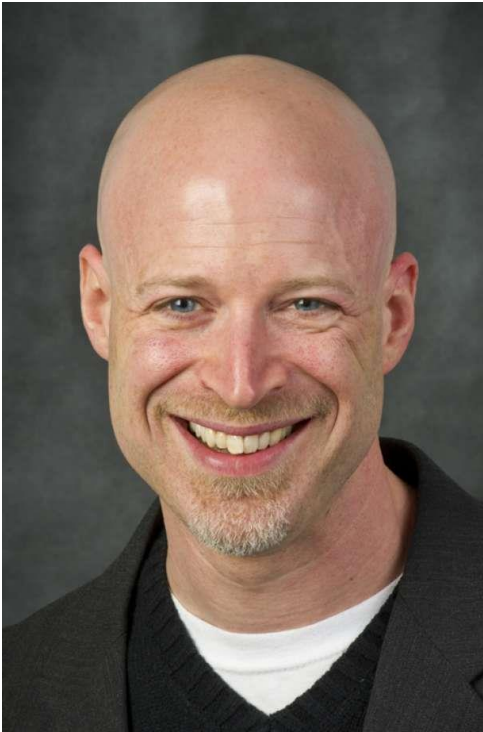


Small town tropes and Main Street myths

Segue • SIUE

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Small town America and the ideals it represents made its way into popular media beginning as early as the 19th century.

On this week's episode of Segue on WSIE 88.7 FM, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's premier radio show that outlines events, activities and accomplishments within the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS), Greg Budzban, PhD, Dean of CAS, speaks to Jason Stacy, PhD, associate professor in the Department of Historical Studies.

Stacy was recently bestowed CAS's most distinguished honor, the 2017 William and Margaret Going Endowed Professorship Award, for his proposed presentation "Spoon River America: Edgar Lee Masters, the Midwest, and the Myth of Small Town America."

Stacy grew up the son of two teachers in a small town. His parents' fascination for the written word sparked Stacy's interest in the historical study of literature. Edgar Lee Masters' "Spoon River Anthology," published first as a book in 1915, took readers by storm, selling 80,000 copies in its first year alone.

In his research, Stacy argues that Masters' book, a collection of poetry where characters in a rural graveyard describe their lives and anxieties, represents the "Main Street Myth" that arose in the Midwest in the late 19th Century.

This myth, in Stacy's opinion, presented rural life with a mixture of nostalgia and ambivalence. "Literary historians and critics have known that 'Spoon River Anthology' was the first of what became a common style in literature during the 1920s, which was popularly called the 'revolt from the village,'" Stacy says.

"After Spoon River Anthology, authors like Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis began to set their stories in small Midwestern towns and sought to expose the complexity of small town America as commentary on humans themselves."

"One of the things I'm exploring is that while literary critics and artists turned to other interests in the 1920s, popular media continued to portray small-town America in these nostalgic and ambivalent terms throughout the 20th century.

Stacy outlines a menagerie of characters that arose within this small town trope, including the heroic, but tragic populist, the nefarious and moralistic bourgeois power-broker, and the disaffected rebel.

With this last type, popular media invited the audience to sympathize with this rebel to understand the ambivalence and nostalgia with which authors like Masters originally engaged small-town life.

“If you look at recent films, literature and perhaps most strikingly, the recent political narrative in this country, you’ve seen the extent to which popular media perpetuates this Main Street myth,” Budzban says.

“The notion that coastal elites have sort of lost touch with authentic America, and to recapture it, they have to go to Main Street, is still seen today,” he comments.

“That’s right, Greg,” Stacy says. “What’s important from my research, is that to a certain extent, so-called elites are the ones who drive a discourse that interprets small towns and Main Street America. But this Main Street myth is not generated by people who live on Main Street. Nevertheless, it’s a very useful myth since it seems to explain a place that appears inexplicable and contradictory from the outside.

The ambivalence and nostalgia for a rural America continues throughout popular media, in such films as “It’s a Wonderful Life” and popular Netflix series “Stranger Things.”

Budzban ties the primary location within “Stranger Things,” Hawkins, a fictional hometown, directly to Stacy’s myth.

“I think ‘Stranger Things’ is a continuation and a version of this Main Street mythology in that it’s got certain characters in it that have their origins within this myth,” Stacy says. “It’s got a small town sheriff, who is both tragic and heroic, and a single mother, who is a disaffected exile from the town. Again, we have these nefarious, economic or elite powers that are either in the town, controlling it, or from elsewhere, but in the town, exerting power over it.”

Charming notions have tugged at the heartstrings of the show’s viewers, including the loveable young friends, playing Dungeon and Dragons in the basement and other nostalgic 1980s-inspired images and themes.

“The importance of Hawkins is that this is a place for nostalgic memories where, underneath the surface, there is something we should be profoundly ambivalent about.”

Catch this episode of Segue at 9 a.m. this Sunday by tuning in to WSIE 88.7 FM.

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