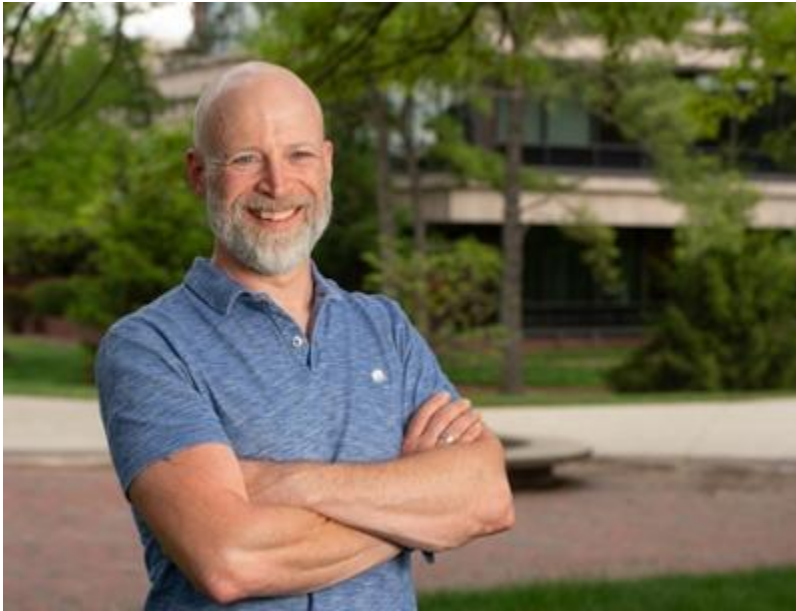


# SIUE's Stacy Publishes Book Highlighting Poetry And History Connections

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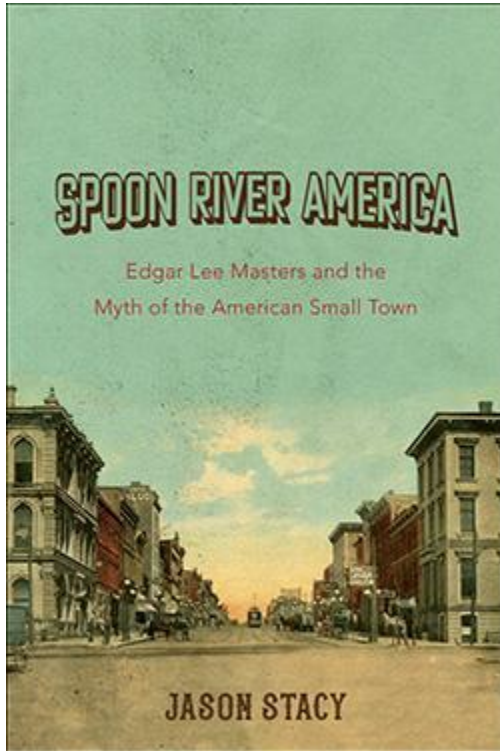


EDWARDSVILLE - Poetry seemingly spoken by the dead sparked interest in Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Jason Stacy, Ph.D., professor in the College of Arts and Sciences' Department of History. Stacy recently published his fourth book, entitled [\*Spoon River America: Edgar Lee Masters and the Myth of the American Small Town\*](#).

“As part of this story, I tell the history of Edgar Lee Masters’ book *Spoon River Anthology* (1915), which was a collection of poetic epitaphs set in a fictional Illinois town called Spoon River,” mentioned Stacy. “Each of Masters’ epitaphs was written in the voice of a deceased citizen of Spoon River. These ghosts tell their stories and appeal

to the reader with the hopes and tragedies of their lives. Along the way, they gossip about each other, celebrate each other, and weave together a community of everyday pettiness, fortitude, and hope.”

Stacy noted the significance of Masters’ book when it was initially released, and used this as a reference in his own writing as “a way to illuminate how the Midwestern small town became a symbol of the country itself, both its ideals and its hypocrisies.” The title of his book was also heavily influenced by Masters, replacing “Anthology” with “America” as a way to draw readers’ attention to the fact that Masters played a key role in moving New England’s “Idealized American Town to the Midwest.”



When asked about his inspiration behind writing this new book, Stacy described his personal history and experience with small-town living and the impact poetry had on his life, even catching interest in early childhood years.

“I’ve wanted to write about *Spoon River Anthology* for a long time,” he explained. “My mother taught English in a small town for many years, and she gave me a class copy of the book when I was around 12. I loved reading its weird little poems, which are not particularly complicated, but often quite creepy, since they are ostensibly spoken by dead people. This was its appeal when I was young.”

Stacy went on to say that as he grew older, the themes of the book became apparent in modern popular culture, such as “the idea that a person must rebel against their

hometown before they can become fully adult.” He also mentioned that many of these stories featured a main character that needed to leave their small hometown in order to achieve growth in life.

Writing the book required extensive research, which mainly consisted of studying Masters’ *Spoon River Anthology* and copies of magazines and newspapers that contained some poems from the book, along with its many reviews, as well as secondary sources on the Midwest. Besides Masters’ work, Stacy observed English pedagogy journals and even multiple films from the 1940s to the present day for perspective on the impact in popular culture.

Through this research, Stacy verified a myth he had been questioning over the years.

“I’m not sure if this surprised me, but this research confirmed for me that one of the abiding myths of the 20th century was that the Midwestern small town was quintessentially American,” Stacy noted. “This myth has a history; it was born in the late 19th century and petered out in the early 21st century.

“Midwesterners don’t really think of themselves as a region with a historical impact, but for much of the 20th century, an idealized Midwest formed the backdrop of the nation’s sense of itself. And like most myths, it was partial, often leaving out entire populations and regions. These blindspots eventually led to this myth’s demise. I hope my book tells a little bit of this story.”

Stacy concluded by stating the biggest influences in his career as a history professor and author were his past history teachers. Along with the publishing of this book, Stacy was named SIUE’s 2021 Paul Simon Outstanding Teacher-Scholar in May.