken.”
- A “strategy that disguised itself as loving concern, and thus against which he was helpless.”
- “a ghost of the old joy... a learning toward no particular end.”
- Friendship “had reached a point that all such relationships, carried on long enough, come to; it was casual, deep and so guardedly intimate that it was almost impersonal.”
- “A kind of lethargy descended upon him... Time dragged slowly around him.”
- “He could see nothing before him that he wished to enjoy and little behind him that he cared to remember.”
- “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.”
- Love is “neither a state of grace nor an illusion... a human act of becoming... by the will and the intellect and the heart.”
- “As the outer world closed upon them they became less aware of its presence... they seemed to themselves to move outside time.”
- Doom revealed “by grammatical usage: they progressed from the perfect – ‘We have been happy, haven’t we?’ – to the past – ‘We *were* happy – happier than anyone, I think’ – and at last came to the necessity of discourse.”
- “They coupled with the old tender sensuality of knowing each other well and with the new intense passion of loss.”
- “Indifference that became a way of living.”



## ?????? Ταμετο?ρο Αμ says

Θα ξεκιν?σω με μια εικ?να που δημιο?ργησα διαβ?ζοντας το συγκεκριμ?νο βιβλ?ο.

Και τον?ζω πως τη δημιο?ργησα εγ? την εικ?να δι?τι ο συγγραφ?ας το μ?νο που ?κανε ?ταν να λ?ει στον αναγν?στη χωρ?ς να δε?χνει.

Αν οι λ?ξεις σου δεν χτ?ζουν χαρακτ?ρες και πλοκ?,

αν η γραφ? σου απλ?ς μιλ?ει χωρ?ς να δημιουργε?, χωρ?ς να περν?ει στον αναγν?στη μια διαδραστικ? σχ?ση αποκλε?οντας κ?θε ε?δους επιτ?δευση, τ?τε συμπερασματικ? καταλ?γουμε στο:συγχαρητ?ρια για την προσπ?θεια μα αποτ?χατε πανηγυρικ?.

Η εικ?να που ε?χα συνεχ?ς μπροστ? μου ?ταν ?να σπ?τι -που συμβολ?ζει ολ?κληρη τη ζω? εν?ς ανθρ?που - το οπο?ο τυλ?γεται στις φλ?γες -ουσιαστικ? και μεταφορικ?- της απ?θειας, και ο ιδιοκτ?της του σπιτιο? βλ?ποντας την φωτι? να ξεκιν?ει απο σπ?θες και να καταλ?γει σε ολοκληρωτικ? καταστροφ? ?χει π?ρει μπογι? και πιν?λο και το β?φει.

Η φωτι? δυναμ?νει, κατατρ?ει και αφαν?ζει ?,τι ?χεις δημιουργ?σει μα εσ? στωικ? συνεχ?ζεις να β?φεις τα αποκα?δια μ?χρι να πεθ?νεις(μεταφορικ?) απο ασφυξ?α και καθολικ? εγκα?ματα. Και το χειρ?τερο απο ?λα ε?ναι πως περν?ει καλ? με την ?λη διαδικασ?α δι?τι ο ?διος μ?νει αλ?βητος.

?τσι, λιτ?, απλ?, απ?ριττα θα μπορο?σα να τελει?σω το σχολιασμ? μου, μα θ?λω να υπεισ?λθω σε λεπτομ?ρειες για να εκφρ?σω τη συναισθηματικ? ν?κρα της πεζογραφ?ας και τη μοιρολατρικ? θλ?ψη που σκορπ?ζεται απλ?χερα σε ?λο το βιβλ?ο.

Ο Στ?ουνερ ε?ναι ?να φτωχ? και στερημ?νο αγ?ρι που κατ?γεται απο αγροτικ? οικογ?νεια.

Οι γονε?ς του παλε?ουν μ?χρι τελικ?ς πτ?σης για την επιβ?ωση και δεν γνωρ?ζουν τ?ποτε π?ρα απο τον μ?χθο, τις στερ?σεις και την στε?ρα ανταμοιβ? μιας ?γονης ζω?ς.

Παρ?λα αυτ? στ?λνουν το γιο τους μετ? απο παρ?τρυνση ?λλων, να σπουδ?σει γεωπ?νος στο πανεπιστ?μιο.

Ο Στ?ουνερ δ?νει μεγ?λο αγ?να δουλε?οντας και σπουδ?ζοντας βασικ?, χωρ?ς να αισθ?νεται το λ?γο που βασαν?ζεται σωματικ? και πνευματικ?.

?ταν κ?ποια τυχα?α στιγμ? στο πανεπιστ?μιο ανακαλ?πτει πως τον καθορ?ζει ως ?παρξη η αν?τερη σπουδ? και μελ?τη της αγγλικ?ς φιλολογ?ας και της μεσαιωνικ?ς λογοτεχν?ας με αρχα?α ελληνικ?, λατινικ? και ρωμα?κ? ?ργα τ?χνης, αποφασ?ζει να ακολουθ?σει ακαδημα?κ? καρι?ρα ως καθηγητ?ς πανεπιστημ?ου.

Και απο δω και μετ? αρχ?ζει μια ζω? ?ρεμης απελπισ?ας.

?,τι συμβα?νει στην πορε?α της ιστορ?ας του Στ?ουνερ ε?ναι καθαρ? και απ?λυτα οι συν?πειες των δικ?ν του επιλογ?ν.

Τις περισσ?τερες φορ?ς β?βαια οι επιλογ?ς του ε?ναι τυχα?ες ? καθοδηγο?μενες απο ?λλους καθ?ς ο ?διος ε?ναι ?να τραγικ? μ?ζερο και μοιρολατρικ? ?τομο με πλ?ρη απ?θεια και μηδενικ?

συναισθηματικ? νοημοσ?νη.

Ακ?μη κι αν δεχτ? πως αταβιστικ? ?ταν στο α?μα του η απ?θεια και η ?λλειψη ενσυνα?σθησης δεν γ?νεται να λατρε?εις και να μελετ?ς με εμβρ?θεια τα ?ργα παγκ?σμιας λογοτεχν?ας και να μην αλλ?ζεις φ?σει θ?σει την κοσμοθεωρ?α σου.

Απλ? δε γ?νεται. Είναι αφελ?ς και αν?ητο.

Επομ?νως καταλ?γουμε στο συμπ?ρασμα πως το ?θελε ?λο αυτ? το αδραν?ς και τραγικ?. Το ευχαριστι?ταν το μεμψ?μοιρο.

Στη συν?χεια κ?νει ?ναν πλ?ρως αποτυχημ?νο γ?μο με μια στεγν?, υστερικ? καταθλιπτικ? γυνα?κα απο επιλογ? του.

Φυσικ? ο συγγραφ?ας φροντ?ζει να μας παρουσι?σει πολ? επιδερμικ? το χαρακτ?ρα της συζ?γου και τους λ?γους που αντιδρ?ει τοσο τοξικ? στο γ?μο της.

Θα ?θελα να μ?θω τι ?νιωθε και πως σκεφτ?ταν ?ταν βυθ?στηκε στο μαρτ?ριο της συμβ?ωσης με ?ναν ?νδρα που ποτ? δεν αγ?πησε και δεν αγαπ?θηκε.

Αποκτ?ει δυο επιστ?θιους φ?λους ζω?ς,συμφοιτητ?ς απο το πανεπιστ?μιο. Αυτο? οι δυο χαρακτ?ρες μάζ? με τον Στ?ουνερ είναι τα μ?να πρ?σωπα που επ?λεξε ο συγγραφ?ας να μας αναλ?σει και να χτ?σει π?νω τους ολοκληρωμ?νους χαρακτ?ρες με σκ?ψη, ν?ηση και αντιδρ?σεις. ?λοι οι ?λλοι ?ρωες του βιβλ?ου απλ?ς πα?ζουν βοηθητικ? ρ?λο με ανεξερε?νητο ψυχισμ? περιστοιχ?ζοντας προσδιοριστικ? τον ?ρωα της τραγωδ?ας.

Αποκτ?ει ?να παιδ? και εκε? φα?νεται αρχικ? να εκφρ?ζει κ?ποια ανθρ?πινα συναισθ?ματα αγ?πης και ευτυχ?ας. Αρχικ?, δι?τι μ?λις η σ?ζυγος του αποφασ?ζει να τον αποκ?ψει απο την κ?ρη του και να διαχειριστε? τα π?ντα μ?σα στην οικογ?νεια ο Στ?ουνερ απλ? βολε?εται, το δ?χεται αναντ?ρρητα και συνεχ?ζει το ?ργο της διδασκαλ?ας και της συγγραφ?ς βιβλ?ων.

Π?ρασε μ?σα απο δυο παγκ?σμιους πολ?μους και τη μεγ?λη ?φηση στην Αμερικ? χωρ?ς να στρατε?τε? ? να βι?σει στο ελ?χιστο τα δειν? που γρ?φτηκαν στις σελ?δες της ιστορ?ας με α?μα.

Συνεχ?ζει απτ?ητος την καθημεριν?τητα του μ?σα στην απολαυστικ? δυστυχ?α του.

Μ?σα απο το ?συλο του πανεπιστημ?ου βλ?πει τον ?ξω κ?σμο και να γεννι?ται, να ζει, να αλλ?ζει, να αγων?ζεται, να πεθα?νει σαν να παρακολουθε? ταιν?α καθαρ? ενημερωτικο? και ?σως εκπαιδευτικο? χαρακτ?ρα.

Γιορτ?ζει πολλ?ς στιγμ?ς προσωπικ?ς ευτυχ?ας μ?σα απο τη διδασκαλ?α και την μελ?τη.

Μ?νο απο κει αποκομ?ζει χαρ? απο τη ζοφερ? ζω? του. Διδ?σκει με σθ?νος και ζ?ση λογοτεχνικο?ς θησαυρο?ς της ανθρ?πινης δημιουργ?ας και δεν καταφ?ρνει να διδαχθε? πως δεν παρατ?με αμαχητ? οτιδ?ποτε στραβ? ? κακ? προκ?ψει στη ζω? μας.

Παραμ?νει φυγ?πονος και μεμψ?μοιρος.

Δ?νει πραγματικ? αγ?να στο πανεπιστ?μιο και εκε? ?ταν μια απο τις στιγμ?ς που ειλικριν? χ?ρηκα και αναθ?ρρησα με τη στ?ση του.

Παραμ?νει εγκ?θετος στη θ?ση του σχετικ? με κ?ποιον φοιτητ? που θεωρε? πως δεν πληρο? τις προδιαγραφ?ς φο?τησης και προσπαθε? δυναμικ? να τον απομακρ?νει απο το πνευματικ? και ιερ? χ?ρο του πανεπιστημ?ου.

Επιμ?νει ακ?μη κι ?ταν αυτ? του η απ?φαση δημιουργε? ?σημες επιπτ?σεις σε ?λη την πορε?α της καρι?ρας του.

Κι εν? εδ? θ?λει και παλε?ει με ?θος και αρχ?ς για τα πιστε?ω του απομακρ?νεται σταθερ? απο την κ?ρη του η οπο?α παραπα?ει αν?μεσα σε κατ?λοιπα και ψυχολογικ? σ?νδρομα.

?ταν του ανακοιν?νει πως ε?ναι ?γκυος απο κ?ποιον συμφοιτητ? που δεν γνωρ?ζει καλ? καλ?, ο Στ?ουνερ αφ?νει τις σκοτο?ρες και τα β?ρη στην σ?ζυγο του και δ?χεται τα π?ντα τρ?χοντας να κλειστε? στο γραφε?ο του για να συγγρ?ψει το ?ργο του.

Το παιδ? του αποκτ?ει ενα γιο, χ?νει στον π?λεμο τον σ?ζυγο της και καταντ?ει αλκοολικ?. Εδ? ο τραγικ?ς πατ?ρας και π?λι δεν χ?νει την απαθ?στατη στ?ση του.

Αφ?νει το παιδ? του ?ρμαιο και δεν βλ?πει σχεδ?ν ποτ? το εγγ?νι του.

Σε διαφορετικ? περ?πτωση θα ?πρεπε να αλλ?ξει την τακτοποιημ?νη του ευτυχ?α και να παλ?ψει για τους αγαπημ?νους του.

Ακ?μη κι ?ταν σε κ?ποια φ?ση της μεσ?λικης ζω?ς του ερωτε?εται και παθι?ζεται με μια μικρ?τερη γυνα?κα απο το χ?ρο του πανεπιστημ?ου δεν χ?νει την κυρ?αρχη παθητικ?τητα του.

Στην πρ?τη δυσκολ?α και αφο? ?χει νι?σει ?στω για λ?γο την απ?λυτη ψυχικ? και σεξουαλικ? μ?θεξη προτιμ?ει να χωρ?σει απο εκε?νη παρ? να ξεφ?γει απο την δυστυχισμ?νη μοιρολατρ?α που τον τρ?φει.

?νας εκ του ασφαλ?ς και κατ'επιλογ?ν δυστυχισμ?νος κακομο?ρης, που ειναι εντο?τοις τακτοποιημ?νος οικογενειακ?, επαγγελματικ? και κοινωνικ?,δεν μπορε? σε καμ?α περ?πτωση να με κ?νει να αισθανθ? κ?τι ?λλο εκτ?ς απο αντιπ?θεια, αδιαφορ?α και οργ?.

Συνοψ?ζοντας δυο κυρ?ως συμπερ?σματα ?καναν την τελικ? αποτ?μηση μου αρνητικ?.

Πρ?τον : ?λες οι ακαδημα?κ?ς επιδι?ξεις του Στ?ουνερ - εκτ?ς ελαχ?στων στιγμ?ν - παρουσι?ζονται απο το συγγραφ?α εκ διαμ?τρου αντ?θετες και ξεχωριστ?ς σε σχ?ση με το κεν? της μ?ζερης ζω?ς του.

Δε?τερον: ο Στ?ουνερ βι?νει θετικ? συναισθ?ματα σχετικ? με την ενασχ?ληση του με τη λογοτεχν?α.

?μως, κ?θε πληροφορ?α που βι?νει απο την αν?γνωση και τη γραφ? της μεγαλει?δους λογοτεχν?ας που γενν?θηκε απο ελληρικ?ς,λατινικ?ς και αγγλικ?ς παραδ?σεις, δεν καταφ?ρνει να τον υποκιν?σει, να τον ενθαρρ?νει ? να του προτε?νει να προβε? σε σημαντικ?ς ? ασ?μαντες προσαρμογ?ς στην προσωπικ? του ζω?. Παραμ?νει ?βουλος, αδραν?ς και κακομο?ρης.

Πεθα?νει απο καρκ?νο γαλ?νια στο σπιτι του κρατ?ντας στα χ?ρια του το πρ?το του βιβλ?ο.

?ντας ετοιμοθ?νατος το παιδ? του τον επισκ?πτεται

μ?α μ?νο φορ? για του πει, περαστικ?, θα το ξεπερ?σεις.

Καθρ?φτης ε?ναι η δρ?ση μας ? η αδρ?νεια μας που δε?χνει πως θα μας αντιμετωπ?σουν οι ?λλοι.

?νας συγγραφ?ας επομ?νως συμπερασματικ?,καταλ?γει πως η αν?γνωση της λογοτεχν?ας δεν μας επιτρ?πει, δε μας επιβ?λλει να κατανο?σουμε σαφ?στερα και πιο προσεκτικ? ? συμπονετικ?, να σκεφτο?με και να αναλ?βουμε δρ?ση στη δικ? μας ζω?.

Τ?τε ποιο ε?ναι το ν?ημα;

Φιλολογικ? ? σ?μφωνα με τους καν?νες γραμματικ?ς και συντακτικο? η προσ?γγιση μας;

Αυτ? το βιβλ?ο σ?γουρα δεν ?ταν για εμ?να.

?Oops!?

???

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?

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Καλ? αν?γνωση.

Πολλο?ς ασπασμο?ς.

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### Samadrita says

*“Most men lead lives of quiet desperation and go to the grave with the song still in them.” -  
Henry David Thoreau*

The triumph of this work lies in its self-effacing world-weariness, its tone of indifference even to the prospective reader's concerns. In the manner of the protagonist's iron stoicism in the face of misfortune and persecution, the narrative revels in its own lacklustreness, its state of diffused melancholy.

William Stoner, first student and eventually English professor at (fictionalized) University of Missouri lives a life of flawed choices, unrealized potential and innumerable regrets, witnessing the world go through a period of tremendous sociopolitical ferment in the 20th century, and remaining invisible in the eyes of history. He breathes his last, just as silently, alone in a hospital ward, feebly flipping through the pages of a scholarly work. But do not for a moment think this deceptively drab synopsis encapsulates the essence of 'Stoner'. John Williams, through his luminous prose and a vision which is as solemn as it is lucid, reminds us of the quotidian battles fought every moment anywhere by faceless individuals against the forces of oppression and moral laxity - that the fate of civilization is dependent on the capable or incapable shoulders of an individual.

*He found himself wondering if his life were worth the living; if it had ever been. It was a question, he suspected, that came to all men at one time or another; he wondered if it came to them with such impersonal force as it came to him. The question brought with it a sadness, but it was a general sadness which (he thought) had little to do with himself or with his particular fate; he was not even sure that the question sprang from the most immediate and obvious causes, from what his own life had become.*

A homage to the spirit of literature? Most certainly. A story recounted with conviction and a quiet dignity? Undoubtedly. A sincere attempt at proffering acknowledgment on a seemingly inconsequential existence? That too. But more than anything else this is a literary toast raised in honour of those small, often unnoticed, acts of courage and compassion which somehow realign the moral order of society but are blotted out from memory and consciousness easily.

There is sadness here - boundless in depth and overwhelming in intensity - but hope glimmers occasionally too. Hope that even though the world may go to pieces and things may fall apart irrevocably, a man may

summon the will to endure the tragedy of existence by discovering a true and unbreakable love. The currents of time weather away all past disappointments, bittersweet longing, old grudges and anger. Only the love of the written word casts a glow in the eternal darkness.

*A kind of joy came upon him, as if borne in on a summer breeze. He dimly recalled that he had been thinking of failure--as if it mattered. It seemed to him now that such thoughts were mean, unworthy of what his life had been. Dim presences gathered at the edge of his consciousness; he could not see them, but he knew that they were there, gathering their forces toward a kind of palpability he could not see or hear. He was approaching them, he knew; but there was no need to hurry. He could ignore them if he wished; he had all the time there was.*

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