On William Stoner

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William Stoner is the protagonist of the eponymous novel—or it's billed as a novel anyway, more on that later—*Stoner*, published in 1965, the author John Williams (NYRB Classics, 2010). The book has gotten a lot of attention in the last few years--decades after its publication, and long after the death of its author. I understand that currently it sells big in Europe, and it gets scores of rave notices, such as this in *The New York Times*: "John Williams' *Stoner* is something rarer than a great novel--it is a perfect novel, so well told and beautifully written, so deeply moving, that it takes your breath away." "Perfect novel," "takes your breath away"--that got my attention; plus I found out that *Stoner* was not about a druggy as I had first surmised but rather a university academic, like I used to be. So I gave the book a shot.

Stoner was worth my time. I wouldn't go so far as to call it a perfect novel, or anything close to that, and it certainly didn't take my breath away. It was well written, and in several places *very* well written (the ending, Stoner's death, a prime example), but I didn't consider myself in the presence of elevated prose reading this book, or first rank art. A good book, which you could miss with no great loss to you, that's my rating.

Note I said "book," not novel. Reading *Stoner* raised the question for me about the distinction between a novel and sociology. There is no compelling narrative line in this book, no dramatic tension, no in-depth character

development, and it isn't really a story with an arc and resolution (rather, like life, it just ends). *Stoner* is a stay-on-the-surface, skip-along-through-the-years, case study of an invented person, William Stoner (though based on author Williams own life?), from his birth in 1891 until his death in 1954 just as he was about to retire from the university where he had been a literature professor for decades. Whatever it was—a novel or sociological case study--I found *Stoner* thought-provoking, and I stayed with the book all the way to the end, which these days is saying something; increasingly, I'm bailing out on books of all sorts, films too.

I'm too lazy to summarize the book myself, so I'll use the blurb in Amazon.

> William Stoner is born at the end of the nineteenth century into a dirt-poor Missouri farming family. Sent to the state university to study agronomy, he instead falls in love with English literature and embraces a scholar's life, so different from the hardscrabble existence he has known. And yet as the years pass, Stoner encounters a succession of disappointments: marriage into a "proper" family estranges him from his parents; his career is stymied; his wife and daughter turn coldly away from him; a transforming experience of new love ends under threat of scandal. Driven ever deeper within himself, Stoner rediscovers the stoic silence of his forebears and confronts an essential solitude.
>
> John Williams's luminous and deeply moving novel is a work of quiet perfection. William Stoner emerges from it not only as an arhetypal American, but as an unlikely existential hero, standing, like a figure in a painting by Edward Hopper, in stark relief against an unforgiving world.

"Rediscovers the stoic silence of his forebears" doesn't square with my reading. "Kept plugging along" is how I'd put it. And I don't know where "luminous and deeply moving novel" comes from. "Competent," "workman-like," "arm's-length treatment"—that's what describes author Williams' effort for me.

While I'm not ecstatic about *Stoner*, as I understand a lot of people are—including the actor Tom Hanks--I am taken with it as a depiction of the sort of life many men lead, one characterized by, a quote from early in the book, "the cloistered and slow extinction that awaits us all." And it's a cloistered and slow extinction that, when all is said and done, doesn't add up to much of anything.

To his credit, William Stoner has well-thought-out theories about medieval literature, his academic focus. He knows his stuff in this area. And he has standards he upholds in his scholarly domain. In one of the few detailed episodes in the book, he admirably sticks to his guns giving a low grade to a student in a course and denying him admission to graduate study.

Stoner works hard in his professorial work: teaching and writing, preparing lectures, grading papers, and getting a book out. He doesn't have marked success with any of that, but he puts in the effort, and that is laudable.

Unfortunately, however, our man Stoner doesn't have theories, standards, and a predilection toward hard work in two areas that are crucial to a life well lived.

One of them, he doesn't have a theory, let's call it that, of personal happiness. What does it mean to be happy? What does it feel like? What does it look like? What are the rules you have to play by to attain it? Particularly, how

do you get happy when you aren't (and most of the time, Stoner isn't).

Stoner, a bright enough person, doesn't have the sense to realize that a theory, or technology, of happiness that he acted upon with dead seriousness might do him a world of good in his life. Rather, he plugs along getting through his day, he makes do, he copes: with a loveless and sexless marriage; a career without a promotion in rank after receiving tenure (permanent status in the university); and disinterested, uncomprehending, and vaguely disdainful students in the undergraduate courses he is assigned to teach by a department chairman who has it in for him.

Another theory Stoner doesn't possess is a woman-in-a-man's-life theory. What is to be expected of a woman who applies, as it were, to be *the* women in a man's life? What standards apply to her? What's the job description?

To put it simply, Stoner isn't his wife Edith's man in a basic, biological, man-woman, time immemorial way. He's a nice guy and he's got a good job, and he's respectable in the world, but he simply doesn't do it for her as a woman. She'd rather be in another room doing her craftwork than with him. And for sure, she'd rather be in some other bed than the one he's sleeping in.

Stoner applies rigorous standards to his scholarship but none to Edith; he bears up with her, and he pays heavy personal dues for it. All the medieval literature in the world won't make up for a ho-hum look on your wife's face when you walk in the door.

A few weeks ago, in a thought called "On Dr. Toni Grant," I set out three responsibilities, or roles, for a woman in an intimate relationship with a man.

Amazon. Assertive, self-referenced, autonomous, goal directed, informed, opinionated. Relates to the man in her life as a companion, friend, co-worker, partner, help-mate, talk-mate, spar-mate, and/or competitor. Today's feminist ideal, which is not to imply it is all bad. To the contrary, as one aspect of a total relationship, it has worth.

Madonna. Embodies the quintessential feminine virtues of patience, kindness, softness, and gentleness. Loving, peaceful, joyous, serene, flowing, graceful. Virtuous, decent, generous, patient, and tolerant. Embodies and imparts human-centered standards, values, and ideals. Home creator. Nurturer. Enhancer, inspirer. Respects, affirms, believes in, and supports her man in his quest for fulfillment. A woman and proud of it, not an emulator of men, not a pseudo-man. A complement to her man, not a mirror image of him.

Courtesan. Emotionally, bodily, connected to her man. In close harmony with him, intimate with him. Fully present, attentive, for him. Affirming of her man as a sexual being. Devoted to sexually attracting, pleasing, affirming, and satisfying her man.

To employ a school metaphor, Edith flunks Stoner's "woman-in-my-life" course in a big way. She isn't a good Amazon, Madonna, or Courtesan with Stoner; and really, she doesn't try to be. Stoner shouldn't have let her enroll in his course, and when she got in, he should have, if at all possible, expelled her. Instead, he keeps busy in his office and, for a short time, dallies with a young instructor named Katherine.

Katherine matches up with the "woman-in-a-man's-life" standards in a big way with Stoner, and as far as I'm concerned, he should have committed himself to her. When she left town, she wanted him to go with her, but he

didn't want to give up his academic pursuits at the university. Katherine was the real deal as a woman for Stoner, and he chose medieval literature over her. A conclusion I've reached after a long life is that while medieval literature—or whatever your passion or career happens to be—is important, if you have a chance at love, grab on to it with all you have.