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A fresh look at “O Captain...”

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A fresh look at "O Captain..."

One of the most famous poems in American literature is Walt Whitman's "O Captain! My Captain!"

Written after the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, it came to represent the sorrow of a nation, a nation seen as a ship that had lost its skipper.

In this, the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War, many are re-examining the events surrounding this critical period in American history.

Few have such depth of understanding of Whitman, the most important literary figure of that time, as Jason Stacy.

Stacy was born in Monee, Ill., a small town south of Chicago. He received his bachelor's and master's in arts degrees from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, his master's in liberal arts from the University of Chicago and his doctorate in history from Loyola University in Chicago. Today he is an assistant professor in the department of historical studies at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville.

Stacy had a rather circuitous path to his current position as a historian at SIUE.

"After I finished my master's, I managed to find work in Eastern Europe teaching at a college in Lithuania for two years," said Stacy. He later pursued his doctorate while teaching history in a high school in Illinois.

"Teaching high school is like trial by fire," he said. "It means handling the schedule and large number of students, but it helped me to read the class and develop techniques to keep students engaged while being efficient with time."

In many ways, that experience helped prepare him for his work at SIUE — and has made his classes favorites of his students. Many history teachers have a reputation for teaching to memorize dates, names and places.

"Unfortunately that is more true that I would like to admit," Stacy said. "Yet, today there is a movement toward historical thinking. That means analyzing sources, contextualizing facts and individuals so students learn the facts in that way rather than by memorization. The answers should be analytical and thoughtful. It also makes teachers' work more interesting."

These new approaches to teaching also make his work enjoyable, Stacy said. "One thing that I like about teaching is that it is a lifestyle," he added. "I am always engaged in

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learning things that I can bring to the classroom."

Stacy is always incorporating other disciplines into his lectures, particularly literature.

"My parents were English teachers, and I think that we need more historians looking at literature," he said.

He tells his students that we all should study history because it helps us answer questions about the world around us. "Why people do certain things, why the political situation is the way it is," said Stacy. "You can find many of the answers in history."

That is why he is relentless when it comes to defending the need for historians. "Historians ask questions that need to be asked that end up in the public discourse," Stacy explained. "Compelling and honest questions can change the way Americans think about who they are. And Americans are fascinated with history, more than when I was a young man. Historians cannot only teach. They have skills in archival work, public history, contact with the community, origins, and now in the digital humanities, historians can create interesting websites."

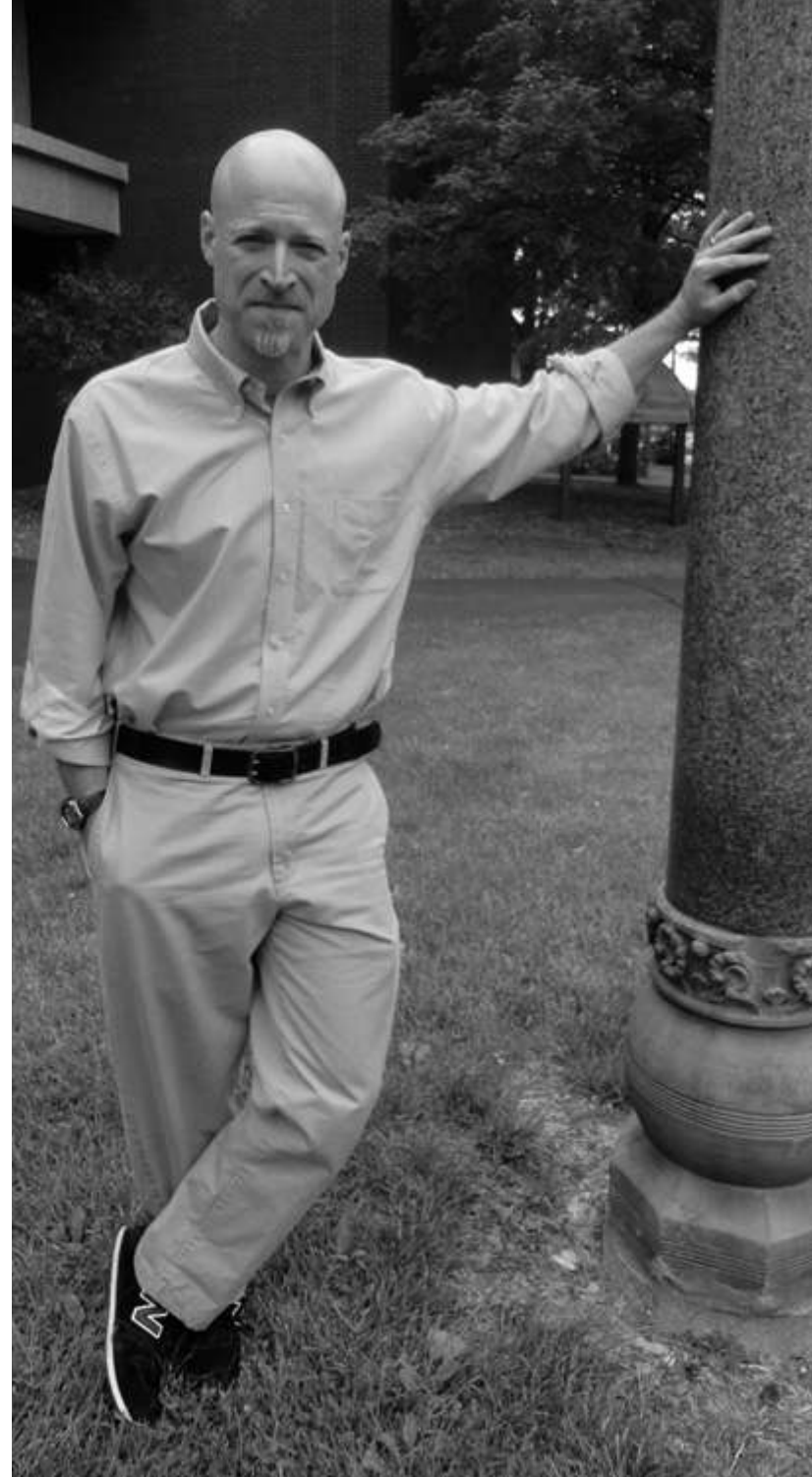
Stacy's most recent book is titled "Leaves of Grass 1860: the 150th Anniversary Facsimile Edition" published by University of Iowa Press. Whitman's book, although a classic in American literature today, was controversial when published. The explicit language used led some communities to ban it.

"He managed to pull together a lot of cross currents that were contemporary to him, and that was unusual in terms of sexuality, diction, structure that were essentially American but that shocked people at that time," Stacy said. "He claimed to be the voice of the American people."

To make things even more complicated, there were several editions of "Leaves of Grass," including the so-called "deathbed edition."

"He was constantly revising his book for more than 40 years," said Stacy. "He did not help, because he was asked which he liked best and he said, 'All of them count.'"

Because of the movie "Dead Poets Society," where the character played by Robin Williams recites "O Captain! My Captain!" there has been an increased interest in



Courtesy of Shan Lu

SIUE's Dr. Jason Stacy, a leading Walt Whitman scholar.

Whitman as an author.

"I think that because of the movie, that is what comes to mind when people think of Walt Whitman," Stacy said.

Stacy is a strong believer that books can change history. "It's easy for me to say that a book changes history like 'Uncle Tom's Cabin' because it did change American history," said Stacy. "I believe that printed words

like poetry or fiction can also influence history — even if few people read them."

Aldemaro Romero is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Arts_Sciences@siue.edu.