

Stoner: A novel

John Williams

Vintage, 305 pp

Described in the *New Yorker* as ‘The Greatest American Novel You’ve Never Heard Of’, Stoner’s success has come late. Despite its author’s hope that it might enjoy a ‘respectable sale’, it sold less than 2000 copies when it was first published in 1965, and was out of print a year later. Its recent rediscovery in the UK where more than 200,000 copies have been sold would have ‘astonished’ Williams, his widow has said.

Stoner is a story about how we measure success. What constitutes a good life? If our desires go unfulfilled, if we do not pursue them, does that mean that we have failed? It begins with a prologue that reads like an obituary penned by someone with no qualms about cataloguing the subject’s failures (‘He did not rise above the rank of assistant professor’). What follows is a clever, wise, and compassionate attempt to expose the limitations of this summation.

The facts are not disputed. Stoner’s story is frequently almost unbearably sad. This is a man whose desires are thwarted; who is restricted not only, or even mainly, by circumstance, but by his own nature. Williams invites us to observe the incursions his hero will decline to resist and the battles he will refuse to pursue. At times this can be infuriating. It is tempting to accuse Stoner of some sort of abdication. We want to see confrontation, defiance, a struggle for the fulfilment of his longings. It is a measure of Williams’ skill as a narrator that another verdict becomes possible.

The central tragedy of the story is Stoner’s marriage, a destructive battle rendered all the more frightening for the silent, insidious way in which it is waged over the decades. There is no question that Stoner’s wife, Edith, inflicts terrible pain upon him, but she is not denied a hinterland, an opportunity to be known by the reader if not by her husband. We learn, for instance, of an education that was ‘negative in nature, prohibitive in intent, and almost entirely sexual’. Several times it dawns on Stoner that his opponents are not maliciously thwarting him; that they truly believe in the rightness of their cause. Williams invites us to do the same, to discover as C. S. Lewis did, that ‘everybody is I’.

At times, this book is terribly bleak. There are very few moments of levity and even those of joy have a certain solemnity to them, weighed down by the protagonist’s meditation on their meaning. But it is undeniably beautiful. Passages in which we see Stoner discover the all-consuming supremacy of ‘lust and learning’ bring to mind John Donne’s sonnets, in which two lovers make up an entire world (‘She’s all states, and all princes, I’). A brilliant storyteller, Williams’ prose is as spare and un-showy as the ‘hard dirt’ from which his hero has been transplanted. In its evocative depiction of Midwestern life it bears comparison with

Willa Cather, who explored academia in *The Professor’s House*. So much is conveyed in a few precise strokes (Stoner’s father’s ‘thick, callused fingers, into the cracks of which soil had penetrated so deeply that it could not be washed away’). He writes with the same restraint shown by the women who staunch tears with fists, loyal to husbands who show ‘hard and bleak’ faces to the world. In doing so, he creates scenes of crushing poignancy. Each pivotal moment of revelation is delivered in a single devastating sentence.

There are interesting comparisons to be made with other novels in the campus genre. Stoner is a man uprooted from an arid patch of land to a world where he is nourished by books, teachers, and love. He takes with him ‘the blood knowledge of his inheritance, given to him by his forefathers, whose lives were obscure and hard and stoical’. In *Howard’s End*, E. M. Forster warned against transplanting the sons of the soil to a life among the bookshelves. For Williams, the university is the making of his hero, a sanctuary from the world whose ideals are the one treasure he is prepared to defend. While Kingsley Amis found a rich seam of comedy in departmental politics, Williams uses them as the setting for Stoner’s principled obduracy. It is as an idealistic teacher that Stoner finally shows some steel.

Stoner is an exploration of how we come to know ourselves,

and others, and whether this is ever really possible. As readers, guided by a narrator at once removed from his subjects and compassionate towards them, we are shown the gaps that exist between intention and action, between man and wife, between mind and body. ‘Don’t you understand about yourself yet?’ Stoner is asked. ‘You’re going to be a teacher.’ Our hero is a man who had ‘never got in the habit of introspection’, prone to periods of disassociation, occasionally manifest as out of body experiences. Set in a seat of learning, it is an account of discoveries gradual, sudden, and late, revelations that continue right up until the last moment of life. Sometimes they result in action; frequently they are met with acceptance and resignation.

The novel ends with Stoner contemplating how his life must be perceived by others. We are included among them. What will be our verdict on this man? Our answer will have implications not only for this fictional character but for ourselves. After being shown a world in which people fail to know themselves or to communicate what limited understanding they have to one another, we are prompted to consider our own blind spots. Final page in hand, we are also invited to reflect on the beauty and power contained in books, and other things held ‘in no particular esteem’ on first appraisal. **Madeleine Davies**

