



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

Reader Resources

A Lesson Before Dying

by Ernest J. Gaines



Table of Contents

A Lesson Before Dying

About the Book.....	3
About the Author	4
Historical and Literary Context	6
Other Works/Adaptations	8
Discussion Questions.....	10
Additional Resources.....	11
Credits.....	12

Preface

The novel has a long history of championing social justice. Fiction has the signal ability to embody social ideas in a compelling narrative that possesses both emotional and intellectual power. Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* offers a painful yet inspirational tale of institutional injustice and personal redemption. It addresses the biggest theme possible—how one affirms life in the face of death.



“In all my stories and novels, no one ever escapes Louisiana.”

What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



About the Book

Introduction to the Book

Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993) poses one of the most universal questions literature can ask: Knowing we're going to die, how should we live? It's the story of an uneducated young black man named Jefferson, accused of the murder of a white storekeeper, and Grant Wiggins, a college-educated native son of Louisiana, who teaches at a plantation school.

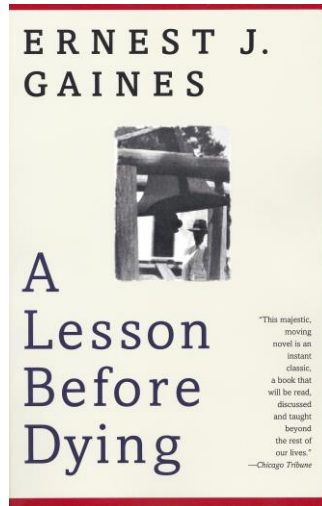
In a little more than 250 pages, these two men named for presidents discover a friendship that transforms at least two lives.

In the first chapter, the court-appointed lawyer's idea of a legal strategy for Jefferson is to argue, "Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." This dehumanizing and unsurprisingly doomed defense rankles the condemned man's grief-stricken godmother, Miss Emma, and Grant's aunt, Tante Lou. They convince an unwilling Grant to spend time with Jefferson in his prison cell, so that he might confront death with his head held high.

Most of the novel's violence happens offstage in the first and last chapters. Vital secondary characters punctuate the narrative, including Vivian, Grant's assertive yet patient Creole girlfriend; Reverend Ambrose, a minister whom the disbelieving Grant ultimately comes to respect; and Paul, a white deputy who stands with Jefferson when Grant cannot.

White, black, mulatto, Cajun, or Creole; rich, poor, or hanging on; young, old, or running out of time-around all these people, Gaines crafts a story of intimacy and depth. He re-creates the smells of Miss Emma's fried chicken, the sounds of the blues from Jefferson's radio, the taste of the sugarcane from the plantation. The school, the parish church, the town bar, and the jailhouse all come alive with indelible vividness.

In the tradition of Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) and Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* (1966), Gaines uses a capital case to explore the nobility and the barbarism of which human beings are equally capable. The story builds inexorably to Jefferson's ultimate bid for dignity, both in his prison diary and at the hour of his execution. That Ernest J. Gaines wrings a hopeful ending out of such grim material only testifies to his prodigious gifts as a storyteller.



How *A Lesson Before Dying* Came to Be Written

The following is excerpted from Ernest J. Gaines's interview with Dan Stone.

"I used to have nightmares about execution. I lived in San Francisco, just across the bay from San Quentin. Ten o'clock on Tuesdays was execution day. I wondered what this person must go through the month before, the week before, then the night before. I'd see myself, my brothers, and my friends going to that gas chamber. I'd have those nightmares over and over.

I wanted to write a story about an execution, so a colleague told me about this material that he had about a young man, who had been sent to the electric chair twice. The first time the chair failed, but a year later, he was executed. That happened in 1948, the same year that I left to go to California.

I visited small-town sheriffs and jails. I met a minister who had escorted a young man to the electric chair. The electric chair at Angola was called Gruesome Gertie. I had a lawyer in my creative writing class who had a client on death row, and I would ask him questions. I'd ask him about the size of the strap, the height and weight of the chair. The character Paul in *A Lesson Before Dying* is built around this student. And that's how I wrote the novel."

About the Author

Ernest J. Gaines (b. 1933)

Gaines's father left the family early, and his mother moved to New Orleans to find work. This left the boy in the care of his disabled aunt, whose strength returns in Tante Lou and several of Gaines's other female characters. Barely into his teens, Gaines began to write and stage steadily more ambitious plays at the local church.



Ernest Gaines (Copyright Joseph Sanford)

In 1948 Gaines rejoined his mother in Vallejo, California, where she had found work in California's great post-World War II economic boom. He discovered the downtown Carnegie Library and plundered it for books with two necessary qualities: "Number one, they had to be about the South, and two, they had to be fiction."

The 1950s ushered Gaines from high school to junior college, to an Army tour in Guam, to college back in California, and finally into the writer Wallace Stegner's prestigious creative writing program at Stanford, where classmates included Wendell Berry and Ken Kesey. He soon won the Joseph Henry Jackson Award for a novel in progress.

That novel developed into 1964's *Catherine Carmier*, followed three years later by *Of Love and Dust*, which coincided with a fellowship for Gaines from the National Endowment for the Arts. He broke through to a wider public with *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), which was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in fiction.

More well-received novels followed, including *A Gathering of Old Men* in 1983, shortly after the start of his years teaching writing at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette. There he conceived the idea for his sixth novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*—though a decade would pass before it saw print.

A Lesson Before Dying (1993) surpassed even the rapturous reception accorded *Miss Jane Pittman*. The Pulitzer jury shortlisted Gaines again. He walked off with the prestigious National Book Critics Circle Award. A MacArthur Fellowship finally gave him some financial security, and he married Dianne Saulney, a Miami attorney who grew up in—where else?—Louisiana.

An Interview with Ernest J. Gaines

On August 16, 2007, Dan Stone of the National Endowment for the Arts interviewed Ernest J. Gaines at his home in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana. An excerpt from their conversation follows.

Dan Stone: When did books first become important to you?

Ernest J. Gaines: As a child in Louisiana, there was no library that I could go to. But when I went to California, I found myself in the library. And at 16, I started reading and reading. I especially read anybody who wrote about the land. I'd look at the dust jacket, and if there was a tree or lake or field on it, I'd flip through. I especially liked to read the 19th-century Russian writers—Chekhov, Tolstoy, and Turgenev—because they wrote about the land and peasant life.

DS: What experiences from your own life did you work into *A Lesson Before Dying*?

EG: The first six years of my education were in my plantation's church, and I used that as Grant's school. We worked and picked pecans to buy our clothes, and we went to school about five and a half months of the year because we had to begin to work in the field at age eight, from mid-March until about mid-September.

DS: It's assumed that Jefferson is innocent, but in the beginning, this is never stated. Did you intentionally give two sides?

EG: I don't know whether he's innocent or guilty. The point of the story is how two men would grow to become real men. Jefferson, with only a few months to live; Grant with another 40 years or more to live—what will they do with that time? Neither one is going anywhere in life. Grant wants to get away. Jefferson is just there, doing whatever people want him to do. He never argues, he never questions anything. I wanted the story to be about how both men develop.

DS: Grant gives Jefferson a radio. How is music able to break down those barriers?

EG: Music is very important to me. When I was growing up, there were maybe one or two radios on the quarters here. We'd listen to the music at my grandmother's house, especially late at night when you could hear the blues. It is the blues that reaches Jefferson spiritually. The minister tried to reach him, but I think he was closer to those old blues. So the purpose of the radio was to get Jefferson to open up.

DS: Why is Grant so unable to help Jefferson at the beginning of the novel? What is his deepest struggle?

EG: Grant is struggling with the South at that time. This man was terribly angry. He didn't know who he was—and that's the worst thing in the world that can happen to a man. He hated where he was, but at the same time, he can't leave. I don't know what would have happened to me, had I stayed here. I probably would have ended up teaching in a little school and angry the rest of my life. So the two best moves I've ever made in life were the day I went to California and the day I came back here. My folks took me away from here in 1948 and then in 1963 I came back here.

DS: The California poet Robinson Jeffers wrote about something he called "the inevitable place"—that some people are tied to a place where they inevitably have to return. They can go anywhere in the world, but that's the spot for them. It seems Louisiana is that place for you.

EG: Definitely so. I tried to write about the Army and the year I spent in Guam. I tried to write ghost stories about San Francisco. I can't write about San Francisco! But I can write about that little postage stamp of land in Louisiana. In my case, the body went to California. The soul remained here with my aunt and my brothers and sisters and friends and the old shack we lived in.

Historical and Literary Context

The Life and Times of Ernest J. Gaines

1930s

- 1933: Ernest J. Gaines is born in Louisiana.
- 1935: Louisiana Senator Huey P. Long, creator of populist "Share Our Wealth" program, is assassinated in Baton Rouge.
- 1937: Joe Louis becomes champion, both in pro boxing and in the hearts of African Americans.

1940s

- America enters World War II, 1941; all-African-American Tuskegee Airmen help win the air war, 1942-45; the Axis surrenders in 1945.
- 1947: Jackie Robinson integrates pro baseball with the Brooklyn Dodgers.
- 1948: Gaines moves to Vallejo, California, the year *A Lesson Before Dying* is set.

1950s

- 1954: Thurgood Marshall successfully argues against school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*.
- 1955: Rosa Parks refuses to give up her bus seat to a white man.

1960s

- 1963: Martin Luther King, Jr., delivers his *I Have a Dream* speech.
- 1963: A six-month return to Louisiana invigorates Gaines's career.
- 1964: Congress passes Civil Rights Act.
- 1967: President Lyndon Johnson names Thurgood Marshall to the Supreme Court.

1970s

- 1972: *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* wins the California Book Award, the same year Gaines receives a Guggenheim grant.

- 1972: Rep. Shirley Chisholm, the first woman and first African American to run for president, receives 152 delegates, but loses the Democratic nomination.

1980s

- 1981: Gaines takes a professorship at the University of Louisiana-Lafayette, and is later made Writer-in-Residence.
- 1983: Gaines publishes *A Gathering of Old Men*.
- Jesse Jackson wins five Democratic presidential primaries in 1984 and 11 in 1988.

1990s

- 1990: After 27 years in prison, Nelson Mandela is released; his policies of reconciliation help to heal the wounds of apartheid in South Africa.
- 1993: Toni Morrison wins the Nobel Prize in Literature, the same year Gaines publishes *A Lesson Before Dying*.
- 1997: Oprah Winfrey selects Gaines's novel for her book club.

2000s

- 2000: Romulus Linney's play *A Lesson Before Dying* premieres at New York's Signature Theatre.
- 2005: Gaines retires from teaching.
- 2005: Hurricane Katrina devastates southern Louisiana.
- 2008: Barack Obama elected first African American president.

The South Before Civil Rights

Between the atrocities of the Jim Crow South and advances of the civil rights era, the 1940s Louisiana of Ernest Gaines's youth forms a crucial bridge. Gaines had used that era before in three other books, and he has written that *A Lesson Before Dying* didn't begin to crystallize in his mind until he made a relatively late decision to set it then. In his essay "Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*," Gaines says, "If I put my story in the forties, there was so much material I could use.... I knew the food people ate, knew the kind of clothes they wore, knew the kind of songs they sang in the fields and in the church."

During the Jim Crow era, local officials had instituted curfews for blacks and posted "Whites Only" and "Colored" signs in parks, schools, hotels, water fountains, restrooms, and public transportation. Laws against miscegenation or "race-mixing" deemed all marriages between white and black not only void, but illegal. Compounding the injustice of Jim Crow laws was the inconsistency of their application. Backtalk would rate a laugh in one town, a lynching just over the county line.

It's little wonder that those few African Americans who succeeded on a national level became a source of enormous pride to those still under racism's lash. The scholar-critic Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has written of hearing the shouts go up all over his West Virginia hometown whenever a black face appeared on television: "Colored on Channel 2!" "Sammy Davis Jr.'s on Channel 5!" For Gaines's slightly older generation, the same thing happened whenever the names of the barrier-breaking ballplayer Jackie Robinson, or heavyweight champ Joe Louis—both mentioned in *A Lesson Before Dying*—or pioneering civil-rights lawyer Thurgood Marshall came up.

As chief counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Marshall argued and won the 1954 landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case, which struck down school segregation. Thirteen years later, Marshall crossed the courtroom rail to become America's first black justice on the Supreme Court, where several of his influential opinions became, and still are, the law of the land. But he laid the groundwork for that triumph in political and legal struggles—such as the *Garner v. Louisiana* case, which invalidated convictions for a lunch-counter sit-in—during the pre-civil rights era that Ernest J. Gaines chronicles so well.

Other Works/Adaptations

Gaines and His Other Works

Ernest J. Gaines began his long walk to renown in 1959 when a story of his won the Joseph Henry Jackson Award, named for the influential San Francisco Chronicle book critic. Encouraged, Gaines began to rework a novel that he had first written and burned at sixteen after New York publishers rejected it.

In 1964 Atheneum published *Catherine Carmier*, a novel about the love between a dark-skinned African-American man and a lighter skinned Creole sharecropper's daughter. Gaines plowed a related furrow three years later in the novel *Of Love and Dust*, also about tangled affairs of the heart among whites, blacks, and Cajuns. *Bloodline* came out in 1968, gathering three previously published stories and two new ones.

Seemingly refreshed by this return to short fiction, in 1971 Gaines produced his breakthrough book, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, the saga of a 110-year-old African-American woman from the Civil War to the 1960s. The CBS adaptation of *Miss Jane Pittman*, released three years later, redefined what a television movie could achieve.

That same year, Gaines published his only work for young people, the little-known *A Long Day in November*. He then took seven years to publish the novel *In My Father's House*, about a civil rights leader confronted by living proof of a long-ago indiscretion.

In 1983's *A Gathering of Old Men*, Gaines borrowed the detective story form for an exploration of racism's lingering cost. The story begins when a white man is found dead and several African Americans step forward with competing claims of responsibility.

If a writer can have a second breakthrough book, Gaines achieved it 10 years later in *A Lesson Before Dying*. With its inexorable momentum and bitter, stifled narrator, the novel struck a nationwide chord, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and won the coveted National Book Critics Circle Award.

In 2005 Gaines came back with *Mozart and Leadbelly*, which contains five stories, an extended conversation with two scholars, and half a dozen essays, including one apiece about writing *Miss Jane Pittman* and *A Lesson Before Dying*. A year later, The Baton Rouge Area Foundation afforded Gaines the chance to pay forward an old favor. That's when the foundation endowed the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence, to honor an African American for a book-length work of fiction—much as the Jackson Award had launched Gaines nearly half a century earlier.

Works by Ernest J. Gaines

- *Catherine Carmier*, 1964
- *Of Love and Dust*, 1967
- *Bloodline*, 1968
- *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, 1971
- *A Long Day in November*, 1971
- *In My Father's House*, 1978
- *A Gathering of Old Men*, 1983
- *A Lesson Before Dying*, 1993
- *Mozart and Leadbelly: Stories and Essays*, 2005

Gaines on Film

The challenge of programming a traditional month-long film festival around a good writer is either too many interesting movies or not nearly enough. Ernest J. Gaines is the exception. All four television movies made from his work reward close viewing, and Gaines may stand alone as the only author whose adaptations have earned two Emmys for outstanding telefilm, plus a third nomination in that category for another.

Ineligible for an Emmy at 46 minutes, *The Sky Is Gray* (1980) was a short film in the much-missed "American Short Story" series, made possible originally by the National Endowment for the Humanities. Olivia Cole plays Octavia, an impoverished Louisiana mother trying to stretch a few coins far enough to cover bus fare into town, dental care for her young son, and maybe a hunk of salt meat for the two to share. An adaptation of Gaines's story of the same name, *The Sky Is Gray* returns Gaines to the 1940s parish of his childhood for a delicately moving parable of interracial kindness and cruelty.

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1974) remains the best known among the films made from Gaines's work. Lovingly adapted by Tracy Keenan Wynn from Gaines's novel about the panoramic life of a 110-year-old black woman, it won not just Outstanding Special but four other Emmys as well, including one for Cicely Tyson's towering performance in the title role. Not only does *Miss Jane Pittman* appear regularly on lists of television's proudest events, but it's hard to imagine the landmark miniseries "Roots" ever getting produced without *Miss Jane Pittman's* precedent to cite.

The playwright Charles Fuller, who also wrote the script for *The Sky Is Gray*, adapted the likewise Emmy-winning *A Gathering of Old Men* (1987) from Gaines's 1983 novel.

Brilliantly acted by a cast including Louis Gossett, Jr., Richard Widmark, Holly Hunter, and a gallery of such great character actors as Woody Strode, Julius Harris, and Joe Seneca—plus musicians Sandman Sims and Papa John Creach—*A Gathering of Old Men* honors a vanishing Louisiana so faithfully that a viewer can hear and almost smell the canebrakes burning.

Finally, Ann Peacock's careful television adaptation of *A Lesson Before Dying* (1999) does full justice to Gaines's popular novel. Don Cheadle plays Grant, Mekhi Phifer the doomed Jefferson, and Miss Jane Pittman herself, Cicely Tyson, contributes a wily turn as Tante Lou. Directed by the underrated TV veteran Joseph Sargent, whose nearly only widescreen foray was the magnificent *The Taking of Pelham One Two Three* (1974), *A Lesson Before Dying* is no substitute for the novel, but the perfect lagniappe after finishing it.

Discussion Questions

1. *A Lesson Before Dying* is mostly narrated by the teacher Grant Wiggins from the first-person point of view. What important attributes does he reveal about himself in the opening chapters? What kinds of things does he conceal?
2. Why hasn't Grant left Louisiana, though he says he wants nothing more than to get away? What is he trying to escape?
3. Grant was educated in the 1930s, and 1942 marks his first year as a teacher. What do we know about Grant's school days, and how does this inform his own teaching methods?
4. Miss Emma and Tante Lou pressure Grant to visit Jefferson in prison. Why does Grant follow their advice against his own wishes?
5. Why does Grant refuse to sit down and eat in Henri Pichot's kitchen?
6. Grant's girlfriend is a light-skinned Catholic mother of two who is not yet divorced. How do these differences create tension in their relationship?
7. How does the radio mark a turn in Grant's relationship with Jefferson?
8. Grant describes the cycle of life for black men in the South to Vivian. What is his answer to the question: "Can the cycle ever be broken?" Is the answer relevant today?
9. Do you agree, as Grant says, that he can never be a hero but that Jefferson can be?
10. What effect does Chapter 29—the only time in the narrative when we see Jefferson's writing—have on the reader? Why might Gaines make the choice to use Jefferson's diary to tell this part of the novel?
11. How does the white deputy, Paul, contrast with other white men and women in the novel? Why is it important that Paul attends Jefferson's execution?
12. Would you have been able to stand with Jefferson? Why wasn't Grant at the execution?

Additional Resources

Resources on Gaines and the Jim Crow South

- Chafe, William H., Raymond Gavis, and Robert Korstad, eds. *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell About Life in the Segregated South*. New York: New Press, 2001.
- Hughes, Langston. *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*. 1940. New York: Hill and Wang, 2002.
- Lowe, John, ed. *Conversations with Ernest Gaines*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
- Simon, Scott. *Jackie Robinson and the Integration of Baseball*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2002.
- Washington, Booker T. *Up from Slavery: An Autobiography*. 1901. New York: Random House, 1999.

If you enjoyed *A Lesson Before Dying*, you might want to read:

- Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, 1845
- Richard Wright's *Native Son*, 1940
- Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, 1946
- Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, 1952

If you want to read books that influenced Ernest J. Gaines, you might want to try:

- Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons*, 1852
- Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage*, 1895
- Jean Toomer's *Cane*, 1923
- William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, 1929

Website

[Ernest J. Gaines Center at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette](http://ernestgaines.louisiana.edu/)

Visitors to this website will find archives of images, a Library Guide, pages for each of Gaines's novels and books, and a blog. The pages for Gaines's works contain background information, questions to consider, possible activities, quotes from Gaines, scholarly articles, and items from the archives.

<http://ernestgaines.louisiana.edu/>

Credits

Works Cited

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ART WORKS.

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The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965 as an independent agency of the federal government. To date, the NEA has awarded more than \$5 billion to support artistic excellence, creativity, and innovation for the benefit of individuals and communities. The NEA extends its work through partnerships with state arts agencies, local leaders, other federal agencies, and the philanthropic sector.



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