

# Image & reality

*Anthony Stewart is the only Black English prof at Dal. He's tall, he's played basketball and he's written a thesis on Orwell. Why do people only believe the basketball part?*

BY SHELLEY ROBINSON

When he was little there were two things Anthony Stewart didn't want anybody to know — his birthday and his middle name. He just didn't like the attention.

Anthony Fitzgerald Stewart was born in Ottawa on May 29, 1964 — the same day as JFK, 51 years later. His mother was a big fan of the US president, which is why they also share the same middle name.

But for someone who describes himself as introverted and introspective, Dr. Stewart had more than just his middle name and birthday to contend with.

"I think it's fair to say that I ascribe a lot of my personality to being Black and being tall," he said. "those two things have conspired to make it very easy for me to get attention."

And Stewart, who is Dal's only Black English professor, says most of that attention focussed on what he was supposed to be like, rather than how he actually was.

"A lot of people generalize when they see me... I look like a basketball player so if I am a basketball player, as they see it, I'm not an intellect."

Stewart, who is 6'6", did play basketball — he says it's something he literally "grew into" — and maybe that's why everyone is surprised to find out he's a professor. Or maybe it's because there are so few Black professors in what Stewart calls "the academy".

"All you have to do is look around an English class or any academic department and there just aren't a lot of people... that look the way I do," he says.

And that matters to him and what he's teaching.

"My being Black and at the front of the room, for a lot of my students, is an unusual thing... so it's important to have my students thinking about that kind of thing all the time, not just when we're reading a novel by a Black person."

But Stewart says as a Black

prof there's a fine line to tread.

"You're not just another teacher," he says. "You're never just another teacher. Whether you like it or not you become symbolic. To some you become representative of good things, to some you become representative of bad things."

And that creates a bind.

"If I say nothing, if I pretend I'm just another university professor then on some level I might as well be just another university professor," he says.

"I might as well be white."

"At the same time, if I sort of lean on it too much, if I make it that everything I do, or everything I say, has to have some sort of statement attached to it, then the risk is that I'm putting myself in the position of 'speaking for my people' and that's just a posture I don't buy... you become intellectually ghettoized."

"It's a line from Public Enemy," he says to sum it up,

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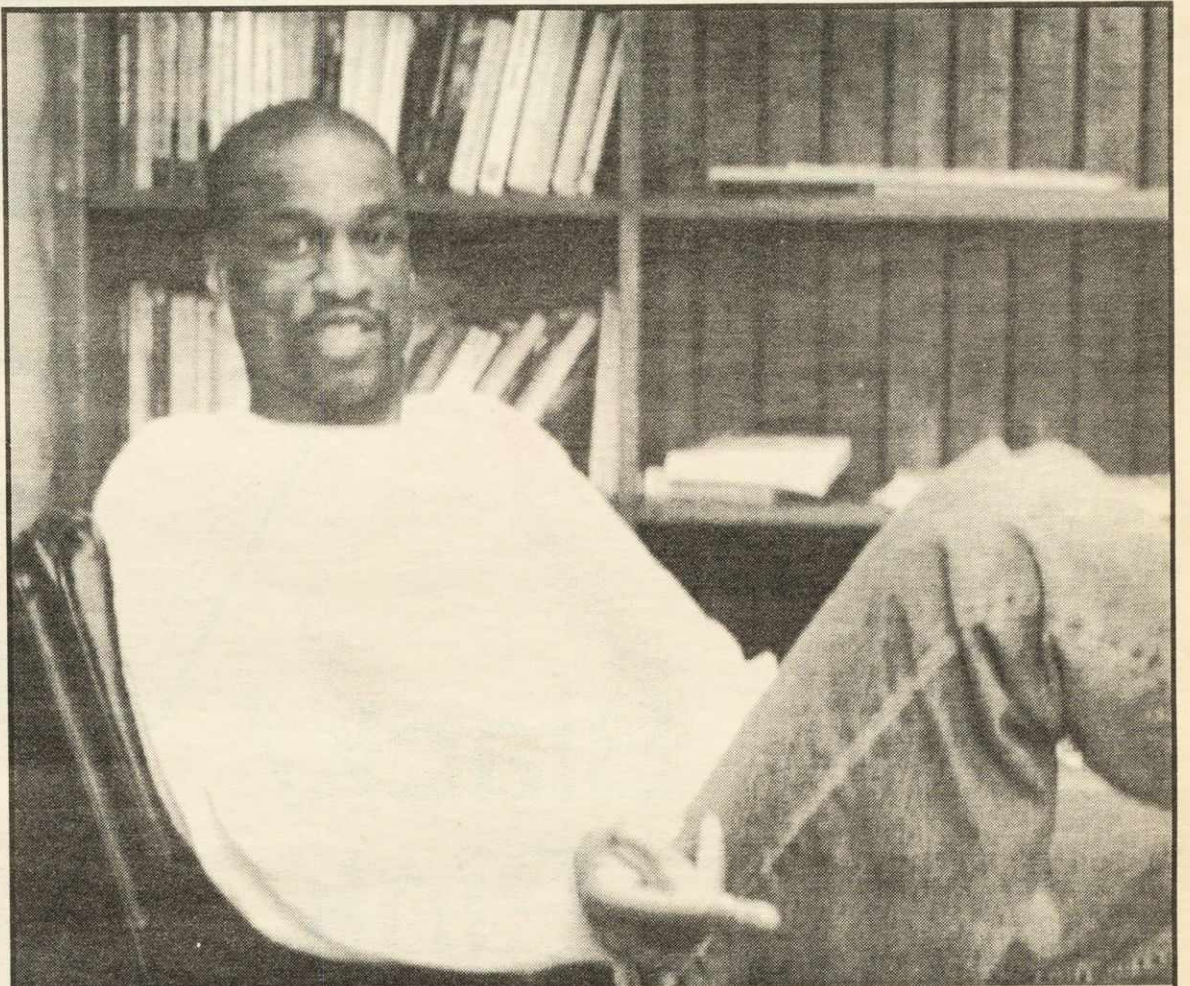
"Duck, yell loud, here comes Chuck with that Black shit."

And, in the same way Stewart analyses characters, he examines his own motivations for why he does what he does, and the way he does it.

He's decided he's a control freak.

"People see what you look like and from there extrapolate wildly concerning who you are," he says "If you are always being determined by things over which you have no control what you want to do is get certain things you can control."

If you look at his course outlines you can see it. In one class, five pages of dense notes are peppered with capital letters, underlining and bold type.



**Dr. Anthony Fitzgerald Stewart**

**Education:** BA (Guelph) MA, PhD (Queen's)

**Quote:** "I think my middle name is on my doctoral degree — I wanted as many letters as I could on that document. I was actually considering making up another name just for that."

**Courses:** George Orwell

The Short Story

Twentieth Century Novel

African American Literature

**Favourite book:** *Invisible Man* by Ralph Ellison

"I tell people unabashedly that this is the best book that the English language has produced. I figure I can say that if other people can say that about Shakespeare or Chaucer."

**Book currently reading:** *The City Game* by Pete Axthelm

"BE FOREWARNED," one syllabus reads. "I will fail a paper on sloppy grammar alone, although that fault rarely occurs in isolation."

Anthony Stewart knows what you are supposed to do and what he is supposed to do, and always does his part. He is measured, immaculate and careful, noticeably pausing before answering questions. And then commenting on the pause.

All of which suggests Stewart

Stewart teaches classes on 20th century fiction, the short story, African American Literature and George Orwell. But if he could teach anything, it would be a study of biographies of Black American athletes. People like boxer Hurricane Carter, golfer Charlie Sifford and baseball player Hank Aaron.

Carter was wrongfully imprisoned for 21 years.

Sifford wasn't allowed to play

courage.

"These are all people who, whenever I see them speak, there's no anger, there's no bitterness and yet at the same time there's this sort of fierce and intense pride and dignity."

And Stewart says that, more than anything, helps him put things into perspective.

"The little bullshit things I've had to deal with is nothing like being outlawed from playing in an event because of the colour of my skin or being thrown in jail when people knew that I wasn't the guy but I was Black so it didn't matter. And that sort of thing still happens."

"I know there are people who feel that I'm not nearly as pissed off as I should be, but frankly... I've been very lucky."

Hank Aaron in particular has meant a lot to Stewart.

One of the students in his class a few years ago, a white guy, told Stewart he had started the book, but put it down because it sounded like "a Black guy whining about how hard it is to be a Black guy in the United States." And he stopped reading it. But after taking one of Stewart's classes he picked it up again, read it, and liked it. When he came back for graduation he asked Stewart if he had it, and told him he'd like him to have his.

"That's one of the best moments I've had as a teacher," he says.

Maybe getting attention isn't always so bad. But that's another story.

is uptight. But the first thing his students mention is how funny he is, how easy to talk to.

After all, Stewart is the same person who quotes NWA's "Straight Outta Compton" in class. He did his thesis on George Orwell, but talks about The Simpsons and how shitty sixty-buck seats at Raptors games are. You never wonder if Stewart watches TV, only what he thinks of it.

One of his students said Stewart was like Woody Allen. And if Allen were Black and 6'6" — well he wouldn't be Woody Allen anymore — but he might still have some of the funny and frenetic digressions that lead to spin-off tales ending with "but that's another story". And then he'd be a lot like Stewart.

in the Professional Golf Association because he was Black.

And Hank Aaron got death threats when he beat Babe Ruth's home run record.

These are all stories of triumph against prejudice, like Hank Aaron eating in a restaurant in the South and hearing them break the plates in the kitchen rather than let anybody else eat off of them after Black people had.

"You get a lump in your throat," he says. "This is a famous man... who has access to money and power and yet he can still be dehumanized and diminished by a group of people whose names we'll never know — just because they can. That's power."

He calls them "cautionary tales", but they're also tales of