BOOK CLUB IN A BOX

THE COMPLETE PACKAGE
FOR READERS AND LEADERS

DISCUSSES JOHN WILLIAMS’ NOVEL

STONER
Bookclub-in-a-Box presents the discussion companion for John Williams’ novel Stoner


Quotations used in this guide have been taken from the text of the paperback edition of Stoner. All information taken from other sources is acknowledged.

This discussion companion was written by Jo-Ann Zoon and Marilyn Herbert, B.Ed. Herbert is the founder of Bookclub-in-a-Box and an international speaker with more than 30 years experience as a teacher and school librarian. Bookclub-in-a-Box is a unique guide to current fiction and classic literature intended for book club discussions, educational study seminars, and personal pleasure. For more information about the Bookclub-in-a-Box team, visit our website.

Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion companion for Stoner

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Readers and Leaders Guide

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is clearly and effectively organized to give you information and ideas for a lively discussion, as well as to present the major highlights of the novel. The format, with a Table of Contents, allows you to pick and choose the specific points you wish to talk about. It does not have to be used in any prescribed order. In fact, it is meant to support, not determine, your discussion.

You Choose What to Use.

You may find that some information is repeated in more than one section and may be cross-referenced so as to provide insight on the same idea from different angles.

The guide is formatted to give you extra space to make your own notes.

How to Begin

Relax and look forward to enjoying your book club.

With Bookclub-in-a-Box as your behind the scenes support, there is little for you to do in the way of preparation.

Some readers like to review the guide after reading the novel; some before. Either way, the guide is all you will need as a companion for your discussion. You may find that the guide’s interpretation, information, and background have sparked other ideas not included.

Having read the novel and armed with Bookclub-in-a-Box, you will be well prepared to lead or guide or listen to the discussion at hand.

Lastly, if you need some more “hands on” support, feel free to contact us.

What to Look For

Each Bookclub-in-a-Box guide is divided into easy-to-use sections, which include points on characters, themes, writing style and structure, literary or historical background, author information, and other pertinent features unique to the novel being discussed. These may vary slightly from guide to guide.
INTERPRETATION OF EACH NOVEL REFLECTS THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOKCLUB-IN-A-BOX TEAM.

Do We Need to Agree?

THE ANSWER TO THIS QUESTION IS NO.

If we have sparked a discussion or a debate on certain points, then we are happy. We invite you to share your group’s alternative findings and experiences. You can contact us via our website (www.bookclubinabox.com), by email (info@bookclubinabox.com), or by phone (1-866-578-5571). We would love to hear from you.

Discussion Starters

There are as many ways to begin a book club discussion as there are members in your group. If you are an experienced group, you will already have your favorite ways to begin. If you are a newly formed group or a group looking for new ideas, here are some suggestions.

• Ask for people’s impressions of the novel. (This will give you some idea about which parts of the unit to focus on.)
• Identify a favorite or major character.
• Identify a favorite or major idea.
• Begin with a powerful or pertinent quote. (Not necessarily from the novel.)
• Discuss the historical information of the novel. (Not applicable to all novels.)
• If this author is familiar to the group, discuss the range of his/her work and where this novel stands in that range.
• Use the discussion topics and questions in the Bookclub-in-a-Box guide.

If you have further suggestions for discussion starters, be sure to share them with us and we will share them with others.

Above All, Enjoy Yourselves
INTRODUCTION

Novel Quickline

Stoner Finds Its Audience

Author Information
INTRODUCTION

Novel Quickline

This luminous account of a young man falling in love with literature follows the life of an unassuming scholar who pursues his passion despite the toll it takes on himself and his family.

In 1910, William Stoner, a Missouri farm boy with no real ambitions and no horizons beyond the fields he tills, is sent away to agricultural college. His uneducated parents sacrifice their meagre savings, with the expectation their only son will return and breathe life into their small plot of land. He works hard at his classes and pays his way as a labourer. There is little light, little joy. But when he hears Shakespeare’s 73rd Sonnet in an English literature class, he experiences “the epiphany of knowing something through words that could not be put in words.” (p.98) His life is irrevocably changed. He has found his purpose.

While he makes a commitment to the study and teaching of the classics, Stoner endures mounting disappointments. Friends are few; he finds himself in a loveless, vicious marriage; his much-loved daughter is turned against him; his career is thwarted by a malicious department head; and a transformative affair with a young lecturer ends under the threat of scandal. At mid-life, Stoner reflects that “he could see nothing before him that he wished to enjoy and little behind him that he cared to remember.” (p.181)
As death approaches and he reflects on what has been, Stoner moves from bitter disillusionment to resignation before gaining a transcendent serenity. Whether by grace or hallucination, he comes to see his life and undistinguished career not as the failure that he and others have so cruelly judged but rather as an act of devotion. Peace comes in knowing that he has given himself as fully as he could to the thing he loved most.

Stoner Finds Its Audience

Despite being published in 1965, only since its re-release in 2012 has Stoner become a word-of-mouth phenomenon. Sales have been astonishing, particularly in Europe. In Britain, it was named 2013 Book of the Year by leading bookseller Waterstones. Reviews have been glowing, and such literary giants as Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, and Bret Easton Ellis, as well as actor Tom Hanks, have championed its cause.

Given that the book sold only 2,000 copies when it was first published, its newfound popularity is puzzling. The only major review back in 1965 was in The New Yorker, which described the book as “a masterly portrait ... of the life an ordinary, almost an invisible man.” The book received no further coverage and was out of print within a year. It was re-issued by The New York Review in 2003, to little notice, and was again re-issued in 2006 by the New York Review Books Classics. A review in 2007 in The New York Times called it a “perfect novel.” But it was not until French novelist Anna Gavalda translated it into French in 2011 that Stoner started to create a real buzz.

As an explanation for the book’s lack of traction in 1965, some have pointed to the competition of the day which included such literary heavyweights as Saul Bellow (Herzog), Norman Mailer (An American Dream), James Baldwin (Going to Meet the Man), and Malcolm X’s popular autobiography. As well, The New Yorker was serializing Truman Capote’s In Cold Blood.
Tumultuous events of the time — including the assassination of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King’s civil rights march, the Los Angeles race riots, and the landing of the first American combat troops in Vietnam — possibly overshadowed the story of an undistinguished college professor at a small Midwestern university.

What is the novel’s appeal to Europeans? And to baby boomers? What is the parallel between Stoner’s connection of what he has and has not accomplished to our own goals and achievements?

Author Information

- John Williams has much in common with his protagonist, William Stoner. Both were raised in a humble, rural environment and rose to nothing much; with Williams becoming a self-effacing novelist and modest academic who achieved limited notoriety in his lifetime.

- Born in Clarksville, in northeast Texas, Williams grew up around Wichita Falls. His grandparents were farmers, while his parents bore the effects of the Depression, until his father George found a steady job as a janitor in a post office. John was eight or nine before he learned that George was actually his stepfather. According to Denver’s Westword News, John was told that his biological father had been murdered by a hitchhiker while he was still a baby.

- By early high school, John had become a voracious reader, was working in a bookstore, and dreamed of becoming a writer. A teacher’s praise for an essay he wrote set him on a literary path.

- Despite a talent for writing, Williams flunked out of freshman English at a local junior college. He then worked with newspapers and radio stations for a year. At 19, he got married, and soon after, in 1942, joined the war effort. He spent two-and-a-half years as a radio dispatcher on missions over the Himalayas, dropping supplies to troops in the jungles of Burma. Much of his downtime was spent writing a draft of his first
Thank you for previewing this Bookclub-in-a-Box discussion guide.

If you’d like to purchase the full guide, just visit:

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