

THE GIFT OF STORIES

By John F. Hall

Jesse Hilton Stuart was a Kentucky poet and writer who achieved fame and fortune writing short stories, novels and poetry. He was from Eastern Kentucky and just about everything that he wrote was centered around that part of Kentucky. In this story I explain how much Jesse and I have in common. We both grew tobacco. We became teachers. He served in the Navy. I served in the Army. The New York Times wrote that Jesse was a chronicler. My Christian Fraternity Brother, Bob Marko said the same thing about me. The amazing thing about this story is how Jesse's manuscripts and other things became a gift that was given to Murray State University. Jesse wrote 460 short stories. So far, I have written about 100 stories.



Some in Society view me as being beyond the creative and productive age. They contend that I am more suited to spend my last days sitting in my rocking chair on my deck. The Antebellum house where I live on Dyers Hill, like me, has weathered its share of life's storms. I like the words in a song by the late country singer, George Jones: "I'm not ready for your Geritol, Medicare, and the rocking chair." Even my rheumatologist, Dr. Desai told me to stop writing stories using a pen. He's right, the arthritis in my hands has crippled my fingers and made it difficult and painful to hold a pen.

Jesse Stuart did not have access to the technology that we have today. Dr. Desai told me to purchase software called Dragon. It's a speech recognition program that allows the user to speak into a microphone on a computer with the software translating the spoken words into text in a text program. The basic version, with the bare minimum features, costs about \$50.00. The professional versions cost up to \$500.00. Dr. Desai has been using that program for the past 18 years. So far, I am able to use one finger to type on my cell phone as I draft a story. My grandson, John-John uses his thumbs to text on his cell phone. His texting speed is 36 words per minute. His grandmother, Paula, when she was a freshman at Murray State, could type 120 words per minute on an IBM Selectric typewriter with no mistakes. I did not marry Paula, 56 years ago, for her typing speed. I married her because I love her. I may purchase the software in the not too distance future.

I certainly have no talent to write poetry or novels like Jesse Stuart. My college friend, Mike Herndon, told me to continue to write for posterity for my grandchildren, Andrea, Heather, John-John. And for my surrogate granddaughters, Jade, Skyler and Lexie. I appreciate the encouraging words from Trish Cunningham, Audrey Lambert, Dr. Daniel Butler, and others to keep writing.

Dr. Desai did not tell me to stop using a pen to write short, mini-letters. Writing letters is becoming as obsolete as the Telegraph. Even finding decent writing stationary is nearly impossible. So my fall back is to fold an 8.5" by 11" sheet of copy paper and cut it twice to make four note-size sheets. I can only guess that Jade, Skyler, Lexie, Trish, Audrey, Mike and Daniel expect to find a note when I mail them a story. We do communicate,

except for Daniel, by cell phone. The same is true for Andrea, Heather and John-John. Sometimes, I'll share a story with my Christian Fraternity Brothers via email. I make a record of our meeting and email them a copy of the minutes. We Zoom our meetings. At the age of 75 and with a compromised immune system, in-person meetings in a small room is out of the question. I am looking forward to being out and about next year when the vaccine is distributed. Fort Campbell will be getting one of the vaccines that requires low temperature freezing as it has that capacity in its hospital. My grandfather, John Hall died during the 1918 Pandemic. He was only 44 years old. He did not leave any stories. At least I am leaving something behind for posterity.

In this story I tell about the gifts that Jesse Stuart gave Murray State University. I tell about being a student that always commuted to that college. I tell about the events leading up to my becoming a teacher. As in nearly all of my short stories, I include lyrics to hymns and secular songs to enhance the themes of my stories. I mention Christ in my stories because He is the true writer behind my stories. Jesse and I have a compulsion to write stories. It consumed his life just as it is consuming my life. It's like an addiction that cannot be satisfied. It's an urgency to write one more story.

What exactly is the definition a short story? Short stories range from lower word counts of 1,000 or 1,500 words up to around 7,500 words or occasionally as high as 10,000 words. I try not to exceed the upper limit in my short stories. I'm not into writing novelette which consists of 7,500 to 17,499 words. I came to Murray State as a transfer student from Hopkinsville Community College (HCC) in 1968. I was able to go to college because I'm an Army veteran. The GI Bill of 1963 paid for my tuition, fees and books. I worked part time at the campus Post Office for Hal Kingins. I took out student loans as I was married and needed money to live. My son, John Andrew was born in the Murray hospital in 1967. The hospital played a pivotal role in this story. My daughter-in-law, Lori has worked as a respiratory therapist at the Murray hospital for more than 30 years. My family physician, Dr. Daniel Butler admitted me to that hospital a few years ago, when I had a kidney stone that brought me to my knees in pain. My wife, Paula was also a patient there after having respiratory problems a decade ago.

In 1954, Jesse Stuart was in Murray, Kentucky. He suffered a near fatal heart and was taken to the Murray hospital. It is my belief that the doctors at that hospital saved his life. I reached this conclusion because in 1960, Jesse loaned all of his manuscripts and other papers and pictures to Murray State. This was a long term loan. In 1977, Jesse converted the long term loan agreement into a permanent gift. He felt that his life was reborn in Murray. His gift can be viewed in the Jesse Stuart Room located in the Forest C. Pogue Special Collections Library on the campus of Murray State University. In the next paragraph, I will give additional details surrounding Jesse's heart attack. I will also explain how the college has such an impact on my life. My wife, Paula tells me that I am wasting my time writing stories. She feels that my time should be better spent doing her "honey do list" around our house.

When Jesse Stuart made his 1977 gift to the college, I was a graduate student learning to become a community college instructor. I would study in the Pogue library because it

was quiet. I also studied there when I was an undergraduate from 1968 to 1970. Another reason why I like to study in the Pogue Library is that the Hut restaurant was just across the street. This is where the Greek fraternities and sororities would also eat. I was a member of Alpha Kappa Psi, a business fraternity, but the Greeks accepted me as an equal. I never lived on campus because I commuted to the college.

Jesse Stuart was in Lovett Auditorium on the Murray State campus speaking to a capacity crowd of local teachers. After his presentation, a chartered plane was scheduled to fly him to Illinois. Instead, he fell to the ground suffering from a near-fatal heart attack. Before he was taken to the Murray hospital, he said, "I will not die, I will not die." He was put in an oxygen tent. That same year, Paula was six years old. She was in the Murray hospital being treated for pneumonia. She was also put in an oxygen tent. In Jesse's memoir, "The Year of My Rebirth," he wrote: "There is a possibility, a good one, that I shall not live through the year." Jesse was 48 at the time. Something happens to a person when they come face to face with their mortality. It happened to me when I made that night parachute jump out of a Huey helicopter. I thought I was going to be killed as the pilot went past the drop zone and I was going to land in the trees. I was falling at the rate of 22-feet a second with no time to do a parachute landing fall (PLF). I thought I was going to be gored by a tree. The same thing happened when I was escorting a cargo ship in the East China Sea and got caught in a typhoon with 60-foot waves. Both times, I made my peace with Christ. He has predestined when my time on this earth will be up. I have an hourglass in the room where I write my stories. I will never know when the last grain of sand will fall and my story writing days will come to an end.

In this story, I selected a hymn by Chris Tomlin called "Gifts from God." These are some of those lyrics: "Back when I was a kid I thought that only gifts from God came from the church. But the more that I live, the more that I learn, it's not always the way it works. Sometimes you don't see it 'till your looking back. When you don't get what you thought you had to have. 'Cause He had a bigger plan than the one you had. Yours didn't work, aren't you glad? When you take a look around, it ain't hard to find. Everybody's got the things that money can't buy. It's the ones you love that are sitting right besides you, then I'd say you got a lot. The best things in life are straight from His hands. Like raising kids on a piece of land. A little peace of mind when the day is done. Where you think that came from? That's gifts from God, oh yeah. It makes you think before the hills that we climb, for the ways that we ride. For the lows and the highs, for the songs we sing, for the dreams that we dream. Makes you thankful for everything. Hallelujah! Every day's a gift from God...".

Before ending this story, I will share a few more things about Jesse Stuart. One of his students, back when he was teaching in a one room school house, nearly killed him. Jesse created 4,000 fictitious characters. I don't write fiction stories. My stories are born from my experiences and observations living and working in Kentucky for the past 58 years. Near the end of his life, Jesse's health failed him. The last four years, he was bed fast due to more heart attacks and a stroke. He was in a coma for two years before he died at the age of 78. Like my dad, I hope that I die in my sleep.

In 1873, a blind lady named Fanny Crosby wrote the hymn, "Blessed Assurance." She is America's most prolific hymn writer. She wrote 8,000 hymns, 1,000 secular songs and four books of poetry. These are some of her lyrics: "Blessed assurance, Jesus is mine! Oh, what a foretaste of glory divine. Heir of salvation, purchase of God. Born of His Spirit, washed in His blood. Perfect submission, perfect delight. Visions of rapture now burst on my sight. Angels descending bring from above. Echoes of mercy, whispers of love. Perfect submission, all is at rest. I in my Savior am happy and blest. Watching and waiting, looking above. Filled with his goodness, lost in His love. This is my story, this is my song. Praising my Savior all the day long..."

I will never write as many stories as Jesse Stuart. I started too late in life to catch up with him. But we are kindred souls. CS. Lewis wrote: "The only things we can keep are the things we freely give to God. What we try to keep for ourselves is just what we are sure to lose." My stories are my gifts that I freely give away.

John F. Hall

*Read other stories by John F. Hall and others at:
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