



Continuing a December Journal tradition...

The books for this month are a holiday gift list:
books to broaden the library and the mind,
to provide pleasure and enjoyment,
to give to oneself and others.

Stoner, by John Williams, Introduction by John McGahern.
New York, New York Review of Books, 2006, 288 pp., \$14.95.

Stoner is a straightforward, seemingly simple book: the story of one man's life. You can read a summary of all the significant events on the back cover. Born on a farm in the 1890s, William Stoner becomes a teacher of English at the University of Missouri in 1910, where he never rises above the rank of assistant professor. His marriage is bitterly disappointing. He has one brief affair, an oasis of pleasure in an otherwise austere life. This respite lasts for a few months, only 26 lyrical pages of the novel. He dies of cancer at age 63, with no record of particular accomplishments, and is soon forgotten. The story of his life is as bleak as his childhood spent toiling on the farm. So why is this book so deeply moving?

Partly, the answer is that the writing is clear, honest, and respectful. The story of Stoner's life, written by John Williams in 1965 and reissued in 2006, is told in precisely detailed language that fully engages the reader. We care about Stoner and the people he cares about; we believe in their humanity. But the excitement that sweeps us forward is the gathering certainty, conveyed by the clarity and conviction of the writing, that there is some pattern to be revealed, some meaning to this story that we can only dimly perceive. The revelation, both for Stoner and for the reader, is the climax of the book, which produces an intense experience of insight. The everyday surface of what we have been reading is stripped away, and an apprehension of an inner truth transforms our understanding of Stoner's life and, for a moment, of life itself. All good books yield some kind of insight, but *Stoner* in particular propels us into the experience of it.

The first 10 pages tell the story of Stoner's childhood. He is an only child of hard-working, unimaginative folk who lack the vocabulary for emotions or abstract ideas. "At thirty his father looked fifty; stooped by labor, he gazed without hope at the arid patch of land that sustained the family....His mother regarded her life patiently, as if it were a long moment that she had to endure" (p. 4). His father sends Stoner to the University of Missouri to major in agriculture, and he plows

unreflectively through his first-year classes, just as he has unreflectively plowed literally and figuratively, through the first years of his life.

In his second year at the university, Stoner unexpectedly discovers the first, transformative love of his life. An English professor reads out loud a Shakespeare sonnet. Stoner is broad-sided. Fourteen lines have opened an unknown world. Williams' writing, like Stoner's consciousness, becomes intensely concentrated in the moment. Every detail that Stoner sees—the light "slanting from the windows," the faces of the students around him, his own hands—becomes infused with significance. The precision of the description makes the reader feel intensely Stoner's heightened sense of himself and his surroundings, his first intimation of an internal reality. The experience gives him a compass from which he never wavers.

His marriage to an immature woman incapable of loving him becomes a lonely slog to be endured. His wife is described through small, telling details. There is no judgment or explanation here. We see Edith. She is insecure and brittle, a woman of her time, with no scope for her energies or imagination outside the home. Raised to be a little girl forever, she can neither understand nor reciprocate Stoner's feelings. She struggles desperately for a sense of herself, which she can only define in opposition to him. Edith is always trying to invent a new persona, whereas he, committed to a life of teaching and study, is unaffected by the eyes of the world. He leaves the farm, despite his father's plans; he takes a deferment from service in World War I, despite tremendous societal pressures. In an absorbing episode in the book, he stays true to his academic standards, despite forfeiting his chance of professional advancement. We can understand why Edith is jealous: she lacks an inner compass.

On the other hand, 20 years into the marriage, she is not jealous, only indulgent and a little contemptuous of Stoner's brief relationship with Katherine Driscoll, a gifted graduate student. Katherine is the only person to understand Stoner's commitment to the life of the mind. He gives himself to her fully, as he once gave himself to Edith, as he continues to give himself, unstintingly, to his work. When Katherine leaves, he

returns to his lonely life, prematurely aged like his father, outwardly stooped, inwardly still deeply committed to his chosen path.

Not coincidentally, the sonnet, Number LXXIII, that first awakened his love of literature, is about the heightened perceptions that the imminence of death can give. When we come to the last section of the novel, which describes Stoner's terminal illness, we seem to rise with him to just such a higher plane of perception. Through his eyes, we see every nuance of color and shadow in the room where he lies, and with him, in this new, clear light, we begin to understand the inner trajectory of his outwardly unsuccessful life. The intensity and flow of the writing at the end of the book breaks on the reader with the same sense of profound insight that Shakespeare's sonnet brought to Stoner 40 years before. In this transcendent light, we finally recognize what we have been witnessing all along: a life of passion and integrity.

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Book review accepted for publication August 2010 (doi: 10.1176/appi.ajp.2010.10081226).

Every Man Dies Alone, by Hans Fallada, Translated by Michael Hofmann (written in German in 1947). Brooklyn, N.Y., Melville House, 2010, 544 pp., \$29.95.

Berlin at War: Life and Death in Hitler's Capital, 1939–45, by Roger Moorhouse. London, United Kingdom, Bodley Head, 2010, 448 pp., £25.00.

Berlin in 1939: the city had made a remarkable recovery from the Great War; its citizens enjoyed prosperity, optimism about peace, and expectations of renewed stature in the world. By 1945, the city lay in ruins.

Much has been written about Jewish and other Berliners who were deported to their deaths in concentration camps and about the fate of the Nazis. But until now, we have known little about the lives of ordinary people in Berlin. These two books address that gap in our knowledge and offer tentative answers to the questions of what the German people did and did not know about the intentions of the Third Reich and why they remained complicit and did not resist.

Hans Fallada (pseudonym for Rudolf Ditzgen), struggled throughout his adult life with drug and alcohol addiction and was admitted to psychiatric hospitals. He continued to write, sometimes collaborating with the Nazis but at other times producing books the Nazis criticized. After the war ended, a fellow author encouraged him to resume writing and suggested as his topic Otto and Elsie Hampel, a working class couple who mounted an individual resistance to the Nazis. Fallada wrote a fictionalized account in 24 days in late 1946. He died before it was published in German, in 1947. The English translation was published in 2009.

Every Man Dies Alone begins with the postwoman delivering to Otto and Anna Quangel, the fictional counterparts of the Hampels, notice of their only son's death in the German army. Otto Quangel, a factory foreman who had never before concerned himself with politics or emotions, is moved

enough by his wife's despair at the loss of their son to devise an act of resistance, on his own and unconnected to any of the cells of other resisting individuals in Berlin. Otto, later joined by Anna, wrote postcards criticizing Hitler and calling for disobedience and sabotage. (One card, shown in the appendix to the British edition of the book, read, "German People Wake Up.") They left the cards in public locations around the city. The Quangels hoped that the cards would be passed on between citizens, but such was the fear of being caught with contraband material that the cards were quickly turned over to the authorities. There follows a gripping account of the Gestapo tracking down the Quangels, torturing them and sending them to a puppet court to be sentenced to death.

The couple die separately in prison. A central question, raised early in the book by Anna, is whether such small acts of resistance matter. The question becomes more pressing as it becomes certain that the Quangels, like most individuals who resisted, will be killed. However, Fallada shows the impact of their dignity and commitment on people around them, particularly their Gestapo interrogator, Escherich, who "lowered his gaze" when Otto confronted him about being part of a corrupt system. Escherich later shoots himself.

Primo Levi described Fallada's work as "the greatest book ever written about the German resistance to the Nazis." The different translations of the title in the American and British versions emphasize two aspects of the meaning of this book. The German title is *Jeder stirbt für sich allein*, which literally means, "each dies for himself alone." The American title, *Every Man Dies Alone*, refers to the fatal sacrifices that those who resisted made. The British title, *Alone in Berlin*, focuses on how the decision to resist the Nazis had to be made on an individual and isolated basis, without the support of a community.

Berlin at War is an excellent companion to Fallada's novel, a historical narrative that is as gripping to read. This is a historian's account of the lives of ordinary people in Berlin, based on diaries and accounts written at the time as well as recent interviews with survivors. Moorhouse begins in 1939, with the city of Berlin celebrating Hitler's 50th birthday. He suggests that while most citizens joined enthusiastically in the occasion, there were already individuals who registered protests. Berlin, after all, was the most cosmopolitan German city, with the largest number of Jews and foreign nationals, and was politically inclined toward the left. The Nazis had registered a lower percentage of the vote in Berlin than elsewhere in the country.

Moorhouse proceeds through the years of the war, suggesting that initially, Berliners could not believe that they were vulnerable to attack. The government supported this view by ensuring that workers quickly tidied the streets after bombs were dropped, repairing the damage and maintaining an appearance of normality. The aerial attack began in 1940, with nocturnal air raids by the Royal Air Force. Accounts of that period emphasize that a significant part of the toll on people was sleep deprivation; some people had to be dragged from their beds by the wardens during air raids.

As the war continued, Berliners increasingly distrusted the information from their government. Many turned to the BBC, listening under their blankets to news broadcasts. Berliners knew that while they were under attack externally, they were also being watched by the Gestapo. Many turned to denunciation, maliciously or for self-protection. Suspicion

and accusation were rife. There were so many denunciations made that the Gestapo tried to reduce the number!

Moorhouse argues that anyone contemplating resistance knew that the risks were great and likely to be fatal. There was little sense of a supportive community, so one could only act for oneself. Information leaked out about the concentration camps, but recent research has shown that less than one-third of Berliners believed it; such was the population's disavowal of the brutal reality of the Nazi regime that they asked few questions about where the transports were taking their fellow Berliners.

Fallada and Moorhouse, through fiction and history, show that within the heart of Nazi Germany, as with all repressive regimes, the risk of death for resistance was great, but some people took that risk because they could not live otherwise.

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Asylum: Inside the Closed World of State Mental Hospitals, by Christopher Payne, Introduction by Oliver Sacks. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 2009, 219 pp., \$45.00.

This illuminating and evocative book features marvelous photographs and edifying discussions by Christopher Payne, an award-winning photographer trained as an architect who specializes in documenting vanishing and forgotten architecture and industrial archeology. Here, he records, validates, and honors both the magnificence and the horrors that were embedded in our nation's large, now disappearing, state mental hospitals. Initially inspired by a suggestion from a psychiatrist friend that he might want to visit Pilgrim State Hospital in New York, Payne visited 70 institutions in 30 states, from 2002 to 2008, photographing splendid exteriors, magisterial grounds, endless corridors, collapsing interiors, peeling walls, and corroded pipes that portray both the grandeur and lofty intentions as well as the industrial-strength dehumanization through which millions of Americans passed, largely from the mid-19th century through the latter decades of the 20th century. These beautiful and harrowing pictures witness a grand, ultimately failed, project that has largely come to an end.

In his eloquent and humane introductory essay, previously published separately in the New York Review of Books (1), Oliver Sacks reviews the good, bad, and ugly of the state hospital era. He lauds Payne as a "visual poet" capturing the beauties and the evolution, and sad devolution, of these enormous enterprises. Payne's photographs see through the deteriorating facades to what was originally intended by the high-minded physicians, nurses, architects, public servants, and citizens who conceptualized moral treatment as the best available method for caring for the mentally ill in the early and mid-19th century. These were interiors of grandeur—large, open, full of light and air and placed in elegant, often palatial, buildings with magnificent grounds, projected to be places of true asylum. So these commanding institutions, in many instances representing top-of-the-line Classic and Victorian architecture, were usually built remotely, purposefully away from large, noisy, and

congested urban concentrations, and served as places of actual refuge for countless individuals and their families. They were meant to be fully contained and self-sufficient institutions, and for many decades until well after World War II they were just that: communities that produced virtually all their own consumables, from food to clothing, based on the productive labor of the patients, many of whom found meaning in the work they were expected to contribute to their well being. And these places were huge. At its peak, for example, Pilgrim State Hospital housed about 14,000 patients.

That many of these institutions deteriorated over the years and degraded into underfunded human warehouses reflected how the dedication, zeal, humanism, charisma, and political persuasiveness of their initial well-intentioned developers, caretakers, and superintendents failed to sustain. The legacies of the state hospital era—peaking in the late 19th century through the 1950s and 1960s, when hospitals began to discharge patients to the community in large numbers, downsize, and, in many cases, close entirely—are complex. The good aspects of moral treatment, where patients were managed by kindly staff out in the country, in peaceful places that actually offered the space, time, and respite to heal, represent the most noble of psychiatry's past days. In contrast, the bad and the ugly of socially neglected, dehumanizing institutions, where patients were stacked, sometimes abused, sometimes neglected, and sometimes subjected to degrading, unethical, and occasionally violent "treatment" protocols prior to the modern era, are the stuff of shame.

On balance? A patient discharged from Bronx State Hospital in the wake of deinstitutionalization and the oversold community mental health movement, as quoted by Sacks (1), nails the dilemma: "Bronx State is no picnic but it is infinitely better than starving, freezing on the streets, or being knifed in the Bowery."

All these themes come together in this excellent coffee-table gift for the photography and/or psychiatric history buffs on your list. And, from my perspective, all teachers and students of the history of psychiatry as well as community psychiatry and psychiatric treatment settings would benefit from perusing these pages and from reflecting on and discussing the many unanswered questions that still abound about how to provide decent moral care for patients. Like penetrating films, these photographs leave indelible impressions, convey haunting images and zeitgeist, and raise numerous questions.

What next? Payne's outstanding sensibilities might be fruitfully invested in portraying post-state hospital treatment settings. His talented and penetrating eye would undoubtedly help us better feel as well as think about the places where many of today's chronically mentally ill individuals are domiciled and reside: single room occupancies, homeless shelters, jails, and the streets.

Reference

1. Sacks O: The Lost Virtues of the Asylum. New York, New York Review of Books, September 24 2009

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The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century, by Alex Ross. New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2008, 704 pp., \$30.00.

Most people who may be interested in this book likely listen to music, perhaps play music on an instrument, or might sing, but they read relatively little about music, whether it be classical, jazz, or popular. As part of their cultural lives, people often collect a number of books on 20th-century painting, but I suspect that music lovers have few books on parallel music topics. For most of us, if we read anything about music, it is in program notes of concerts or occasional newspaper articles, and these are occasionally augmented by documentary-style television programs. Hence our knowledge of music is often fragmented or nestled in pockets around composers that we particularly love.

In this book, Alex Ross provides what he calls an approach “from multiple angles; biography, musical description, cultural and social history, evocations of place, raw politics, firsthand accounts by the participants themselves.” This makes for an intelligent, readable, and exciting account of the interplay between composers and musicians and the cultural milieu in which they lived. It is a book that can widen our horizons, deepen our understanding, bring us closer to the composers, and above all, open our ears! It has already swelled my record collection and accelerated my interest in contemporary music.

Linked to this is a point that Ross makes about classical music: while exhibitions of 20th-century paintings, including the most abstract works, will attract viewers in large numbers, the appearance of work by Schoenberg, Weburn, Henze, or John Cage will likely reduce ticket sales. This makes concert organizers ensure that their works are always on programs that also include more acceptable music from the classical or baroque.

Although Ross's book is partly a history of the development of 20th-century music, its aim is not to be scholarly or to offer the reader overly detailed, technical analysis of music form. Rather, Ross places the lives of the composers and the development of their music within the national, cultural, political, and economic context in which they lived and worked. The book does offer some musical analysis to make clear how composers expressed meaning. However, Ross does not offer his own opinions about what he likes.

Ross sketches the personalities of composers, along with the influence of some of those around them, such as their wives, families, friends and colleagues, and competitors. For example, he writes of Mahler and Strauss as follows:

“Mahler was 46, Strauss 41. They were in most respects polar opposites. Mahler was a kaleidoscope of moods—childlike, heaven-storming, despotic, despairing. In Vienna, as he strode from his apartment near the *Schwarzenbergplatz* to the Opera House on the *Ringstrasse*, cab drivers would whisper to their passengers, ‘Dear Mahler!’ Strauss was earthy, self-satisfied, more than a little cynical, a closed book to most observers. The soprano Gemma Bellincioni, who sat next to him at a banquet after the [Salome] performance in Graz, described him as ‘a pure kind of German, without poses, without long-winded speeches, little gossip and no inclination to talk about himself and his work, a gaze of steel, and indecipherable expression.’”

The book shows that music developed in ways that were intertwined with and in response to developments in art and philosophy. Duchamp remarked that what changed in

20th-century art was the way that we looked at an object, not the object itself. In music, the way we listen to sounds, including noise, also has become increasingly central. In a 2004 poll of artists, the Duchamp's *pissoire* (a urinal as an art object) was voted the most influential work of 20th-century art. It would be an interesting question (if it has not been answered already) to know what composers and musicians would vote as equally important in their field. Perhaps, if the criteria were how we listen, it would be John Cage's completely silent piece entitled *4'33*.”

Music in the United States brought to the foreground musicians and composers who were black or Jewish, and both learned from and inspired each other. With jazz came a new genre of music, creating new audiences and radiating its influence on music across the world. Alongside it grew musical theatre and the American songbook, unsurpassed for encapsulating in a popular idiom the manifold vicissitudes of romantic love.

Ross shows that the 20th-century, with the explosion in the world population, two world wars, consolidation of European countries, and emergence of third-world countries, alongside the political and economic hegemony of the United States, was also supremely a century of music. Musicians for the first time had access not only to centers of teaching, but also to mass audiences, particularly because of the invention of recording machines, starting with the phonograph cylinder to the present compact discs. Alongside this, musicians had access to a large number of listeners through radio, film, and then television. This meant that music, from its composition to its distribution, became an industry and was produced on an industrial scale. Audiences became not simply listeners, but consumers. I think that this is less a cause for worry and more a chance to broaden and deepen our understanding and experience. Music is increasingly available and much of it, in its performance, is of high quality. And what this book can help us resist is the deprivation that comes with anxiously sticking with what we know and only listening to what we believe we like.

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Wolf Hall: A Novel, by Hilary Mantel. New York, Henry Holt and Company, 2009, 532 pp., \$27.00.

In the Frick Museum in New York City, two remarkable 16th-century portraits by Hans Holbein are placed on each side of a mantelpiece. One is of Thomas More, resplendent in an ermine-lined coat and wearing the chain of Lord Chancellor of the Realm. The other is of Thomas Cromwell, his successor, dressed more soberly. Both are penetrating psychological portrayals. More is handsome and seems the embodiment of a powerful yet benign intellect. Cromwell is less attractive; a subtle intellect glimmers through his narrow eyes, but he appears less benign than More.

Cromwell is the protagonist of Hilary Mantel's historical novel *Wolf Hall*. Set in the court of Henry VIII, Mantel creates

vivid and compelling portraits of More and Cromwell in her own right. Holbein also features in a minor role. This novel does not succumb to the isomorphic fallacy—the tendency to interpret the distant past through our contemporary worldview—which often besets historical novels. Instead, Mantel uses a developmental, carefully researched, and brilliantly written account of the psychological growth of Cromwell that enters his psyche (as Mantel imagines it through an almost stream-of-consciousness style) and plunges the reader into the turbulent and frightening world of Tudor England. As sovereign, Henry VIII rescued his country from the divisive aftermath of a devastating civil conflict (*The Wars of the Roses*), established the nation's religious independence, and set the stage for the Elizabethan Renaissance, where Shakespeare would be the brightest star. This did not happen without much unfortunate bloodshed and persecution as well as frequent legally sanctioned beheadings, including More; Henry VIII's second wife, Anne Boleyn, who was also the mother of Elizabeth I; and ultimately Cromwell himself. Mantel is witheringly clear about the ubiquitous use of private and state violence to further ambition and personal agendas.

Cromwell is portrayed as an abused child who escaped his father's relentless brutality and fled to continental Europe. A brilliant autodidact, he learned finance, law, and philosophy

and became fluent in multiple languages. Upon his return, he became Cardinal Wolsey's advisor and legal counsel. The portrayal of Wolsey, the second most powerful man in England after the King until he was deposed, is one of the highlights of the novel, as is that of More. In Mantel's reading, More is not the sanctified figure of Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons*, but a self-righteous sadist, albeit the author of *Utopia*, whose greatest pleasure lay in the burning of heretics. Henry VIII, vain, self-indulgent, and infantile, does not come off lightly in this book either, although his shrewd intelligence is acknowledged.

Mantel's powerful evocation of Cromwell through her use of internal and external dialogue leaves the reader with an appreciation for this appealing and often compassionate individual who, with all his frailties, remains in the mind as if one had known him intimately. The reader cannot ask more from a novelist.

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