



LITERARY

At 83, celebrated author Ernest J. Gaines reflects on his hopes and passions from his home in Eunice.

monitoring along False River Road in Oscar, Louisiana, with the serene False River on one side, and houses, cane fields and livestock on the other, it's easy to see why world-renowned author Ernest J. Gaines, now 83, devoted his life and work to this place. The home he shares with wife, distinguished lawyer Dianne Gaines, originally from Miami, overlooks the river in the front, beyond double wrought iron gates, bearing a "G" on each side. Designed by the late local architect Glenn Morgan, the couple built the house 11 years ago. The style of the

house is contemporary, but has a local sensibility and a welcoming interior awash in natural brown hues. The structure is attractive, yet unremarkable in most ways, other than the fact that it's located on the same land Gaines was born on and lived for the first 15 years of his life, the River Lake Plantation.

"All of my ancestors are buried here – except Mom – about three-quarters of a mile from here," says Gaines. He is seated in a brown leather club chair in his library, donning his signature brown beret, a burgundy turtleneck sweater, light brown corduroy slacks

Ernest J. Gaines, known most widely for his critically acclaimed novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, is one of Louisiana's, the South's and the country's most celebrated writers. Four of the author's works have been made into movies, including *A Lesson Before Dying*, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, *A Gathering of Old Men* and *The Sky is Gray*. His accolades include the Louisiana Humanist of the Year, a MacArthur Foundation Fellowship – also known as the Genius Award – the National Humanities Metal, plus he is a Chevalier (Knight) of the French Order of Arts and Letters and has dozens of other awards and honorary degrees.

LEGEND



Inside the circa-1920s church behind the Gaines' house, located on the plantation where he grew up, are several black and white photos taken by Ernest J. Gaines. One shows a simple wooden houses in the "quarters," which is where sharecroppers lived on the plantation. Another is a photo of Gaines sitting on a porch in the "quarters," with family and friends. "I can't say that I love this plantation, that I love the South, but I do love my people," says Gaines.

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A former Writer-in-Residence and a Writer-in-Residence Emeritus at the University of Louisiana Lafayette, Gaines' handwritten original manuscripts, galley proofs, correspondence, unpublished materials and other papers, are part of UL Lafayette's Ernest J. Gaines Center. From May 30 through June 24, scholars, along with 25 educators and graduate students, will immerse themselves in Gaines' work during the 2016 National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Institute titled, "Ernest J. Gaines and the Southern Experience," in Lafayette.

In January, Gaines attended the annual ceremony to honor the 2015 recipient of the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence, established by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation nine years ago to recognize rising African-American fiction writers. Winners receive a \$10,000 cash prize to allow them to focus on writing.

"We have judges from different parts of the country," Gaines says about the award in his name. "They have a conference call when all of the judges talk about it. Dianne and I listen in, but we have no commentary, unless there is a tie. There has never been a tie, and we are going into the 10th year."

This year's winner is New Orleans-native, T. Geronimo Johnson, for his second novel, *Welcome to Braggsville*. Johnson, who now lives in California, is a visiting professor at the prestigious Iowa Writers Workshop.

Each year, Gaines meets the winners and the couple holds a luncheon at their home. He says he appreciates that the award keeps his name and work out in world and in the minds of teachers who use his books, especially *A Lesson Before Dying*, in the classroom.

"I don't know any other way to reach [young people]," says Gaines.

"The last 10 years I haven't been traveling. I still get letters from students. I get letters from teachers. I get letters from lawyers. It's worth discussing a time when blacks were not on juries. All white men. No women. Now, these kids are reading it as history. They haven't experienced it. The parents haven't experienced it."

Normally Gaines says he doesn't talk about race with students, young writers and reporters, allowing instead for his work to speak for him. When pressed however, he says despite the changes for the better Gaines has seen in his lifetime, he's still aware of the strides yet to be made.

"If I was not who I am, I would not be treated the way I am," says Gaines. "But my brothers, sisters and friends

“There will always be that dislike, hatred, evil in man. There are always people who are changing, but the old thing, the feeling of superiority or better than others will not change. I hope the better part of man will be more prominent.”

still have to deal with it. There's still prejudice. If I [were] a worker or, not who I am, I would be treated like a third-class citizen. Men change, but man remains the same.

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the better part of man will be more prominent."

That hope is alive in Gaines' spare and poignant prose. In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the protagonist and narrator Grant Wiggins is quick to discern the hateful men; the changing men; and those for whom the better part of man is more prominent. Each of them is found throughout the bars, the "quarters" where Wiggins' family lives, at the jail and in the plantation house in Gaines' fictional Bayonne, Louisiana. Grappling with themes of prejudice, the darkness of man, hope, love and vivid, complicated and often dark characters set against a rural backdrop is reminiscent of the themes and individuals found in William Faulkner's imaginary Yoknapatawpha County, based on and inspired by Lafayette County, Mississippi and the town of Oxford. Not surprisingly, Gaines counts Faulkner among his many literary influences, which also include Leo Tolstoy, Ernest Hemingway and Ivan Turgenev.

"*Father's and Sons* was sort of my Bible when I was writing my first novel," says Gaines, pointing out similar themes. "Problems communicating with the older people. There was always a beautiful woman."

Gaines says he's working on the revisions for two novellas, but his other passion – reading – often distracts him.

"I feel like I haven't read nearly enough of what's out there," says Gaines, whose library has nine bookcases, each containing seven shelves, loaded with works of fiction and non-fiction. "That's just a few of the books. About two-thirds of the books."

Listening to National Public Radio and enjoying music are two of Gaines' other favorite pastimes. From classical and blues to country, citing Johann Sebastian Bach and John Coltrane as his favorites, Gaines says he has music on around the house all day. But his greatest passions are two exceptionally personal preservation projects.

Before buying the property for their house, the Gaines would drive from their then home in Lafayette to visit the old plantation cemetery, where the black sharecroppers that farmed the land for decades and generations were laid to rest in wooden coffins.

excellence & inspiration

Each year in January, the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence honors Gaines and recognizes a rising African-American fiction writer. Established by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation nine years ago winners receive a \$10,000 cash prize to allow them to focus on writing. The recipient receives the prize during a ceremony and gala held in Baton Rouge, in which Gaines reads an excerpt from the winning work of fiction. A panel of renowned literary figures judges the contest each year. The 2015 judges were Thomas Beller, Anthony Grooms, Elizabeth Nunez, Francine Prose and Patricia Towers.

The 2015 winner is New Orleans-native, T. Geronimo Johnson, for his second novel, *Welcome to Braggsville*. Johnson, who now lives in California, received his M.F.A. from the prestigious Iowa Writers' Workshop and his M.A. in language, literacy and culture from UC Berkeley. He is currently a visiting professor at the Iowa Writers' Workshop.

Johnson will participate in educational activities at Baton Rouge-area schools and after-school programs, as part of the Gaines Award's emphasis on literature and the arts in education. Creative writing workshops conducted by Johnson will focus on helping students explore their creativity and inspire them to read and consider becoming authors.



Behind the Gaines' house in Eunice – which is on the plantation where he grew up and where he now owns six acres – stands a simple, circa-1920s white wooden structure, the Mount Zion Baptist Church. The couple had it moved from its original location on the property when they built the main house, then they painstakingly restored it.

"This is where the old people long before me worshipped," says Gaines. "Even I attended school there, also Sunday school and church. They tried to make me a preacher, but I said no and turned my talents toward writing, but the church is important to me."

Gaines says he preserves the church, because of his ancestors and friends buried in the cemetery, who assembled in the modest little building for funerals, wakes, church services and the other celebrations and milestones of life and community.

"Except for my home, it's the most important building in the world," says Gaines.

"When we first came here, it was overtaken by weeds," says Gaines. "You couldn't go anywhere. It was impossible to get in."

Each year, there is a cemetery beautification event attended by approximately 50 people from as close as Texas to as far as California and Washington State. They rake leaves and paint the tombs. The couple is credited with saving the long-forgotten cemetery and the Mount Zion River Lake Cemetery Association they assembled has spent years identifying the graves and working to preserve the sacred space.

"Those people back there never had anything," says Gaines. "They never owned the little shack they lived in or their people or their people. We like to see that the six feet of area is kept and clean. We want them to at least have their grave."

"It's something I'm trying to give back to them. I want the world to know they were here at one time. I would not be a writer if it [weren't] for those people."

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When asked why, given the history of slavery, violence and oppression represented by a plantation and after traveling the world and living in other cities, he would yearn to own and live on one – especially the one where he grew up – Gaines says in many ways, he never left.

"I was constantly coming back," he says. "Nothing is more beautiful than [these] six acres. My memories are here and their spirit is here."

After living for 40 years in San Francisco, Gaines says he could never write about California. The weather, the pecan and oak trees, False River and the cane fields, the people he grew up with, the disabled aunt who raised him, each kept a place in his heart and inspired a longing to honor them with his writing and now his preservation work and – like so many Southerners – an unwavering desire to return.

"I always wanted to spend my final days in the South," says Gaines. "I didn't know if it would be Louisiana, but the South. I never knew it would be here in this place." ♦

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