

Room to Read Book Group Report by Beverley Redfearn – April 2022

Stoner by John Williams

This novel, first published in 1965, received a more successful reception on its second publication in 2012, eighteen years after the author's death.

In the opening pages we immediately comprehend the grey, soulless existence of the young Stoner, born in 1891 to poor, hardworking parents, on a small farm in central Missouri. From an early age, the harshness and drudgery of his daily routine, 'milking bony cows; gathering small eggs from spindly chicks; sitting at a small table ... lighted by a single kerosene lamp' inevitably result in limited personal expectations and aspirations. At sixteen, Stoner stoically accepts that he will take over from his father, but his father has determined that his son will attend the College of Agriculture at Columbia University, whilst boarding with, and working for, a distant relative.

At first, Stoner does his work at the University as he did on the farm; automatically, devoid of emotion. However, a hugely significant encounter with Archer Sloane, a tutor in literature, causes Stoner to abandon his agricultural course and transfer to a subject for which he develops a lifelong love. Thus, Stoner, almost accidentally, becomes an assistant Professor of Literature.

Shortly after this aesthetic awakening in Stoner, he falls in love and marries Edith, a woman with whom he is totally incompatible. Both sexually inexperienced and apparently unable to communicate meaningfully within their marriage, their relationship quickly declines. As Edith's behaviour appears increasingly vindictive and unpredictable, their daughter, Grace, becomes an innocent casualty. Meanwhile, Stoner retreats further within himself, spending more time away from the marital home, eventually beginning a passionate love affair with a junior colleague.

Though he continues to take solace from his teaching, Stoner makes an implacable enemy of his superior, Hollis Lomax, who makes Stoner's life extremely difficult. Again, Stoner accepts and endures his unjust treatment without retaliation, even when he is forced to give up his affair.

In discussing the novel, we agreed that it is well written, particularly in descriptive passages, and we felt the emotional intensity building throughout. However, there was some concern that the female characters are rather stereotypical, albeit defined by the expected role of women at that time.

As a recommendation to a reading group, we attributed an average score of 4, and 2.5 as a recommendation to a friend.

Next meeting: *Wednesday* 18 May 10.30 *Sad Little Men*, Richard Beard