

## Author Spotlight

# JOHN WILLIAMS



John Edward Williams was born August 29, 1922 in Clarkesville, Texas. Little is known of his early life. He served in the Army Air Corp in Asia during WWII and rose to the rank of sergeant. After the war, Williams studied English literature at the University of Denver. He received a Ph.D. from the University of Missouri in 1954. Williams returned to Denver in 1955 as an assistant professor and director of the creative writing program, positions he held for 30 years before retiring. Williams published four novels in his lifetime: *Nothing But the Night* (1948), *Butcher's Crossing* (1960), *Stoner* (1965), and *Augustus* (1972).

When Williams died of heart failure at the age of 71 in March 1994, his literary achievements had been largely forgotten. In fact, Williams's writing had not met with much critical or commercial success even during his lifetime. *Nothing But the Night* received scant attention, and *Butcher's Crossing* was dismissed by many critics as a mere western genre novel. *Stoner*, released in 1965 to minor critical acclaim, sold a paltry 2,000 copies and was out of print by the following year. Williams did win the 1973 National Book Award for his historical novel *Augustus*, however, it was the first time in the award's history that the final vote resulted in a tie (Williams shared the award—and split the \$1,000 prize check—with John Barth.) Williams declined to attend the ceremony.

Williams's achievements as a writer might have been consigned to oblivion had *Stoner* not carried on such a curious second life after his death. While the novel remained as neglected as ever by the mass reading public, it developed into a minor cult classic among literary circles and students of creative writing. The writer Steve Almond recalls that *Stoner* was passed around like contraband in his MFA program in the 1990s. By the turn of the century, Williams had developed a posthumous reputation as a so-called “writer's writer.”

When NYRB Classics republished *Stoner* in 2006, the book began a slow but fixed journey. Surprisingly, initial success was found abroad. The book made a strong impression on the French novelist Anna Gavalda, who published a translation in 2011. *Stoner* was an unexpected bestseller in France and soon inspired a Dutch translation that also proved a chart-topper. A best-selling British edition appeared in the United Kingdom in 2012, and the novel was subsequently named Waterstones' Book of the Year. With time, word traveled back to the United States, where, almost five decades after its original publication, *Stoner* finally met with commercial success.

In 2015, NYRB Classics released a 50th anniversary edition of *Stoner*, which is now widely heralded as a rediscovered classic. The book has gained the attention and reaped the praise of scores of writers, including Bret Easton Ellis, Ruth Rendell, and Julian Barnes. The novelist Emma Straub has called it “the most beautiful book in the world.” For his part, Williams has joined an illustrious if unlucky group of writers—among it such greats as Poe, Melville, and Dickinson—whose talents were ignored in their lifetimes, but who in death have achieved immortality.

Prepared by Jody Smith

October 2018

Sources: *The Guardian*, *New York Times*, *New Yorker*



## Discussion Questions for *Stoner*

1. '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.' Having read the whole book, do you think the summary of Stoner's life, as described on the first page of the novel, is a fair assessment?
2. 'He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor, and few students remembered him with any sharpness after they had taken his courses.' Why do you think the author begins the novel by summarizing Stoner's life and telling us how little he is remembered after his death? Having already had a summary of Stoner's life, what did you think the book would be about and did you find it irritating to know, upfront, that nothing sensational would happen?
3. In the introduction, John McGahern cites an interview in which the author says: '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.' Do you agree with the author's view that Stoner is a hero?
4. 'From the earliest time he could remember, William Stoner had his duties.' Stoner's life is filled with many failures – his marriage, his stymied career and his short-lived affair. Do you think Stoner views these unpleasant parts of his life as duties he must endure? How do you think his rural upbringing affected his personality?
5. 'The required survey of English literature troubled and disquieted him in a way nothing had ever done before.' Stoner is troubled by his initial foray into English literature and in a class with his English instructor, Archer Sloane, he is unable to answer a question on a Shakespearean sonnet. Why do you think Stoner changes his course of study from agriculture to English?
6. 'Her childhood was an exceedingly formal one, even in the most ordinary moments of family life. Her parents behaved toward each other with a distant courtesy; Edith never saw pass between them the spontaneous warmth of either anger or love. Anger was days of courteous silence, and love was a word of courteous endearment.' How much do you think Edith's upbringing affects her life with Stoner? Why do you think she is constantly compelled to wage battles against Stoner – what is she trying to prove?
7. 'Throughout the late spring and early summer she was tireless in her search [for a house], which seemed to work an immediate cure for her illness.' What do you think is the cause of Edith's recurring illnesses? Do you think her illnesses are psychosomatic?
8. 'And so, like many others, their honeymoon was a failure; yet they would not admit this to themselves, and they did not realize the significance of the failure until long afterward.' There are several turning points in the novel, where Stoner's life could go down different paths. Do you feel he takes control of his life and lives in accordance with his values, or do you think he remains too passive and stoic during the course of his life? Do you think stoicism is a good quality?
9. 'William fell instantly in love with her; the affection he could not show to Edith he could show to his daughter, and he found a pleasure in caring for her that he had not anticipated.' Do you think Stoner is a good father to Grace? Do you think one parent carries more blame for Grace's early pregnancy and alcoholism, or do you think both parents share equal blame?
10. '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.' In the end, do you think Stoner has any regrets about the way he has lived his life? Do you think Stoner is a good man or a weak man?

Source: Penguin Australia

