

Novel Club Minutes – November 2, 2021

Stoner, by John Williams

The Novel Club met in bifurcated fashion on November 2. Fourteen brave, covid-vaccinated members gathered at Patricia and Kent Smith's home to enjoy snacks, wine, and conversation. About ten additional members gathered virtually on Zoom.

There were no committee reports, and we did not review the minutes from the prior meeting. Instead, in very efficient fashion, we all gathered to hear Victoria Ware deliver (via Zoom) Rob Ware's excellent biography of the author and Victoria's perceptive critical paper about the book.

Discussion took place, as at the October meeting, in two separate places: in person at the Smiths' home, and virtually on Zoom. Victoria Ware led the Zoom crowd. Jennie Kaffen presided over the in-person meeting. We all considered Victoria's discussion questions.

1. *In a prescient scene toward the beginning of the novel, Stoner is drinking beer with his two young graduate student friends, Gordon Finch and David Masters. Usually a cynic, Masters in this setting extols the university and states that it 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." He further states: "We do no harm, we say what we want, and we get paid for it; and that's a triumph of natural virtue, or pretty damn close to it."*

*Do you think Williams shared Masters' view of the university as a haven for the dispossessed and a "triumph of natural virtue"? If so, how do you reconcile the treatment of Stoner by Lomax and the ostracism of Katherine Driscoll by the university community?*

The in-person attendees considered this question at length. Nobody really understood what was meant by "natural virtue." Some thought that Masters was speaking with irony, not sincerity.

All Club members with experience in academia agreed that the book was true to academic life, with its many eccentricities, petty but bitter disputes, periodic favors irrationally conferred on an undeserving student, common occurrence of professor/student relationships, and tendency to value scholarship over teaching.

There was some discussion of the character of Lomax and how it can be explained.

2. *There are many examples throughout the book in which Stoner shows great strength of character, such as his refusal to back down when his Department Chair insists on promoting an unqualified graduate student, but there are other circumstances where it could be argued that he shows weakness, such as in failing to confront the problems in his marriage, not volunteering for military service and having an extramarital affair. How do you judge Stoner's overall character, and how do you think our views of his behavior might be different today than they would have been during the time of the novel, or at the time the novel was published (1966)?*

Club members had different views about Stoner's character. There was agreement that he valued his own love of learning above anything else. Many members found themselves unable to forgive him for giving up all authority over his daughter. Some members felt happy for him that he had a satisfying extramarital affair, and a period of contentment during that time.

The character of Edith was dissected a bit, in an attempt to understand why she was so awful, and why Stoner might have been unwilling to fight her over their daughter Grace.

There was some discussion of military service, and how it might be viewed differently in 1917 and 1966.

3. *Williams stated to an interviewer that he considered Stoner a "real hero" who had a "very good life." Do you think Stoner was successful? If so, what do you think of the passages at the very beginning of the book, which describe him as a little-remembered professor with no accomplishments to speak of?*

Nobody thought Stoner was a hero. Nobody thought he had a particularly good life. Some people found the book to be a thorough downer.

Stoner did, however, have significant personal accomplishments, because he took himself away from the farm and successfully won a secure position in academia, where he was able to pursue the interests that he valued most.

It would have been nice to have a broader discussion of defining "success." Was Stoner a success?

In the end, Stoner was a success for the Club, because all agreed that the book was engaging to read, and it was highly discussable. The in-person meeting adjourned in a lively mood at 9:15 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Catherine LaCroix