Stoner
(John Williams)
July 21, 2025

When I was very young, my mother told me that the chief value of good fiction is it allows the reader to better understand other men and women. Even so, I have never read much fiction. Moreover, most of what I do read is science fiction, which is usually not "good" in the sense of reflecting the reality of mankind. Perhaps this shows a lack in me, an inability or unwillingness to try to inhabit the minds of others. It is not for nothing that I am sometimes deemed a sociopath. Regardless, *Stoner* shows that my mother was correct, even if the book mostly demonstrates how other men and women can be grossly defective.

I read this book last year, but did not write about it, thinking that I had little of interest to say. Yet I kept recurring to it, in my thoughts and in my conversations, which suggested to me that I should refine my thoughts on it. John Williams published this modestly famous work in 1965, though that fame is relatively recent, occurring long after the book was published, initially a commercial failure. *Stoner* narrates the life of the eponymous William Stoner, born in 1891, son of hardscrabble Missouri farmers, who unexpectedly, to himself and others, becomes a professor of English literature. He dies in 1956, having accomplished very little in his professional life, as success is measured in the universities, and less in his personal life, having experienced crushing disappointment after crushing disappointment, leavened by no lasting happiness at all.

Stoner, then, is a quintessential sad sack, and this book is undeniably depressing. But as my mother promised, by considering Stoner's life, we can both draw lessons and conclusions for our own lives. Most of all, we can understand what it means to fail to act as a man should, and therefore to be a failure as a man.

I perhaps have more understanding than some of the events of Stoner's life, because my father was also a university professor, and thus many events in this book are easier for me to viscerally grasp than they might be for someone unconnected to the professoriate. (Williams was also a professor, at Missouri, though naturally he denied that he was portraying people he knew.) In the United States at least, the term "ivory tower" exists for good reason. The university system conduces

to extreme and pernicious insularity, largely because of the practice of tenure, guaranteed lifetime employment granted early in a professor's career, which has no equivalent in any other job. Tenure distorts the normal relationship of employment, resulting in idiosyncrasy and incompetence being tolerated of necessity that would be tolerated in no other job, and in the creation of incentives and disincentives difficult for an outsider to fully appreciate.

Tenure, after all, is a form of welfare—the granting of benefits not based on productivity. To be sure, tenure is typically only granted after some modest production of value, usually publication of a book. In the university system, where prestige and money are the result of publishing, even if nobody reads what is published, not teaching, no matter how excellent the teaching, the theory behind tenure is that it allows a professor to publish without fear of repercussions for expressing unpopular or idiosyncratic opinions. Of course, everyone knows this is untrue; the Left has wholly occupied our universities for half a century, and ensured that anyone who does not toe their ideological line is punished, and that anyone they fear might not advance their ideology is never hired, much less granted tenure. Thus, the practical effect of tenure for fifty years or more has been to provide sinecures which enable leftist professors to spread their poison throughout our society, and we see the effects of this all around us.

These maleficent effects of tenure have been further exacerbated by something that does not appear at all in *Stoner*—the destructive consequences of extending age discrimination protection to the university system. Naturally, all age discrimination should be legal; the vast majority of age discrimination is entirely rational and beneficial to society. By far, by at least an order of magnitude, the most productive members of society in terms of output which drives society forward are young men, under forty years of age; an older man lacks the drives, of temperament, desire, and necessity, which power a young man's output. Age discrimination protections therefore are merely a device to allow the old to steal from the young. Yes, sometimes, rarely in employment, age is compensated by knowledge gained over the years, but the only person who should make the judgment is an employer. (I do not mean to imply that any discrimination, rational or not, should be illegal. Total

freedom of association should be the law of the land. But that is a topic for another day.)

Age discrimination in the United States has sadly been forbidden since 1967. But an exception was initially made in the law for university professors, who only had this benefit bestowed on them in 1993. Prior to that time mandatory retirement at age sixty-five was the rule. Since then, it has become much more difficult for a young person to find a job as a university professor, because professors have no reason to retire. Why retire from a job that requires almost zero work? For most professors in their sixties, they are already functionally retired. Better to keep the nice office and prestigious job, and teach a class once a year, taking a six-month sabbatical paid vacation every few years, while talking about the publications that you will someday present to the world.

Naturally, there are exceptions, highly productive professors. Such men are driven by an internal spring, either to improve themselves or raise their prestige. But they are one in fifty, if not fewer, and that leaves aside that the majority of university disciplines are utterly worthless, certainly as practiced today. Does anyone with a brain think a single university professor in America who is tenured in a Sociology or Women's Studies department has ever added one ounce of value to the nation?

But enough about today; let us retreat a hundred years, to pre-World War I rural Missouri. *Stoner* is often depicted as a novel about work, and there is some truth in that reading. It begins with work on the farm, where Stoner is the only child of husband-and-wife dirt farmers. When Stoner is nineteen, his father sends him to the new University of Missouri College of Agriculture, hoping, in his circumscribed way, that his son will learn "new ways of doing things." Here, as throughout the book, Williams writes in bright, spare prose, drawing a compelling picture of the lives of the American poor before government handouts of everything from food to rent to iPhones made such a life impossible to imagine, for good and ill.

At first, college makes no impact on Stoner, who is a fish out of water, working on a cousin's farm near Columbia for room and board and lacking any social life or friends. The turning point of Stoner's life, though perhaps not for the better, is when, in his sophomore year, he takes a required survey course on English literature. One autumn day he is transfixed by a Shakespearean sonnet, which transforms him by

revealing to him whole new unimagined worlds. Without telling his parents, he drops his agronomy classes for literature classes, and later accepts an offer from a kindly mentor to study for a master's degree in English literature, then a Ph.D., disappointing his uncomprehending parents, who had expected him to rejoin them on the farm.

Towards the end of his undergraduate career, Stoner finally makes a few friends—two, Dave Masters and Gordon Finch. It is not a lack of social skills that hampers Stoner; in fact, he seems to be able to converse well and observe all social proprieties. There is nothing of the autist in him. Rather, he falls into this friendship mostly because the other men take a liking to him, not through action of his own.

In one of the most insightful passages of the book, Masters accurately analyzes why the three of them have chosen to inhabit the university as a career. "The University is . . . an asylum, a rest home, for the infirm, the aged, the discontent, and the otherwise incompetent." In short, it is a refuge for those who cannot make their living elsewhere. Those who choose to be professors are those who would almost certainly fail elsewhere, either through lack of ability, lack of mental fortitude, or excessive, often poorly directed, intelligence they refuse to hide or compromise. No doubt there are exceptions to this general rule, but I can say from personal experience, both indirect of my father's colleagues, and from my own time teaching at Purdue, that even today this is generally the case.

World War I begins immediately after Stoner graduates. Masters dies in the war. Despite intense social pressure, Stoner refuses to enlist, though he has no very clear idea why he refuses. More than anything else, it is inertia that characterizes Stoner, a flaw which ultimately implodes his life. He dully ignores Finch's demanding admonition, "We're all in this together now." That oft-used dishonest phrase is, we can see, not new—it was most recently heard during the Wuhan Plague, plastered on lying billboards and the handmade roadside signs of fools. It was no more true then than it was in 1917, and in parallel to Stoner's experience avoiding a war the United States should never have entered, it would be equally false in almost any possible war that the United States could become involved in today, given the corruption, incompetence, and straight-up evil of the Regime and our ruling class. (Conscription in 2025, to fight in anything short of an invasion of the mainland United

States, would be full moral justification for violent rebellion against the state.) Instead of fighting, Stoner takes a teaching position at Mizzou, having earned his doctorate with a dissertation on "The Influence of the Classical Tradition upon the Medieval Lyric." Soon, Finch, returned from the war and quickly climbing the ladder of university administrative power, introduces Stoner to his future wife, Edith.

The central problem of Stoner's life, the razor blade in an already-mealy apple, is his marriage. Edith and Stoner quickly marry, but they are fundamentally incompatible, sexually and otherwise, because his wife is malicious and he is weak. She acts at every turn to undercut him as a man, with little or no resistance from Stoner. Edith is drawn as a women with zero redeeming characteristics. Maybe that is a caricature, but there are indeed people such as that, and her defects throw Stoner's into sharper relief.

In nothing are her crimes more poignant than in Edith's removal from his affection of their only child, a daughter, Grace (the name is no doubt not an authorial accident), whom Stoner initially raises almost by himself, and who as a small child loves him more than life itself, sitting with him for hours in his study. Edith instead wants her to be popular and bars her from spending time with her father, while she treats Stoner with constant contempt and drives him from the house to the maximum degree possible. She encourages their daughter to become a slut in high school (something Stoner either cannot see until it is too late, or refuses to allow himself to see), and she ends up a drunk, married briefly to a husband who dies in World War II and living a dead-end life in an apartment in St. Louis.

Stoner is that low man on the university totem pole, a teacher devoted to teaching, which he enjoys and is reasonably good at, and not to publishing. He does turn his dissertation into a book, the only book or other written work he ever publishes. His department head takes a dislike to him, when for the only time in his life, for reasons unclear, Stoner takes and holds a principled stand involving direct struggle and flunks a student who is a dear pet of the head. The sole reason he manages to not be driven from his job entirely is his lifelong friendship with Finch, who for decades protects him as best he can, using his power as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, assisted by the passive-aggressive nature of conflict among academics, where the direct conflict of men

is frowned upon and feminine circuitous discussion and duplicitous backstabbing substitute for frank resolution of disagreement

Nothing good happens to Stoner in his life, mostly because Stoner takes no action for anything good to happen to him. He has an affair with a student, and he cannot even do that effectively. He starts a second book, and abandons it. He very often has "vague notions," as of saving money to take his wife, bitter that her planned trip to Europe with her aunt was sidelined to marry Stoner, on a Continental tour. But he never concretizes these notions, nor takes the actions necessary to make them reality. Like a turtle, he withdraws his head into his shell. He dies of cancer, in an very well-drawn death scene, repeating to himself, as he reproaches himself for his life, over and over, "What did you expect?"

His dying thoughts encapsulate Stoner, for they imply that he sees himself as a passive vessel, acted upon by others. As, indeed, he was. This raises the question, however—what should Stoner have done? That's easy—he should have acted like a man. When his wife, having spent several months exploring life as a 1920s flapper in St. Louis after her father dies, without permission or agreement from Stoner, returns and orders Grace to stop spending any time with her father, he should have disciplined her and manifested his position as paterfamilias, something still possible in that time and place before odious feminism placed all social and legal power in family relations in the hands of women. The power of flatly saying "No, we're not going to do that," is immense. Stoner is, simply put, a pussy, and nobody, not even the man in question, likes a pussy.

Stoner is, perhaps, aware of this. In his own mind, it seems to manifest as a feeling of stoicism, and this book is often read as an endorsement of a stoic approach to life. But stoicism is not passivity; it is the acceptance of matters one cannot change. Stoner's parents, who died young, were stoic. Stoner does not have their virtues; he has an oppressive vice. He could have changed his life and he chose not to. He is not incapable of seeing what he should do; in fact, once he even pushes back successfully, after years, against his department head's always assigning him a teaching schedule meant to degrade and punish him. But rather than using this as a springboard to turn his life in the direction he wants, he immediately deflates into his default position of passivity.

If you go to Goodreads, this book has almost thirty thousand reviews and more than two hundred thousand ratings, huge numbers. The vast majority of the reviews try to avoid the obvious conclusion, that failures are going to fail, and instead substitute bromides about how every man's life is insignificant, which is both false and beside the point. I am not sure whether this is just the modern disease of refusing to pass judgment on those of weak character, or simply too many readers being sucked into the frame of the book. After all, this is almost a nihilist book, and nihilism is the modern Zeitgeist.

Stoner depicts no joy at all in any character's life, at best a kind of leaden neutrality with an occasional penumbra of ephemeral happiness, and as a result the book conveys the lie that joy can never be found, that "life's a bitch and then you die." Along the same lines, and wholly unrealistically, no mention of any form of religion appears even once in this book, which must be a deliberate choice of the author, given the time and place of events. It might have been better had this book remained obscure, but if you do read it, and it is well written, you would do best to take away lessons how not to live your life.