

A Lesson Before Dying by Ernest J. Gaines

Summary

Winner, 1993 National Book Critics Circle Award

Set in a small Cajun community in the late 1940s, *A Lesson Before Dying* is an "enormously moving" (*Los Angeles Times*) novel of one man condemned to die for a crime he did not commit and a young man who visits him in his cell.

In the end, the two men forge a bond as they both come to understand the simple heroism of resisting—and defying—the expected. (*From the publisher.*)

Author Bio

- Birth—January 15, 1933
- Where—Pointe Coupee, Louisiana, USA
- Education—B.A., San Francisco State University; fellowship to Stanford University
- Awards—Wallace Stegner Fellow, 1957; National Endowment for the Arts grant, 1967; Dos Passos Prize, 1993; MacArthur Foundation fellow, 1993; National Book Critics Award, 1993; National Humanities Medal, 2000; he American Academy of Arts and Letters, 2000; Chevalier, Order of Arts and Letters (France), 2000.
- Currently—lives in San Francisco and Oscar, Louisiana

Ernest Gaines was born on a plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish near New Roads, Louisiana, which is the Bayonne of all his fictional works. He is writer-in-residence emeritus at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. In 1993 Gaines received the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation Fellowship for his lifetime achievements.

In addition to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Mr. Gaines is also the author of *A Lesson Before Dying*, *A Gathering of Old Men*, *Bloodline*, and *Of Love and Dust*.

In 1996 he was named a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres, one of France's highest decorations. He and his wife, Dianne, live in Oscar, Louisiana. (*From Wikipedia.*)

Discussion Questions

1. All the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* are motivated by a single word: "hog." Jefferson's attorney has compared him to a hog; Miss Emma wants Grant to prove that her godson is not a hog; and Jefferson at first eats the food she has sent him on his knees, because "that's how a old hog eat." How are words used both to humiliate and to redeem the characters in this novel?

2. Grant's task is to affirm that Jefferson is not a hog, but a man. The mission is doubly difficult because Grant isn't sure he knows what a man is. What definition of manhood, or humanity, does *A Lesson Before Dying* provide? Why is manhood a subversive notion within the book's milieu?

3. At various points in the book Gaines draws analogies between Jefferson and Jesus. One of the first questions Jefferson asks his tutor concerns the significance of Christmas: "That's when He was born, or that's when he died?" Jefferson is executed eight days after Easter. In what other ways is this parallel developed? In particular, discuss the scriptural connotations of the word "lesson."

4. For all the book's religious symbolism, the central character is a man without faith. Grant's refusal to attend church has deeply hurt his aunt and antagonized Reverend Ambrose, whose religion Grant at first dismisses as a sham. Yet at the book's climax he admits that Ambrose "is braver than I," and he has his pupils pray in the hours before Jefferson's death. What kind of faith does Grant acquire in the course of this book? Why does the Reverend emerge as the stronger of the two men?

5. One of the novel's paradoxes is that Ambrose's faith—which Grant rejects because it is also the white man's—enables him to stand up against the white man's "justice." How do we resolve this paradox? How has faith served African-Americans as a source of personal empowerment and an axis of communal resistance?

6. Grant believes that black men in Louisiana have only three choices: to die violently, to be "brought down to the level of beasts," or "to run and run." How does the way in which Gaines articulates these grim choices—and suggests an alternative to them—make *A Lesson Before Dying* applicable not only to Louisiana in 1948 but to the United States in the 1990s?

7. Women play a significant role in the book. Examine the scenes between Grant and Tante Lou, Grant and Vivian, and Jefferson and Miss Emma, and discuss the impetus that Gaines's women provide his male characters. In what ways do these interactions reflect the roles of black women within their families and in African-American society?

8. *A Lesson Before Dying* is concerned with obligation and commitment. Discuss this theme as it emerges in the exchanges between Emma Glenn and the Pichots, Grant and Vivian, and Grant and the Reverend Ambrose. What are the debts these people owe each other? In what ways do they variously try to honor, evade, or exploit them?

9. Like Faulkner and Joyce, Gaines has been acclaimed for his evocation of place. In *A Lesson Before Dying* his accomplishment is all the more impressive because of the book's brevity. What details in this book evoke its setting, and what is the relation between its setting and its themes?

10. From the manslaughter that begins this novel to the judicial murder at its close, death is a constant presence in *A Lesson Before Dying*. We are repeatedly reminded of all the untimely, violent deaths that have preceded Jefferson's and, in all likelihood, will follow it. Why then is Jefferson's death so disturbing to this book's black characters, and even to some of its white ones? What does Jefferson's death accomplish that his life could not?

(Questions issued by publisher.)