

***Stoner* by John Williams**

Biographical Paper

John Edward Williams was born in 1922 in Clarksville, Texas where he grew up in a poor family. He served in the Air Force in World War II, earned a PhD in English Literature from the University of Missouri and then spent virtually his entire career as a professor at the University of Denver, where he was the director of the creative writing program and one of the founding editors of the literary journal the Denver Quarterly. During his career he published four novels and two collections of poetry, and he edited and wrote the introduction for a respected anthology of English Renaissance Poetry. He died of respiratory failure in 1994 at the age of 71.

On the surface, Williams' career trajectory is not substantially different than the protagonist in the novel we are discussing this evening, *Stoner*. To be sure there are some notable differences: Williams enlisted and went off to war in his youth, unlike the choice made by the young assistant professor Stoner. Also unlike Stoner, Williams left the University of Missouri after obtaining his Ph.D. in English Literature there, and he achieved a much higher level of success – one of his novels, *Augustus*, published in 1972, won a U.S. National Book Award.

But the parallels are many: the hardscrabble rural upbringing from which he emerged as the first in the family to go to college, the Ph.D. in English Literature from the University of Missouri, the influence of a post-war environment (for Williams, it was World War II), and the lifelong career as an academic. Also notable and ironic is that he considered his novel *Stoner*, like Professor Stoner's precious book, his masterpiece, although it received little notice at the time of its publication and its sales were disappointing. The book did not become a major critical success until the early 2000s, more than 10 years after Williams' death.

Stoner's delayed critical and commercial success is not a unique story – certainly there are many examples of books not recognized in their time that ultimately achieved broad popularity and critical acclaim – but *Stoner's* rise from obscurity 40 years after its publication still seems exceptional.

***Stoner* by John Williams**

Biographical Paper

Stoner was published in 1965. The original title that Williams had composed was *A Matter of Love*, which was changed by his publisher. Williams was at the time an established, if not widely recognized, author and academic. He had published two novels as well as a collection of original poetry, and his anthology of English Renaissance Poetry had recently gone into a second edition. Williams believed that *Stoner* would launch him into the upper strata of the 1960s literary firmament. The book was published by Viking, which promoted it by, among other things, flying Williams to New York for a book-signing event and a series of interviews.

Despite Viking's efforts and Williams' faith in the book, it received little notice. It was generally regarded as overly earnest and out of step with the sensibilities of the time, which seemed to favor novels that were modern, satirical and socially conscious. *Stoner* was none of these things – it extolled the academic life and featured as protagonist a dignified and principled English professor. The book sold less than 2,000 copies, generated little interest and faded from public discussion. It was out of print within a year of publication.

But even at that time there was a kernel of what ultimately became widespread critical approval. A review in the *New Republic* in 1966, a year after it was first published, praised *Stoner* as an overlooked gem, calling it "serious, beautiful and affecting." Critical praise continued intermittently over the years, and the book seemed to have attracted a small group of admirers.

As one writer later described:

"Basically, *Stoner* became the 'Velvet Underground' of novels. As Andy Warhol famously quipped, that band only had 300 fans, but all of them started bands. Very few people knew *Stoner* existed when it was published. But a startling number were writers and critics, and virtually all of them became passionate advocates."

But despite its devoted fans, *Stoner* did not gain traction on a broader level. In the meantime, Williams published another novel, *Augustus*, for which he won the National Book Award in 1972. By the time

***Stoner* by John Williams**

Biographical Paper

Williams retired from the University of Denver in 1985, *Stoner* had been reissued more than once, but had quickly gone back out of print each time. Williams continued to write in his retirement, but he had been a lifetime heavy smoker and dealt with serious health issues until his death in 1994. A fifth novel was unfinished at the time of his death.

Stoner was reissued again in 2006, and this time the sparks of critical praise finally ignited a real fire. A review by Morris Dickstein in the New York Times described the book as “the perfect novel,” which led to praise from many other sources, and sales took off. The book was a particular success in Europe, selling over a million copies and becoming a bestseller in several countries. A documentary about the novel and its critical reception, entitled “An Act of Becoming,” was released in 2015. Interest in John Williams also surged. A biography of Williams, entitled “The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel,” was published in 2018. A movie version starring Casey Affleck and Tommy Lee Jones is reportedly in pre-production and may be released in the next year.

Clearly, there is something about the life 100 years ago of a taciturn, undistinguished midwestern English professor that has struck a chord. And it is easy to draw parallels between the story of Williams’ posthumous attention and praise after years of relative obscurity, with that of his modest hero William Stoner. One reasonably expects that Williams may have created *Stoner* as a slightly idealized version of himself. But here is the twist in the story.

The biography of Williams, as well as interviews of those who knew and worked with him, reveal someone quite different than might be expected by the seeming parallel between the author and his subject.

The real-life John Williams was not, in any observable way, William Stoner. In fact, he was quite the opposite. Williams was regarded as egotistical and unlikeable in his interpersonal relationships, highly competitive with his colleagues and obsessive about his reputation, and he

***Stoner* by John Williams**

Biographical Paper

was a persistent philanderer who was married four times and had a tumultuous domestic life.

One anecdote that his biographer relates is how Williams had the habit of hanging out in a conspicuous spot in the common area of the Denver English department when one of his novels or a favorable review came out so that his colleagues would have the opportunity to congratulate him.

Williams himself was competitive and jealous and would routinely disparage colleagues that he viewed as rivals. And his biographer also describes Williams as an alcoholic who was often too drunk to teach his classes at the University of Denver.

This is not to say that Williams did not have professional accomplishments worth mentioning. Williams helped establish the Denver Quarterly literary journal and the creative writing program at University of Denver, which was a relatively novel program at the time, and his anthology of Renaissance literature is highly regarded. But even here there is a sour note: Williams was accused of plagiarizing another scholar in the book, which resulted in a revision to the later edition.

Whatever the issues with Williams' character, the modern critical consensus is that he produced a compelling, beautiful and emotionally affecting work of fiction. It is tempting to conclude that Williams had some psychological impulse that drove him to create a fictional character that embodied the admirable character traits that Williams himself did not possess. But perhaps he was simply a talented writer with a complicated personal life. What is certain is that upon his death, his book did not slip from his grasp and fall into the silence of eternity like William Stoner's, but instead lives on for us to enjoy and appreciate.