

ONE JACKSON ONE BOOK

ONE JACKSON ONE BOOK seeks to unite our community through the reading and discussion of one book. Young people and adults, book lovers and infrequent readers, are invited to participate.

The book selected for 2003 is Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*. To join with others reading and discussing the same book, follow these steps:

Obtain the Book- Copies of *A Lesson Before Dying* are at your branch library. Local bookstores also stock the book.

Read the Book - Between April and October join your community, friends and family in reading and talking about the book.

Access the Toolkit - A Toolkit designed to enhance your reading pleasure is available at all Jackson/Hinds library branches, area bookstores and on the web site, www.jhlibrary.com. This resource guide will help you enter into a dialog with others about Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying*.

Join the Conversation - Choose *A Lesson Before Dying* for your book club or form a new discussion group in your home, community center, coffeehouse, or place of worship. Area libraries and bookstores will offer discussion sessions. Contact them for dates. Partner with a group from another area of the city for a different viewpoint.

Meet the Author - Ernest Gaines will be in Jackson in October as a part of a **One Jackson One Book Celebration**. He will read from his award-winning *A Lesson Before Dying*. For details during the summer consult a branch library or the web site: www.jhlibrary.com.

Answer the Question - What is a lesson learned in *A Lesson Before Dying*? Who learns it? Read the book and decide.

Biography of Ernest J. Gaines

Ernest J. Gaines was born in 1933 on the River Lake plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, the setting for most of his fiction. His maternal aunt, Augusteen Jefferson, raised him and became the model for Gaines's best-known character, Miss Jane Pittman. Because people of color could not legally attend high school or visit the public library in Pointe Coupee Parish, Gaines's aunt sent him when he was 15 years old to live with his mother and stepfather in California.

Gaines made frequent visits to the public library in California, where he discovered Russian and French writers. He loved the literature but recognized that none of these authors told stories about his world. This recognition led Gaines down a writer's path. He studied literature and creative writing at San Francisco State University and at Stanford he studied with Wallace Stegner.

Gaines has realized his goal of telling many stories about African-American history and culture. These stories offer readers a chance to examine issues of community, race and class. They also explore personal relationships, folklore and religion.

Ernest J. Gaines holds the title of Writer-in-Residence at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette. *A Lesson Before Dying*, his most recent novel, was published in 1993. It was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize; won in 1994 the Best Fiction Award by the National Book Critics Circle, the Southern Writers Conference, and the Louisiana Library Association; and was the October 1997 choice of Oprah's Book Club.

Professor Gaines holds numerous honorary doctorate degrees. He is married to Dianne Saulney Gaines, an attorney.

Background Information

Ernest Gaines's award-winning novel is set in a small Louisiana Cajun community in the late 1940's. Pointe Coupee Parish, northwest of Baton Rouge, is the area where Gaines spent his childhood and is the region he uses as a model for his fictional St. Raphael Parish. The description of Henri Pichot's cane fields comes from the fields he worked in as a child. Gaines also draws on the mores of black culture and the storytelling tradition of rural Louisiana that he knows well. It is a tradition not unlike that in Mississippi.

His portrayal of the speech, thoughts and actions of his characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*, both black and white, often reflect the Louisiana *patois*, English sprinkled with French and

African-American expressions. French and this *patois* are still a second language for many Louisianans. Likewise, religion in Gaines's novel reflects white Anglo-Saxon Protestant theology along with Catholic and traditional black Protestant beliefs found in the state.

Louisiana includes a diverse population. The Creoles are descendants of French and/or Spanish born immigrants. Black Creoles are descended from French immigrants who intermarried with people of African heritage. The Cajuns are descendants of exiles from either Acadia (a Canadian province) or from an island in the West Indies.

Louisiana Creole and Cajun cuisine play an important role in *A Lesson Before Dying*. Known throughout the world, these foods developed as a result of French, African, Caribbean and Indian influences. They depend greatly on local produce and seafood for their distinctive flavors.

While a knowledge of the setting for *A Lesson Before Dying* will add to a reader's understanding of the story, it should not take precedence over the book's eloquence and the issues and concerns it raises. The themes of love and redemption, racial prejudice, justice, community values, family relationships and responsibility, individual happiness, and religious belief are as important and as critical today as they were in the 1940's when the story takes place.

Discussion Questions

With this book only one question really needs to be asked: *What are the lessons learned and who learns them?*

Here are some additional questions that will enrich the discussion.

1. Why does Jefferson grab the money? ch 1
2. What has motivated the defense attorney to characterize Jefferson as a “hog”? Why does Miss Emma suddenly decide to take action against the image of Jefferson as a “hog”? Ch.1
3. What does Miss Emma mean when she asks Grant to teach Jefferson to walk to the chair as a man? Why does she choose Grant? Why is Grant opposed to going to the jail? ch 2
4. How do Miss Emma and Grant’s Tante Lou force him to do something he clearly doesn’t want to do? What hidden agenda might they have in persuading Grant to visit Jefferson in his cell?
5. What clues indicate when and where the story takes place? How would the story change if the time were 2003 and he place Jackson, MS?
6. Why does the school superintendent check the children’s hands and teeth and ignore Grant’s request for materials? What does he mean when he tells Grant that he’s doing a good job as teacher? Is Grant a good teacher? ch 7
7. Grant says that educated black people and those who want to “make it” need to leave their small town and their plantation life. Grant desperately wants to leave, yet he feels called to stay. At the same time, he wonders if he is doing any good, since things seem to stay the same. What does Grant represent for his students and his community? What would happen if he left? Would leaving constitute “flight”?
8. What, according to Grant, is the burden of the educated black man?
9. The Creole teacher Matthew Antoine says that everyone needs to feel superior to someone else. How does racism fit this contention? Do you agree with Antoine? That is, do **you** have to feel superior to someone to feel good about yourself?
10. Why do the men, including Jefferson, have so much trouble believing in God, while the women rely so heavily on their faith? If Grant isn’t a believer, why does he teach Bible verses to the children? Why does he hope Jefferson will listen to Rev. Ambrose?
11. How does Grant explain the problems of manliness for African-American men? How does Grant cope with manliness? Does he change during the story? ch 21
12. Do you agree with Grant’s definition of a hero? What does Grant mean when he says, “I could never be a hero, I teach”? p. 191
13. Do you believe the myth Grant states on p. 192? What myths do black people have about white people?
14. What role does food play in the community? Why is it so important to Miss Emma that Jefferson eat her food each time she sends or takes it to the jail? Why does he refuse to eat at first, then accept the nuts the children send? p.183
15. Does Grant actually help Jefferson become a man? If so, how? What do the radio and the journal represent for Jefferson? ch 23
16. What are some of the subtle ways Grant asserts his freedom and his individual rights?

17. Does Jefferson believe in God by the end of the story? If so, what is his idea of God? How do we know that Jefferson “walks” to the chair? What does “walk” mean? What allows Jefferson to “walk”? What does Grant admire about Jefferson?

18. What are the lessons each main character learns before the execution of Jefferson? Think about the sheriff and Paul Bonin, Reverend Ambrose, Tante Lou, Miss Emma, Vivian, Grant, the school children, and Jefferson himself.

19. Grant asks himself some tough questions in the last chapter. How do you answer them? “Why wasn’t I there? Why wasn’t I standing beside him? Why wasn’t my arm around him? Why wasn’t I back there with the children? Why wasn’t I down on my knees?”

20. In what ways is this book not a story about race relations, but a story about all people?

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Request Form for a Speaker or a Discussion Leader

Date of Request _____

Name of Group: _____

Contact's name: _____

Contact's address: _____

Contact's phone: (h) or (w) _____
(c) _____

Meeting information:

Address of meeting place: _____

Date of meeting: _____ Time of Meeting _____

Number of people expected to attend _____

Are you requesting a speaker to make a presentation to your
group on *A Lesson Before Dying*? ___yes ___no
or

Are you requesting a discussion leader to facilitate the
discussion of a *Lesson Before Dying*? ___yes ___no

Please copy this form and mail it to:

ONE JACKSON ONE BOOK
PO Box 16042
Jackson, MS 39236
Or email: onejb@aol.com

ONE JACKSON ONE BOOK

Evaluation Form

1. How did you hear about **ONE JACKSON ONE BOOK**?
(check all applicable)
 newspaper radio TV at library
 a friend other
2. Have you participated in a discussion of a book before? _____
If not, why did you decide to participate this time? _____

3. How did you participate?
 Read the book
 Attended a book discussion group
 Attended a program on the book
4. Where did you attend a discussion of the book?:
 at the library at work at school
 informally with friends at a book/study club
 did not discuss the book
5. Where did you get your copy of *A Lesson Before Dying*?
 bookstore library
 borrowed from a friend
6. Which materials in the Toolkit were helpful in your understanding
and discussion of the book? questions
 Cajun background info author's bio
7. Was *A Lesson Before Dying* a good selection for people in
Jackson to read? yes no
8. What should we read next? _____
9. Based on your experience with **ONE JACKSON ONE BOOK** this year,
do you think you will participate next year?
Why? _____

WIN a FREE BOOK! Completed forms will be entered into a drawing for a free hardcover edition of the 2004 **ONE JACKSON ONE BOOK** selection.

Return evaluation to: **ONE JACKSON ONE BOOK**, PO Box 16042,
Jackson, MS 39236