The author of the “perfect novel” was in some ways similar to its protagonist, William Stoner, an English professor from a dirt-poor family. But he was also John Williams (1922–94)—a difficult man and the writer of a small but radiant body of work well deserving of its late renaissance. Now, Charles J. Shields introduces us to the creator of Stoner in The Man Who Wrote the Perfect Novel.

Williams, a long-time professor at the University of Denver, published Stoner in 1965, and it became an exemplar of the campus novel. He wrote only two other mature works, taking on—and excelling at—a new genre each time. Shields describes Williams’s development and motivations and explains persuasively why a writer hungry for fame didn’t go in for the postmodernist experiments of his time. In his mind, he was competing not with his contemporaries, but with the canon itself. Williams wrote himself into traditionalism.

Williams got his first name—and little else—from his biological father, John Edward Jewell. His mother, Amelia, and stepfather, George Williams, raised him in Wichita Falls in northeast Texas. By the time he enrolled at the local Hardin Junior College, he had earned a reputation as a bit of a
performer: a small, flamboyant young man wearing a knotted scarf and nursing lofty artistic ambitions. His love of acting and writing led him to radio, and when he enrolled in the Army Air Corps in 1942, he was assigned to a supply aircraft as a radio man.

As Williams tells the story, it was while recovering from a plane crash in the Himalayas that he wrote his first novel, *Nothing but the Night*. “Ambitious” is both the best and worst that can be said for it, a Joycean “day in the life” of a college dropout who spends most of his time drinking and suffering from repressed memories of his mother. Shields charitably explains that the young Williams attempted a trendy sort of “psychological realism” with its interest in the subconscious. Put plainly, it’s unreadable.

The book was roundly rejected by publishers until 1947, when Alan Swallow, a professor at the University of Denver and the head of the prolific—and, at times, reckless—Swallow Press, expressed interest and suggested that Williams enroll in Denver’s English program.

For Shields, *Nothing but the Night*, and everything before Denver, is a rough draft of Williams the writer. “Answering the question ‘Who am I?’ is the great work of life,” Shields says. Much of Williams’s personal and professional life can be explained by his “search for identity” and his ferocious determination to make a name for himself.

And Williams was certainly bidding hard for membership in the group of writers who converged in and around Denver in the mid-twentieth century, including Swallow, J. V. Cunningham, and, especially, Yvor Winters. A poet and New Critic, Winters believed that the poetry of the Renaissance, with its emphasis on cool reason over the heat and subjectivity of emotion, was the height of literature. Williams bought in wholesale, completing his doctoral thesis on the British poet Fulke Greville (1554–1628) in 1954 and calling himself a “Winterian.”

As naïve as Williams’s approach to the literary world may seem, his first years in Denver also drove him to overhaul his amateurish writing in favor of a more mature style. Yet the writing life enabled what his son later called an obsessive personality: he lived like a bad stereotype of an artist, drinking heavily, going through a succession of wives and girlfriends, and, most of all, talking up his own work incessantly.

Thankfully, by his second novel, there was actually something to boast about. *Butcher’s Crossing* (1960) takes William Andrews, a Harvard student obsessed with Emersonian idealism, to the testing ground of the American West, where he is almost destroyed by a long winter after a buffalo hunt that goes wrong. *Butcher’s Crossing* is a complete one-eighty from the psychobabble of *Nothing but the Night*. Where before he had attempted to express the experience of losing oneself in personal disillusionment, in *Butcher’s Crossing* his protagonist’s philosophical illusions collide head-on with reality. And the prose is clear as a mountain lake. Renaissance poetry had taught him control and a
sense of “intellectual distance,” as Shields puts it.

Pulling off his second debut proved difficult, though, introducing another lifelong frustration: his publishers and critics. Williams wanted to avoid marketing *Butcher’s Crossing* as a Western, a genre that he believed over-romanticized the region: “The East made up the West,” he said. Marie Rodell, his new agent out East, did what she could, but the book’s pulpy jacket and its reviews proved, for him, that the literati just didn’t get it. *The New York Times* covered the book as a Western, panning it as a failed version of the very genre he set out to challenge.

Yet Williams’s status as a writer was growing, at least among his friends. Swallow had recommended him for the position of director of Denver’s creative writing program. There were rumblings there, though, that Williams fell short as an academic, especially since he failed to make up for his scholastic shortcomings with a prolific career in fiction.

Perhaps to establish himself more fully as a scholar, he assembled a collection of Renaissance poetry in 1963. Unfortunately, he followed his teacher too closely. Winters turned against him with a vengeance, accusing him of plagiarism. Williams’s response was somewhat dismissive: he promised to acknowledge Winters’s “influence” in subsequent editions. Their relationship was ruined. Regardless, someone had the right idea: the collection remains a popular reference in the alternate canon for students of the period.

Williams started the 1960s with his own list of grievances. Fed up with publishers, rejected by his idol, and aware of his colleagues’ skepticism, he believed he had to create his legacy for himself.

And he responded with one of the most extraordinary novels of the twentieth century. *Stoner* (1965) presents the life of a poor farm boy who becomes an assistant professor at the University of Missouri; struggles as a husband, father, and lover; and produces a single book. “Stoner’s colleagues, who held him in no particular esteem when he was alive, speak of him rarely now,” the first page reads. “[T]o the older ones, his name is a reminder of the end that awaits them all, and to the younger ones it is merely a sound which evokes no sense of the past and no identity with which they can associate themselves or their careers.” His shining moment is standing up to a professor who wants to pass an incompetent student. “Stoner is a teacher. And then he dies,” one editor summarized.

Amid the wild literary experiments of his time, Williams found his lackluster subject part of the challenge. He was convinced that a skilled novelist needs to do nothing more than offer the “realized and presented history of a person.” Stoner’s working title was *A Matter of Light*; its Jamesian climax is a shaft of sunlight in a quiet classroom that reminds Stoner of his time as a student and brings his life a sense of coherence.

But it wasn’t until Williams’s third novel that his work was widely recognized. The 1973 National
Book Awards marked a temporary stalemate between postmodernism and traditionalism in American literature: John Barth’s metafictional *Chimera* shared the prize with Williams’s *Augustus* —the first split in the history of the prize. (He described his acceptance speech to an interviewer as “a defense of the goddamn novel.”)

Augustus is an epistolary work that begins with letters from Caesar Augustus’s acquaintances and friends attempting to fathom him from the outside. Williams withholds Augustus himself until the end, when the aged emperor emerges, full of wisdom, but also intolerable regret, for the way his public life consumed his personal one. The novel took Williams seven years to write, and it is a feat of research and a triumph of style: as serious, restrained, and magisterial a voice as any in American fiction. *The Washington Post* called it “the finest historical novel ever written by an American”; Cunningham thought it beat out Thornton Wilder’s *The Ides of March* (1948) in the quality of its prose and its loyalty to classical history.

Williams thought the national recognition brought by the award was long overdue. But his colleagues at Denver were hesitant to congratulate the man whose drunken rants, uneven teaching habits, and general insufferability they’d tolerated for years. “How can such a son of a bitch be such a great writer?,” one professor complained.

But there were clearly many Williamses. His third wife, Nancy, saw dedication where others saw egotism: “I think he wasn’t much interested in exploring himself, or maybe that’s what he did with his novels. He wasn’t contradictory or contradicted about himself,” she said in a recent *Paris Review* interview. “[H]e was a good man, good, good.”

Augustus was Williams’s last published novel. For the next twenty years, he taught classes at Denver, moved around the country with Nancy, and worked on *The Sleep of Reason*, a book about Washington, D.C., in the Nixon years. He left it unfinished when he died of respiratory failure in March 1994 at the age of seventy-one. “I never expected to live this long,” he said to Nancy; he drank and smoked far too much to expect any sort of longevity besides the literary.

But Stoner has lived on. Shields, a biographer who has also written on Harper Lee and Kurt Vonnegut, provides a helpful epilogue on its recent revival, largely a word-of-mouth phenomenon of the “best novel you’ve never heard of” variety. Stoner became a literary favorite; the high praise in the title is from a 2007 New York Times article by Morris Dickstein. (Recently, however, critics have accused Williams of misogyny, which is supposedly apparent in his often distasteful female characters, especially Stoner’s admittedly over-the-top wife, Edith.)
There’s a lot of Williams in Stoner: a professor who came from nowhere and scratched out a life in literature from the hard earth of the frontier. But when asked about similarities between himself and Stoner, Williams insisted that “fiction and autobiography don’t go together in any sensible way.”

Conflating an artist and his work is a mistake, and one that Shields skillfully avoids. Williams’s work is not a mirror, but a prism: “I write of human experience so that I may understand it and thereby force myself into some kind of honesty,” he said. It is not necessary, then, to read Williams’s writing as autobiographical to realize that he used Stoner, more than any of his other characters, to see his own world. As Stoner says, “We know that we are—what we are.”

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