

Stoner by John Williams

I was given the book, Stoner, in 2011 by Zack Zook, a young man whose parents owned BookCourt, a beautiful bookstore in New York. The occasion was an exhibit of The Fulbright Triptych at the German Consulate in New York. I had put the book into my bookcase and it had completely disappeared without my reading a single page. Last year, this bookstore went out of business. The store was having a party to celebrate. I thought that I should start the book so I would, at least, have something to say to Zack at the celebration.

In the first few pages, I learned that the protagonist, William Stoner, came from a farming community and that his family encouraged him to attend the nearest university.

They lived 25 miles away. He was to study the science of agronomy at this school. Reluctantly, Stoner agrees to go to the school and it is there, where he becomes interested in literature and rhetoric. The fictional school that he goes to is the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Because I was to have an exhibit at the Museum of Art and Archaeology, the University of Missouri the very next year, I found this coincidence to be quite eerie. I thought of it as a *calling*. Stoner's new-found love for literature hits him in the way that first love envelops us, with passion, awe and an all consuming quest. I found myself re-calling Jack London's fictional protagonist, Martin Eden and the protagonist's coming to writing and his consuming passion for literature.

A few months after finishing the book, I received a call from Chuck Swaney mentioning that he was interested in a book club selection for the museum, which would relate to my exhibit. He mentioned the book, The Chosen by Chaim Potok. I was familiar with the book, which is the story of an Orthodox Jew who finds his way to art and must deal with his family's religious identity and devotion. I told Chuck that the Potok book wasn't really relevant for me in that my family was not religious and the issues raised in

The Chosen somehow were different from my own background. Chuck asked if I could think of a book that would connect with my exhibit. A few days later, I called back and enthusiastically recommended Stoner by John Williams. It seemed to me that this is a book which went beyond identity politics, ethnic groups, racial and religious classifications. It brought us to a very different issue: What it means to be alive.

Since finishing Stoner, I have found myself wondering about why certain works of art hit us with such great power. What makes them speak to our deepest axis? Why do these works move us with so much depth? The book Stoner hit me with great force and intensity. Perhaps it is because the story is about purity and innocence. It is about a man who has found a calling, which he embraces with

great energy and passion. Isn't the calling that he finds what some would describe as an *essence*. Watching the film Cinema Paradiso just recently, I could not help thinking that the theme of this very evocative film is the concept of this *same* essence and *what* becomes of it.

It's important to understand that William Stoner doesn't seek this calling. It comes to him by accident, full of awe and wonder.

Stoner discovers a purity that engenders love in two worlds, in literature and between a man and a woman:

"Sloane's eyes came back to William Stoner, and he said dryly, "Mr. Shakespeare speaks to you across three hundred years, Mr. Stoner, do you hear him?"

"William Stoner realized that for several moments he had been holding his breath. He expelled it gently, minutely aware of his clothing moving upon his body as his breath went out of his lungs. He looked away from Sloane about the room. Light slanted from the windows and settled upon the faces of his fellow students, so that the illumination seemed to come from within them and go out against a dimness; a student blinked, and a thin shadow fell upon a cheek whose down had caught the sunlight. Stoner became aware that his fingers were unclenching their hard grip on his desk-top. He turned his hands about under his gaze, marveling at their brownness, at the intricate way the nails fit into his blunt finger-ends; he thought he could feel the blood flowing invisibly through the tiny veins and arteries, throbbing delicately and precariously from his fingertips through his body."

"Sloane was speaking again. "What does he say to you, Mr. Stoner? What does his sonnet mean?" "

"Stoner's eyes lifted slowly and reluctantly. "It means," he said, and with a small movement raised his hands up toward the air; he felt his eyes glaze over as they sought the figure of Archer Sloane. "It means," he said again, and could not finish what he had begun to say." "

Stoner's calling reflects a strong theme in the novel : What it means to be *deeply alive*. His calling is literature. He addresses this subject with great innocence.

Stoner discovers a love of literature, in the "epiphany of knowing something in words that cannot be put into words."

1. Is Stoner's fate sealed when he attends the nearby college - the University of Missouri? The book made me think of Jude attending the university on a hill in

Thomas Hardy's Jude the Obscure. On the one hand Stoner finds himself and discovers the passion that will steer his internal axis. On the other hand, he is not equipped to handle this situation. He has a different code, a different set of skills. He brings the world of his family of generations of farming to his new home, the university. Is his fate sealed?

2. One can argue that literature saves William Stoner. He finds something which makes him deeply alive. In the purity of his office, of his apartment, of his interior life, literature brings him a prism to observe and comment on the world, a way to be of this world. What does Stoner bring to this calling: generations of individuals who worked the land, a stalwart American sense of reality, a plainspoken truth, a don't complain attitude, a sense of being a "standing man", someone who doesn't fall down, despite winds, turmoil, politics, petty rankling and venomous competitiveness.

In his study, everything can be controlled, held in check, governed. As the creator of The Fulbright Triptych, I discovered that in the best moments within the studio, the great god of art governs, with a purity of spirit, not unlike some religious order, with communion and knowledge for its own sake. In the study or studio of The Fulbright Triptych, a world of pure reason, pure study and love of art dominate. However, when one opens the window a bit or opens the door slightly, what comes in but the world of galleries, the marketplace, competition, reputations, politics and the human drama: the art scene. In Stoner's case, it's his English department and its department chair, the college, certain students, his wife, his daughter. So, Stoner's calling saves him, but cannot, ultimately, save him.

"Later Stoner comes to his most fundamental awareness:

He found himself wondering if his life were worth living.... 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 sadness...."

How do we summarize Stoner's life?

"Almost without regret he looked at her [Edith] now.... "If only I had been stronger, he thought; if I had known more, if I could have understood. And finally, mercilessly, he thought if I had loved her more."

Dispassionately, reasonably he contemplated the failure his life must appear to be

"He had dreamed of a kind of integrity, of a kind of purity that was entire; he had found compromise and the assaulting diversion of triviality. He had conceived wisdom, and at the end of long years he had found ignorance."

John Williams' prose is austere, beautifully evocative and poetic. We follow William Stoner's journey with great empathy and humanity. The writing conveys the spirit of

a life, the slow inexorable voyage, almost as if we are in real time. We see how John Williams' life is echoed in the poignant depiction of William Stoner's journey. We are given the full measure of a man.

"He had no friends and for the first time in his life he became aware of loneliness. Sometimes, in his attic room at night, he would look up from a book where he was reading and gaze at the corners of his room, where the lamplight flickered against the shadows. If he stared long and intently, the darkness gathered into a light, which took the insubstantial shape of what he had been reading. And he would feel that he was out of time, as he had felt that day in class when Archer Sloane had spoken to him. The past gathered out of the darkness where it stayed, and the dead raised themselves to live before him; and the past and the dead flowed into the present among the alive, so that he had for an intense instant a vision of denseness into which he was compacted and from which he could not escape, and had no wish to escape. Tristan, Iseult the fair, walked before him; Paola and Francesca whirled in the glowing dark; Helen and bright Paris, their faces bitter with consequence, rose from the gloom. And he was with them in a way that he could never be with his fellows who went from class to class, who found a local habitation in a large university in Columbia, Missouri, and who walked unheeding in the Midwestern air."

Williams' writing has great range and insight, from the austerity of the previous paragraph to the sensuality of this description:

"Her flesh, that had at a distance seemed so cool and pale, had beneath it a warm ruddy undertone like light flowing beneath a milky translucence. And like the translucent flesh, the calm and poise and reserve which he thought were herself, masked a warmth and playfulness and humor whose intensity was made possible by the appearance that disguised them."

and

"In his 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 one another."

We travel with William Stoner through his days and years. John Williams' evocative prose gives shape, sensitivity and empathy to this long and perhaps fated odyssey.

"There was a softness around him, and a languor crept upon his limbs. A sense of his own identity came upon him with a sudden force, and he felt the power of it. He was himself, and he knew what he had been. His head turned. His bedside table was piled with books that he had not touched for a long time. He let his hand play over them for a moment; he marveled at the thinness of the fingers, at the intricate articulation of the joints as he flexed them. He felt the strength within them, and let them pull a book that he sought, and when the hand held it he smiled at the familiar red cover that had for a long time been faded and scuffed.

It hardly mattered to him that the book was forgotten and that it served no use; and the question of its worth at any time seemed almost trivial. He did not have the illusion that he would find himself there, in that fading print; and yet, he knew, a small part of him that he could not deny was there, and would be there.

He opened the book; and as he did so it became not his own. He let his fingers riffle 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 until it contained him, until the old excitement that was like terror fixed him where he lay. The sunlight, passing his window, shone upon the page, and he could not see what was written there.

The fingers loosened, and the book they had held moved slowly and then swiftly across the still body and

fell into the silence of the room.”

As one reads of the many vicissitudes of Stoner’s journey, a life emerges. Is he successful? Is he a loser? Why is he so passive? How does he relate to his daughter? Many questions pour forth about him.

However, ultimately, I believe that when all is said and done, the most important thing to be said about William Stoner is that: *He is us and we are him.*

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