



In the
Thurston
Frontier
Heath

Pearl

Bethel

Columbine

Parker

Lincoln County

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East Carter

A special report



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The Gregory Forum filled to capacity last Friday night when noted author Ernest Gaines read from his new book, *A Lesson Before Dying*.

TIMOTHY A. BELL / Clackamas Print

Crowd gathers for Gaines reading

SANDY FRAZIER
Staff Writer

"Black man standing" is the core idea of *A Lesson Before Dying*, written by Ernest J. Gaines, who came to Clackamas Friday night to speak in a standing-room-only auditorium, and to a standing ovation.

A Lesson Before Dying earned Gaines the 1994 National Book Critics Circle Award, one of many honors he has received during more than 40 years of story telling. The novel was featured by Oprah on her Book Club, and has now been made into a TV movie set to premiere in May.

That particular book was the subject of Gaines' reading and conversation Friday evening at the Gregory Forum. With his beautiful, deep, Southern voice, he read chapters one through four.

We learned about Jefferson, a young black man sentenced to death for the murder of a white man. He was innocent. During the trial he was called a dumb animal, incapable of the crime, "a thing that acts on command. A thing to hold

the handle of a plow, a thing to dig your ditches, to chop wood...What justice would there be to take his life? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this." This is rural Louisiana, 1948.

And then we met Miss Emma, Jefferson's godmother, who went to another young black man, the school-teacher Grant Wiggins, and pleaded with him to help Jefferson in prison. "I don't want them to kill no hog. I want a man to go to that chair, on his own two feet," she said.

And so the "lesson" begins, and the long, painful journey that will transform Jefferson "from hog to hero" and will teach Jefferson's teacher and people and the reader about death with dignity and the simple heroism of resisting.

Gaines has always written about rural Louisiana, where he was born and raised. He wanted to, because no one else was writing about the people and places as he had known them.

As he wrote in "Callaloo" magazine, "I wanted to smell that Louisiana earth, feel that Louisiana sun. I wanted to see on paper those black parents

going to work before the sun came up and coming home to look after their children after the sun went down. I wanted to see on paper the true reason why those black fathers left home...And I wanted to hear that Louisiana dialect; that combination of English, Creole, Cajun, Black. For me there's no more beautiful sound anywhere."

Thus, since the 1950s Gaines has written about "my plantation people," portraying their strength and dignity amid dehumanizing racism amid the breakdowns of family and relationships under social pressures amid the conflicts between tradition and change.

His most famous novel is *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, published in 1971. It was made into a movie starring Academy Award winner and nine-time Emmy winner Cicely Tyson. Miss Jane's story is personal, and also the history of her people from the Civil War to the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s.

Gaines is the author of four other novels: *Catherine Carmier*, *Of Love and Dust*, *In My Father's House*, and *A Gathering of Old Men*. He has also published a collection of short stories, *Bloodline*, and a book for children. *A Lesson Before Dying* is the fourth work by Gaines to be made into a movie.



TIMOTHY A. BELL / Clackamas Print

Award winning author Ernest Gaines traveled from his home state of Louisiana for last Friday's reading.

Gaines is also a Professor of Creative Writing and Writer in Residence at the University of Southwestern Louisiana at Lafayette. He teaches the fall semester, and travels extensively with his wife Dianne much of the rest of the year. He has recently been inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and was a 1993 recipient of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation fellowship, a \$335,000 cash grant.

Friday night was a beautiful, sunny evening. The audience members who arrived for

Gaines' presentation before the scheduled hour of 7 p.m., had the pleasure of finding the best parking spaces, and lounging on the perfect grass with friends.

Gaines was brought to our campus courtesy of the Clackamas Community College Foundation, the Cultural Arts Committee, and especially Clackamas Creative Writing Teacher Craig Leslie, the best-selling author of *Winterkill*. Leslie, a longtime friend of Gaines, introduced the author, a "black man standing" indeed.