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Robert Stone, Novelist of the Vietnam Era and Beyond, Dies at 77

By **BRUCE WEBER** JAN. 10, 2015

Robert Stone, who wrote ambitious, award-winning novels about errant Americans in dangerous circumstances or on existential quests — or both — as commentary on an unruly, wayward nation in the Vietnam era and beyond, died on Saturday at his home in Key West, Fla. He was 77.

His wife, Janice, said the cause was chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Mr. Stone was previously given a diagnosis of emphysema — “my punishment for chain smoking,” he said in a 2010 interview with *The San Francisco Chronicle* — although he quit smoking in 1982.

A seagoing Navy man who later spent beatnik years in New York that evanesced into hippiedom in California, Mr. Stone led an adventuresome early life that was crucial in the development of his work. He participated fully in the drug-fueled 1960s, when he spent time with the novelist Ken Kesey and his friends, known as the Merry Pranksters, whose notoriety was spread by Tom Wolfe in “*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*”; and he briefly spent time as a Vietnam War correspondent.

The author of eight novels, a pair of story collections and a memoir, “*Prime Green: Remembering the Sixties*” (2007), Mr. Stone may not have been especially prolific, but his novels were big and serious, commanding attention as literary events and often seized upon by critics as an opportunity to write about the novelistic traditions he was either perpetuating, stretching, satirizing or defying.

They include “*Dog Soldiers*,” set in Vietnam and California, the tale of a heroin-smuggling deal gone horribly wrong that won the National Book Award in 1975; “*A Flag for Sunrise*” (1981), a Pulitzer Prize finalist about an American professor and others drawn into the ominous pre-revolution politics of a Central American nation reminiscent of Nicaragua on the eve of the Sandinista coup; “*Outerbridge Reach*”

(1992), about the crises, both spiritual and real, of a solo sailor attempting to circumnavigate the globe and win a race; and “Damascus Gate” (1998), a thriller set in Jerusalem and Gaza involving gun-smuggling, drugs and the intifada. Collectively and individually, they earned Mr. Stone comparisons to a wide range of literary lions, from Beckett to Hemingway to Graham Greene.

“There has always been a strain of American fiction that seems to grow directly from Melville and Conrad,” the novelist Mona Simpson wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* in 1992. “The foremost voice of this sensibility in our time is Robert Stone.”

In muscular, observant prose, he wrote largely in the realistic mode, though he was not averse to hallucinatory or surreal passages at climactic moments with his characters in extremis. His books resonate with philosophical concerns, the thin divides between life and death, good and evil, God and godlessness, reflecting Mr. Stone’s own grappling with spiritual matters, dating from his childhood, when he grew up partly in a Roman Catholic orphanage. He rebelled, but never outgrew his hunger for some kind of ethereal nourishment.

“I see this enormous empty space from which God has absented himself,” Mr. Stone said in a *New York Times Magazine* interview in 1992. “I see this enormous mystery that I can’t penetrate, a mystery before which I’m silent and uncomprehending. This, in any case, is where I find myself in my sixth decade.”

Whatever its spiritual dimension, in the world according to Robert Stone life is a precarious, if not threatening, business. Danger hovers, if only suggestively, everywhere. In a passage from “A Flag for Sunrise” that is often cited as emblematic of Mr. Stone’s oeuvre, the protagonist, Frank Holliwell, an American academic who has been drawn into a C.I.A. operation in Central America, goes scuba diving to relax, only to find that the saturating malevolence of the world exists underwater as well:

“Some 50 feet away, he caught clear sight of a school of bonito racing toward the shallows over the reef,” Mr. Stone wrote. “Wherever he looked, he saw what appeared to be a shower of blue-gray arrows. And then it was as if the ocean itself had begun to tremble. The angels and wrasse, the parrots and tangs which had been passing lazily around him suddenly hung in place, without forward motion, quivering like mobile sculpture. Turning full circle, he saw the same shudder pass over all the living things around him — a terror had struck the sea, an invisible

shadow.”

His outlook on life had its genesis in an unorthodox childhood.

Robert Anthony Stone was born in Brooklyn on Aug. 21, 1937. His parents never married, Janice Stone said, and they separated when Robert was an infant. His father, Homer Stone, who worked for the New Haven Railroad, , was never in the picture after that. He was reared mostly by his mother, Gladys Grant, a teacher whose father was a tugboat captain, a fact that Mr. Stone said was an early seed of his fascination with the sea. She had schizophrenia, however, and was frequently hospitalized. From the ages of 6 to 10, Robert lived in an orphanage run by the Marist brothers.

“My early life was very strange,” Mr. Stone said in a 1985 Paris Review interview. “I was a solitary; radio fashioned my imagination. Radio narrative always has to embody a full account of both action and scene. I began to do that myself. When I was 7 or 8, I’d walk through Central Park like Sam Spade, describing aloud what I was doing, becoming both the actor and the writer setting him into the scene. That was where I developed an inner ear.”

Mother and son did travel together, making intermittent trips west, as far as New Mexico, on insubstantial errands that lasted until whatever money was available ran out.

“We usually ended up on welfare, then trying to get out of wherever we were,” he said. “It was wild, you know. It was useful. On the one hand, it gave me a fear of chaos, and on the other hand, it was a romance with the world and bus stations and things like that.”

Mr. Stone studied Latin in a Marist brothers high school, but he never finished; instead he joined the Navy, traveling to, among other places, Antarctica, an experience that informed the writing of “Outerbridge Reach.” He read voluminously — “Moby-Dick,” “Ulysses,” “On the Road” — wrote his first stories and got his first rejection slips. (Reading “The Great Gatsby” in his 20s, he said, was the spur for his first attempts at novel-writing.)

He also earned his high school equivalency diploma. When his tour was over he worked as a copy boy for The Daily News in New York and attended New York University. He never graduated, but he met a fellow writing student, Janice Burr, whom he married in 1959.

“She was a guidette at the RCA building,” Mr. Stone said about his wife. “She’d

take off her uniform and go to this espresso bar where she waited tables. So she'd get out of her straight job, and I'd get out of my straight job at The News, and we'd go be beatniks together."

"We hung out for a while," he continued. "And then we decided we'd quit our jobs and have an adventure. So we went to New Orleans. Why New Orleans? I don't know."

It was a fortunate move. Their time in New Orleans provided Mr. Stone with the backdrop for his first novel, "A Hall of Mirrors," which the Times Magazine described as "a jambalaya of love, sex, booze, violence, racial politics and evangelism." It received the Faulkner Award for the best first novel of 1967.

By then, Mr. Stone had received a Wallace Stegner writing fellowship at Stanford and moved to Palo Alto, Calif. There he fell in with Kesey, the author of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" and "Sometimes a Great Notion," and the Pranksters, notorious intellectual mischief-makers and drug-taking experimenters who commandeered the Menlo Park bohemian quarter known as Perry Lane.

"We were there on Perry Lane, and Bob Stone came in with a face lit with whiskey and anarchism," Kesey, who died in 2001, recalled to the Times Magazine. "And he said, 'I hear you're the bull goose looney writer in this neck of the woods.' I took it as a challenge.

"What impressed me about Bob was his ability to riff. This is what made him a Prankster."

In 1963, while living in Palo Alto, Mr. Stone was told he had a brain tumor, and had exploratory surgery. It revealed not a tumor, but merely a minor neurological disorder that affected his vision.

"For a couple of months, I really thought I was going to die," Mr. Stone said. "It got me in kind of an elegiac mood. It may be I was too young to realize there was such a thing as death. I realize it now."

In the late 1960s, Mr. Stone lived for a time in London, where he wrote the screenplay for the film adaptation of "Hall of Mirrors"; the film, "WUSA" (1970), starred Paul Newman but was mostly forgettable. So was "Who'll Stop the Rain," the 1978 adaptation of "Dog Soldiers," which starred Nick Nolte and Tuesday Weld and is perhaps best remembered for the song by Creedence Clearwater Revival that gave the film its title.

His experiences in the moviemaking world were the catalyst for his Hollywood

novel, the grim, sardonic sendup “Children of Light” (1986). In London he took an assignment from a newspaper to write about Vietnam; his six-week sojourn there solidified his belief that the war was a colossal American mistake and inspired “Dog Soldiers.”

“You just had to stand in the middle of Constitution Square in Saigon and look around and you could see how wrong, wrong, wrong this was,” he recalled in the 1992 magazine interview. “It was this enormous, endless, boundless, topless, bottomless mistake, something I was not used to seeing the United States do.”

In addition to his wife, Mr. Stone is survived by their children, Ian Stone and Deidre Stone Jones; a daughter from another relationship, Emily Burton; and six grandchildren. The Stones had homes in Manhattan and Chesterfield, Mass., as well as in Key West.

Mr. Stone stopped taking drugs, he said, in the 1970s, and he cut down on his drinking as well. Over the past few decades he held teaching posts at campuses including the University of Hawaii; Amherst; the University of California at Irvine; Johns Hopkins; and Yale. His other books include two story collections, “Bear and His Daughter” (1997), a Pulitzer finalist, and “Fun With Problems” (2010); and two novels. “Bay of Souls” (2003), like “Flag for Sunrise,” concerns an American professor who gets mixed up in dangerous Latin American politics, this time in the Caribbean and this time because of a woman. His final book, “Death of the Black-Haired Girl” (2013), is an anomaly: a page-turning psychological suspense story set not in an exotic locale but in New England, borrowing more from the tradition of Hawthorne than that of Graham Greene or Conrad. Still, it isn’t entirely a departure.

“No matter who drove the car that killed Maud” — the title character — “there is plenty of guilt to go around, but which solution are we to believe?” Mark Saunders wrote in a review in *The Washington Post*. “A standard-issue interpretation of the wages of empire? Payback for ripping our land from its native inhabitants? Judeo-Christian moral retribution in a fallen world? What is America’s secret culture as revealed by Robert Stone? After reading this harrowing novel, one is tempted to say: all of the above.”

Correction: January 15, 2015

An obituary in some editions on Sunday about the novelist Robert Stone misstated the given name of his daughter. She is Deidre, not Deirdre.

Correction: January 21, 2015

An obituary on Jan. 12 about the novelist Robert Stone misidentified the city in California that is home to a bohemian quarter known as Perry Lane, which was once commandeered by the author Ken Kesey and the Pranksters, notorious intellectual mischief-makers. It is in Menlo Park, not in Palo Alto.

Ashley Southall contributed reporting.

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