

Ernest J. Gaines



Ernest J. Gaines, in full **Ernest James Gaines**, (born January 15, 1933, Oscar, Louisiana, U.S.—died November 5, 2019, Oscar), American writer whose fiction, as exemplified by *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), reflects the African American experience and the oral tradition of his rural Louisiana childhood.

When Gaines was 15, his family moved to California. He graduated from San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) in 1957 and attended graduate school at Stanford University. He taught or was writer-in-residence at several schools, including Denison and Stanford universities.

Gaines's novels are peopled with well-drawn, recognizable characters who live in rural Louisiana, often in a fictional plantation area named Bayonne that some critics have compared to William Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha county. In addition to *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, a fictional personal history spanning the period from the Civil War to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, his novels included *Catherine Carmier* (1964), *Of Love and Dust* (1967), *In My Father's House* (1978), and *A Gathering of Old Men* (1983). In 1994 he received the National Book Critics Circle Award for *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), the story of two African Americans—an intellectually disabled man wrongly accused of murder and a teacher who visits him in prison—living in Bayonne. The novella *The Tragedy of Brady Sims* (2017) follows a newspaper journalist as he researches “a human interest story” on a man who killed his son. Several of Gaines's books were adapted into television movies, most notably *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1974) and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1999), both of which featured Cicely Tyson.

In 2005 Gaines published *Mozart and Leadbelly*, a collection of stories and autobiographical essays about his childhood and his writing career. He was awarded the National Medal of Arts in 2013.