



## The Life and Work of Jesse Stuart

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to analyze the educational experiences and views of Jesse Stuart through selected writings, speeches, and the educational positions that he held. Stuart, over a time span of fifty years, held over nine different educational positions. They were: teacher at Cane Creek Elementary School, Greenup County, Kentucky, 1924; teacher at Warnock High School, Greenup County, Kentucky, 1929-1930; principal of Greenup City High School, Greenup, Kentucky, 1930-1931; Superintendent of the Greenup County School System, 1932-1933; principal of McKell High School in Greenup County, Kentucky, 1933-1937; teacher of Remedial English at Soutli Shore High School in Portsmouth, Ohio, 1939-1939; Superintendent of the Greenup City School System from 1941-1943; principal, of McKell High School, 1957-1958; and Visiting Professor to American University in Cairo, Egypt, 1960-1961. The conclusions drawn from the study were: 1) Stuart was a major influence in curricular change in the schools that he served; 2) Iris publications informed a great number of American readers of the plight of education in rural Eastern Kentucky; 3) he was a popular speaker for educational change in not only his own immediate area but also on a national scale.

**Keywords:** Jesse Stuart, story, life, character, work, activity, writer, teacher.

### 1. Introduction

Jesse Stuart has been recognized as a national figure for his contributions to American literature. A native of Greenup, Kentucky, Stuart wrote and published over fifty books of poems, short stories, novels and autobiographies, and was recognized in 1974 as "one of the forty-four American novelists selected from the first half of the twentieth century in American Fiction 1900-1950."<sup>1</sup> He was presented, in 1960, with the Outstanding Poet Award from the Academy of American Poets. Stuart's book, *The Man with the Bull-Tongue Plow*, published in 1934, was chosen as a literary masterpiece, and in 1946 it was "selected as one of the 100 Great Books in America and one of the 1,000 Great Books of the World."<sup>2</sup> Another book, *Taps for Private Tussie*, sold over a million copies after its publication in 1943, when it was chosen as a Book of the Month selection. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer bought the movie rights to the book in 1944 for \$50,000.00. *The Thread That Runs So True* was published in 1949 and was selected by the National Education Association as the Best Book of the Year.

*The Year of My Rebirth*, published in 1956, was selected as one of the 100 best books published that year. Recognizing the numerous honors given to Stuart, the United States Information Service of the State Department chose him to serve as a roving ambassador to countries in the Far East, Middle East and Europe. Stuart visited Egypt, Greece, Lebanon, Iran, West Pakistan, Bangladesh, Taiwan, Formosa, and the Philippines. Stuart carried to these countries the message of how a poor farm boy could receive fame and fortune through hard work and a good education. Dissertations written about Jesse Stuart and his literary creations brought him further recognition. Numerous Master's theses were

<sup>1</sup> Ruel E. Foster, *Jesse Stuart* (New York: Twayne, 1968), p. 37

<sup>2</sup> John Gilpen, Jr., *The Man . . . . . Jesse Stuart* (Ashland, Kentucky: Economy Printers, 1977), p 28.

completed on the characterizations and implications of his books. Several colleges and universities honored him with the presentation of Honorary Degrees. He received an Honorary Doctor of Humanities degree from Lincoln/ Memorial University in 1950; Honorary Doctor of Literature degrees from, respectively: Marietta College in 1952, Berea College in 1966, University of Louisville in 1974, and Morehead State University in 1975; an Honorary Doctor of Pedagogy degree from Murray State University in 1968 and from Pfeiffer College in 1969; and an Honorary Doctor of Law degree from Ball State University. Jesse Stuart was recognized in 1954, by the Kentucky State Legislature, as the Poet Laureate of Kentucky. One year later, he was honored by his hometown and county. A statue was erected on the courthouse square in recognition of all the publicity that Stuart had brought to Greenup.

The following words were written on the statue: "Jesse Stuart, Poet, Novelist and Educator." Kentucky Governor Lawrence Weather by made the activity a statewide celebration by officially proclaiming the day "Jesse Stuart Day." Jesse Stuart has been, throughout his life, deeply involved in education. He told a close friend that "he was a writer who loved to teach. "Stuart was proud of his educational experiences. Three of his major books, *The Thread That Runs So True*, *Mr. Gallion's School*, and *To Teach, To Love* were all drawn from his classroom activities as either a student, teacher or an administrator. His educational experiences ranged from a teacher in a one-room school in rural Kentucky to visiting professor at American University in Cairo, Egypt. He was principal of three different schools covering five assignments, and he served as Superintendent of Schools in both a rural and a city school system. He spoke to hundreds of educationally concerned groups about the need for a quality education for all students, not only in Kentucky, but also in the nation and in the world. He wrote, "Schools all over America needed plenty done for them. In one year I made eighty-nine talks in thirty-nine states. "He proudly told his audiences of the value of education and of the dedication of the true educator. He continually repeated, "Teachers constitute the only profession I have ever seen or that I have ever known in my life, who would work without pay." Stuart received scores of honors for his literary abilities, and he became a revered figure in the field of education. He held the educational position of teacher, principal, superintendent of schools, and college professor. He proudly proclaimed, "The teaching profession is the greatest profession in the world because all professions stem from it."

He spent a great amount of his personal time visiting and talking about the value of the best educational experiences for students and the benefits that America receives from an educated citizenry. The experiences that Jesse Stuart had in the field of education and educational administration were many. He served as a principal of a one-room school, a rural high school, and a city high school. He was assigned the arduous task of leading a rural school system as its superintendent through one of the worst economic crises that this nation had ever faced. Stuart's philosophy of hard work and the worth of the individual were central to his writings and lectures. His dedication to education and his philosophy of building educational strength through character development have won him many converts to education. Jesse Stuart returned to the field of education during the 1941-42 academic year as Superintendent of the Greenup City Independent School System. This was the same school system that had bitterly fought his actions and activities when he had served as Superintendent of the Greenup County School System in 1932.

## 2. Literature Review

Stuart later wrote, "I said that I was through with teaching and schools forever . . . but education is in my blood and bones. I am a schoolman, whether I like it or not, I always come back."<sup>3</sup> This assignment was one of the most prestigious positions in the county. Stuart's salary was substantially higher than his rural superintendent counterpart and his responsibilities were not as many. Compared to the much larger rural school system that had scores of schools across the county, Stuart's school system consisted of three schools. In the *Louisville Courier-Journal* on May 20, 1942, the following information was given about Stuart and his assignment. It read, "As head of the Greenup Municipal Schools, he will have charge of the high school, as well as the grade schools for the white and negro

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<sup>3</sup> Jesse Stuart, *To Teach, To Love* (New York: World Publishing Co., 1970), p. 214

children."<sup>4</sup> Stuart did not remain in this position for very long. As America entered the second world war in December of 1941, Stuart grew restless to serve his country in some military capacity. He resigned his position as superintendent in the spring of 1942 and joined the United States Navy. Stuart wrote about his time in the superintendent's position, "Not counting the summer months, I served a year. I was there until school was out in the following spring."<sup>5</sup>

When the war was over in 1945, Stuart returned to his W-Hollow farm and resumed his writing career. He did not become active in an educational position again until the fall of 1957. During this period of time from 1945 to 1957, Stuart wrote and had published fourteen books. Although several of these books became major successes, two of his publications brought national attention to him. *Taps for Private Tussie* was published in 1943 and within a couple of years had sold over a million copies. The other publication was *The Thread That Runs So True*. *The Thread* was published in 1949 and has been received as one of Stuart's greatest contributions to literature and American education. When Dr. Poe, of the *Progressive Farmer* had requested from Stuart an article on education, Stuart did not immediately respond to the request. In fact, a period of nine years passed before Stuart finished the *Thread* manuscript in 1949. In the time period between 1940-1949, Stuart served two academic years as a city superintendent and had served in World War II. When he returned to his farm in 1945, Stuart resumed his writings. He began in earnest the writing of *The Thread* in 1947. According to the National Education Association, in 1947, Kentucky ranked forty-ninth out of fifty states in educational quality. This image of a poor educational environment was a detriment to developing pride in the education profession. Stuart wrote, in *The Thread*, that Kentucky educators facetiously repeated the phrase, "thank God for Arkansas." Stuart was aware of the overwhelming obstacles that Kentucky educators faced in trying to bring educational equality to every classroom in the state. Kentucky was such a diverse state in geographical, economical and cultural boundaries that an attempt to make uniform the educational opportunities was a tremendous task.

Stuart wrote in his book, *My World*, "Kentucky contains several states within its rugged, irregular boundaries."<sup>6</sup> Thus the task of organizing and administering a state-wide educational system from the state capitol in Frankfort was a complicated assignment. According to the Kentucky Department of Education bulletin of 1949, "there were 589 complete high schools that offered work through the twelfth grade."<sup>7</sup> A large number of these schools incorporated the seventh grade in their curriculum. Of the 589 high schools in the state in 1949, "343 were operated by county boards of education and 167 were maintained by independent school boards."<sup>8</sup> The other 79 schools unaccounted for in the above statistics were, schools that were organized and administered by a joint county and city board of education. In Greenup County there were two county high schools. Stuart had served as principal of McKell High School and had spoken to student assemblies at the other school at Wurtl and. There were four independent school systems located within the boundaries of the county. They were: Greenup, Raceland, Russell, and South Portsmouth. In attempting to bring both his own personal experiences and the educational climate of Kentucky in contemporary focus, Stuart decided to write more than an article for the *Progressive Farmer*.

He decided to write a book on his own personal experiences as an educator. Stuart planned to make this book a work of fiction. He changed his mind as the result of an accident. He wrote, "The wind blew some of the pages away from my writing room, scattered them over my yard. . . . I regarded this as a bad omen, a wrong way to start the book, so I changed to personal experience and the truth." Stuart wrote of the educational experiences that he had from his first teaching experience in 1923 at Cane Creek rural school to 1939 when he resigned his position at South Portsmouth High School.

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<sup>4</sup> Mae Dittbenner Dixon, "Jesse Stuart and Education" (M.A. thesis, Western Kentucky State College, 1952), p. 40

<sup>5</sup> Dixon, p. 40.

<sup>6</sup> Jesse Stuart, *My World* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1975), p.22

<sup>7</sup> Kentucky Department of Education, May 1949, p. 47

<sup>8</sup> Educational Bulletin, p. 47

During this period of time, Stuart held five different educational experiences that ran the range of public school administrative positions. He was both a principal of a rural and city high school, a teacher in a large city high school, a county superintendent, and a teacher-administrator of a one-room school in rural Greenup County. All but one of these assignments were in his native Greenup County. The popularity of the Thread was such that Stuart began a new career of speaking engagements.

He had spoken to many school groups prior to the publication of the Thread, but not to the extent that occurred from 1949 through 1954. Stuart wrote about that time period, "They were good years and fruitful years . . . in one year I gave eighty-nine talks in thirty-nine states." The one thing that slowed Stuart was a massive heart attack that he suffered at Murray State College on October 8, 1954. Speaking before a full house in the college's main auditorium, Stuart spoke for over one hour and then attempted to rush off to an awaiting plane that was readied to fly him to another speaking engagement. He later wrote of that experience, "The chartered plane was waiting. I had to be on my way to carry the ball for the schoolteachers of America." The heart attack that Stuart suffered at Murray State was almost fatal. A contemporary wrote, "Here he lay close to death on a hospital bed for 48 days before he could be brought home to W-Hollow." Stuart spent a total of six academic years in an official educational position during this time span. He also taught a total of six summers creative writing workshops.

His influence on educational activities came not only from his active educational assignments but also from his writings and lectures. During this time span, *The Thread That Runs So True* was published and the popularity of the book made Stuart a national figure in American education. The heart attack that Stuart suffered at Murray State University in October of 1954 was the deciding factor in limiting his teaching and speaking activities. The publication of *Mr. Gallion's School and To Teach, To Love* would add to Stuart's reputation as a speaker for the American classroom teacher as well as education on a global scale. Jesse Stuart stood out as an educator who was willing to stand up and speak out against what he considered to be inequities in education. He sought quality education for all students whether they were rural or urban, rich or poor, gifted or educationally deprived. The most apparent conclusion drawn from the study of Stuart's experiences and views in education was that he was a major influence in curricular change in the schools that he served. At Cane Creek Elementary School, Stuart's idea of combining the academic pursuits with recreational activities is a contemporary educational practice.

At McKell High School, Stuart, as principal, opened the school doors to non-traditional students who sought to return to school. His oldest student was a sixty-seven year old woman. As Superintendent of schools for the Greenup County School Division, Stuart led the fight to improve the educational offerings of all the schools in his system and he was a major leader in the fight for school consolidation. He also was a strong advocate of a teacher retirement system and of a tenure system which would protect the classroom teacher from political reprisals. He was very influential in having the powers of the school district trustees diminished and eventually dissolved in his own county as well as the majority of counties in Kentucky. Stuart, through his writings and speeches, called for a recognition of the contributions that the average classroom teacher provided for the students in America's classroom. He felt that he was the speaker who had been picked to "carry the ball" for America's educators. In Stuart's most famous educational publication, *The Thread That Runs So True*, he proudly wrote in the preface: A great many of our leading educators have said that *The Thread That Runs So True* helped hurry school consolidation in this county and in this state; it helped to bring about changes in our school laws and a reapportionment of our school money to the pauper counties in Kentucky.- One of Stuart's biographers wrote: He has recognized the need to gear the curriculum and activities of the schools to include special services for the gifted and the retarded students as well as the normal ones; he has promoted adult-educational programs . . . by drawing upon all the resources of schools, community and human beings for fuller and more productive living.

### **3. Conclusion**

The major conclusion of this study was that Jesse Stuart provided a great deal of inspiration and expertise to the educational world. He not only is a writer whose fame will live after his death, but his

educational experiences and views are inspirational and directional for both contemporary and future educators.

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