

Historica Canada Education Portal

Stewart James

Overview

This lesson is based on viewing the Stewart James biography from [The Canadians](#) series. This Ontario born trickster made a name for himself around the world as the greatest inventor of magical tricks and puzzles that ever lived. His name lives on in magical circles years after his death and is spoken of with the greatest possible respect.

Aims

In a variety of activities, students will study the life of Stewart James and his world of magic. Students will also look at the strange genius of his work and decide if his work has been important enough to include him in the list of important Canadians.

Background

Stewart James lived in relative obscurity throughout his life. He loved inventing magic tricks and devoted his life to creating new tricks and puzzles. His is a story of a creative imagination with an unusual focus, but so rich and so productive that it seems inexplicable.

Born in Courtright, Ontario, Stewart James lived his early years in a forced state of deprivation of friends and love. Later in life this deprivation was mostly self-imposed. But he had friends and a devoted following when he died in 1996.

Books have been written about his work. Gatherings have been held in his honour. The rich and famous as well as the low and humble study his work. He would not have been surprised to see the widespread interest in magic, but perhaps he would have been perplexed to see the widespread interest in him.

Activities

Time Allowance: 1 - 4 hours

Procedures:

These activities explore the life of Stewart James as well as his psyche. Stewart James was a brilliant man who had some very strange tendencies. He overcame an oppressive childhood in order to become the greatest inventor of tricks and puzzles of our times.

1. Have each student research one of the tricks or puzzles created by Stewart James. Have them perform the trick and then explain to the class how the trick works. Should the opportunity arise, the tricks may also be presented at an assembly, at parent teacher night, or at a sporting event, (etc).
2. Stewart James often met with his three imaginary friends Rigonally, Faxton, and Cardova. During these meetings, they would help him

develop his magic tricks, puzzles, and systems. Have students write a scene about one of these meetings.

3. During the video, the narrator states: "I don't think he would have been surprised to see a room full of movers and shakers, politicians and writers enjoying the same art of magic that he loved so much." Have students write a short essay on why they think that so many different types of people are attracted by magic.

4. Aberystwyth, the house built by Stewart James's father, was built with many "...very mysterious hiding places, very creative little nooks and crannies...." Have students create floor plans of what they think the inside of Aberystwyth looked like. Have them include several mysterious hiding places and inventive nooks and crannies full of surprises.

5. As a young adult Stewart James travelled about performing the magic he had created. In small groups, have students design and create a poster advertising one of his shows.

6. The life of Stewart James can be divided into distinct stages (such as childhood, early career, time in the army, etc.). As a group, decide what these stages of his life were. Have each student then write one diary entry for each stage of his life.

7. Have students make a list of the key events that happened in Stewart James's life. Examine these events for elements of literature (comedy, tragedy, conflict, etc.). Write a play or short story about one of these events focussing specifically on a particular element of literature. Make sure it is clear what the event is, when it happened, what element of literature is being explored and what the possible outcome was. Students may use some artistic licence when completing this assignment.

8. Stewart James reportedly predicted newspaper headlines a year before they happened (such as the start of the First World War). As a group discuss several current events and predict where they are going and what headlines may say about them a year from now.

9. Stewart James is included in the series *The Canadians* with some other very prestigious persons. Should he be included with them? Have students look at the strange genius of his work and decide if he was important enough to include in the list of important Canadians. Have them pick one other person who also appears in *The Canadians* series and compare and contrast the two. Have them write a one page summary of their findings.

Resources

[Stewart James Worksheet](#)

Ben, David. *Advantage Play: The Manager's Guide to Creative Problem Solving*. Key Porter Books, 2001.

Fulves, Karl. *Self-Working Rope Magic: Seventy Foolproof Tricks*. Dover Publications, Inc., 1990

Fulves, Karl. *Self-Working Close-up Card Magic: Fifty-three Foolproof Tricks*. Dover Publications, Inc., 1994.

(Any other book by Karl Fulves)

Lyons, Howard and Allan Slaight (ed.), *Stewart James in Print: The First Fifty Years*. Jogestja Ltd., Toronto, 1989.

Slaight, Allan. *The James File*. Hermetic Press, Inc., 1993.

[Stewart James Biography - The Canadians Series](#)

[Magic Tricks](#)

[Magic Tricks.Com](#)

[MysteryNet's Kids Mysteries](#)