

A Conversation with William Heath, editor of *Conversations with Robert Stone*

Did you know Robert Stone?

I read Robert Stone's first novel, *A Hall of Mirrors*, when it came out in 1967, and I immediately realized that here was the best novel thus far on the sixties. Stone wrote about the emerging counterculture in New Orleans as well as the right-wing power structure with equal authority, his black and white characters were in voice and convincing, and he had all the novelist's essential tools: precise descriptions, apt dialogue, a personal style, and a knack for powerful drama. He had, in sum, a vision of life that was as genuine as it was unsettling.

A few years later, after Stone's second novel *Dog Soldiers* came out, which if anything strengthened his reputation, I spent an evening with Bob and his wife Janice at their home in Amherst, Massachusetts. I was attending an N.E.H. summer seminar on contemporary fiction at the time, and when I learned that he was a writer in residence at Amherst, I hunted him up to tell him how much I admired his work. The next year I arranged for him to come give a reading at Vassar, where students were reading *Dog Soldiers*, and during that time Michael Berryhill and I taped an interview with him, which is the opening interview in the book. It is of special interest, I think, because Stone had not previously given an extensive interview, and so we see the author, already impressively poised and articulate, formulating his thoughts on his work, his life, and on the sixties generation.

Did you have further contact with Stone during his life?

I wrote to him occasionally over the years, and I spent time with him at Bread Loaf in the early 1980s. When my first novel, *The Children Bob Moses Led* (Milkweed Editions 1995) was accepted for publication, I asked him to write a blurb. By that time Stone had won the National Book Award, published several more distinguished novels, and was very much in demand. But he did write the blurb and my book won a national award. When *Damascus Gate* came out, my wife and I happened to be in Greenwich Village when Bob was giving a presentation at a bookstore on Union Square. I thanked him personally for the blurb at that time and promised to keep in touch. Ironically enough, my wife and I landed in Key West in January of 1915, on the very day he died there. I knew that Bob was suffering from emphysema, but I hadn't realize how dire his condition was.

How did you come to edit this book?

I typed up the Vassar interview with Stone, which I would sometimes refer to when I was teaching his novels, but for the most part I turned my attention to my own work as a critic, poet, novelist, and historian. After his death, I re-read the interview, realized its value, and as a tribute I thought about putting together a collection of his best interviews. I knew that the University Press of Mississippi had a distinguished series of "conversation" books with major American writers, and so I contacted them first and they sent me a contract. I assumed that my

end of the job would be relatively easy—all I had to do was select the interviews, get permissions, and write a brief introduction. Each of these tasks proved more difficult than expected, however: there were lots of good interviews and so the selection was difficult; permissions in some cases were much harder and more elusive than I expected; and to write the introduction I needed to re-read all of Stone's books, a pleasurable but time-consuming task.

Were there some interviews you wish you could have included?

Certainly. Stone is always eloquent—there are gems scattered through all the interviews—and a few included acute analyses of his work by the interviewer. In two cases, in particular, the permission fees were simply too high. My website contains a useful bibliography: www.williamheathbooks.com. I was very pleased with the selection I did make. I chose only lengthy interviews in which Stone responds to probing questions about his life, the art of fiction, and his latest work. Hence the interviews scan the full range of his career, with at least one on each of his major novels. Thus it is an invaluable collection for future critics of his work as well as general readers who simply want to know more about an author they admire.

What do you think is most distinctive about *Conversations with Robert Stone*?

Wallace Stevens once said that what we sense in great poetry was “the presence of the determining personality.” That is also true in fiction. Robert Stone's sensibility is very much present in all of his work; his signature is unmistakable. When most people, including historians, discuss the sixties, the assumption is often that that decade is all about the baby boom generation, while the truth is that the distinctive sixties sensibility was created by the people born just before or during World War II. Stone, Ken Kesey, and other writers; Bob Dylan, Joan Baez, et. al. in music; Bob Moses and other SNCC leaders of the civil rights movement, and so forth. By temperament and training an autodidact, Stone was always a quick study who absorbed people, places, and books with great facility. His wide experiences of a world in turmoil shaped his keenly ironic take on the human condition. In person, he was always a fascinating figure to listen to, and in these interviews his memorable voice comes alive on the page. He had what the Romans called *gravitas*, characteristically leavened by his sardonic wit. His novels are not perfect—nobody's are—and their grim vision is not for everyone, but his work certainly deserves to last as long as people care about serious literature.

Who should buy this book?

Any academic and/or research library worthy of the name. Admirers of Stone's fiction. All people interested in the state of contemporary American fiction. Lovers of literature in general. And anyone who would like to engage “in conversation” with an exceptional human being.