

# Jerome Stueart: a Yukon-made writer

By JESSICA SIMON  
Special to the Star

All 60 people at last month's launch of *Angels of Our Better Beasts*, on the coldest night of 2016, have moulded author Jerome Stueart into the Yukon writer he's become.

Stueart wasn't born here. He wasn't even born in Canada. And he's been living in Ohio since 2014.

But the American-born Canadian is a Yukon author.

His 10-day December visit gave him occasion to reflect on how our literary community fosters that transformation.

When he arrived as a Yukon College instructor in 2001, he had 11 drafts of Chapter One for a polar bear novel, a Fulbright Fellowship to research northern biology and an MFA in literature.

"What I didn't have was training or guidance in the genre I wanted to write in," a situation he equates with "being schooled in driving without really taking the car out for a spin. Or worse, you know how to drive, but you have nowhere to go."

"The Yukon helped me practise my craft. I started to become a writer in multi-faceted ways," Stueart says.

A memoir-writing class with local author Patricia Robertson influenced his approach to fiction.

"My better science fiction short stories are told in a memoir voice to make the fantastic sound authentic and real," he says.

The class allowed him to convert stories about his life, such as the fresh experience of meeting his birth mother, into "Constellations", a story about about a man who, undercover, meets his birth father.

"The important thing is that I wrote about something I cared about. And something personal, in fiction," something Stueart says he had never done before.

Next, "I got training from local conferences with an influx of outside writers."

Marcelle Dube, who shared the stage at Stueart's launch, and Barb Dunlop had organized a weekend retreat in Haines Junction with fantasy writer Terence M. Green. Stueart decided to write another version of that Chapter One as a short story.

"Green told me I was ready," Stueart says.

"Until then, no one had really done that. That writer's retreat gave me encouragement, and then I submitted, and got accepted. My first publication in the genre I wanted to write in."

The territory gave him more opportunities, and Stueart kept writing.

In collaboration with the CBC's Arnold Hedstrom, and for Lily Gontard, then editor of *Yukon North of Ordinary*, he wrote for radio, stage, and inflight magazines. Under Erling Friis-Baastad and Darrell Hookey, he wrote for the local papers.

"It was not all about my fiction," Stueart says. "It was about understanding new and different audiences, integrating local knowledge, and learning skills that would eventually change my writing into something better than I came in with."

From 2004 to 2007, Stueart returned to the States to immigrate to Canada.

When he returned, he kept teaching: with Artists in the Schools, City of Whitehorse classes and high school sci-fi/fantasy workshops.

Santana and Zeb Berryman and



Photo courtesy J. STUEART/JENNIFER MOORLAG

**BACK IN FAMILIAR TERRITORY – Jerome Stueart gives a reading during his visit to Whitehorse last month.**

Kalyna Riis-Phillips honed their craft there, along with Steve Parker, who read at the launch from his 2009 fantasy, *Skrelsaga*.

Two faith-based writing groups Stueart founded at the United Church still meet monthly and host a summer Braeburn weekend retreat.

"That group has kept going without me, which was my ultimate goal," he says.

While here, Stueart visited, armed with new exercises.

The Writing Faith group gave Marie Carr and Dianne Homan the faith to take their writing in different directions.

With Stueart's mentorship, the three experimented with travel, fiction, and science fiction writing, bringing Homan closer to publishing *Walking Your Own Camino*, set to launch 6:30-8:30 p.m. Jan. 18 at the Farmer Roberts Store.

"It's inspiring to see others writing," says Stueart.

Teaching forced him to "keep up. It challenges you. I know without the teens, my peers, and the faith-based group, it would have been a lot harder to be a writer without a community."

Later in 2007, Stueart became the marketing director for the Yukon Arts Centre and stopped writing completely.

"Good God, there's a training ground for a skill most writers need badly – the ability to market yourself."

He made another unusual apprenticeship with the Frantic Follies and the Waterfront Trolley.

"Writers are asked to read, and it's a great skill to have," Stueart says.

"It also lets you judge how your writing is going. It's not just about performance – it's about the writing and word placement and listener comprehension. I learned a lot about audience by doing those jobs."

Stueart frequently served on funding panels for the arts.

"It's a glorious thing to see it all together – in its myriad forms."

The big picture "shows you other people's passions – which are just as important as yours and touch as many people as yours do."

Then, in 2014, Stueart followed his heart to Ohio, sketching his travels as seen from a Greyhound bus.

At the terminus of his voyage, he started teaching as an adjunct at the University of Ohio, Dayton, joined the Dayton Gay Men's Chorus and from fall through the spring of 2016 wrote *Angels of Our Better Beasts*.

He taught online for the Brainery last summer, and on a visit to Toronto he received news from ChiZine: they would publish this collection of short stories and a novel in 2018.

So, 15 years later, how did Stueart get to The End?

"Just keep going, with the idea that it will look like s\*\*t for a couple of drafts but that having the eyes of first readers, like I have here, will help it grow into what it needs to be," he says.

Then, "Let it go. Wrap it up with a bow and move forward."

And live the magic.

In a crazy recital to close the launch, Dube and Parker joined Stueart in *Song of Sasquatch*, a love poem between a sasquatch and a cryptozoologist, modeled on the Song of Solomon.

"Having their help reading this very stylized kind of poem just made people laugh and have a great time," says Stueart.

"On a night of -33C."



**MOTORISTS SHOULD BE WARY – A herd of caribou pauses recently north of Jakes Corner on the Alaska Highway. The public should be diligent as they travel in areas frequented by caribou. They are on the roads at all times and are difficult to see, particularly at night. These caribou are part of the protected Southern Lakes herd.**