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THE **BIG
READ**

Arts
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A great nation
deserves great art.



INSTITUTE of
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SERVICES



Ernest J. Gaines

The National Endowment for the Arts has named *A Lesson Before Dying* as part of its 2008 Big Read National Reading Program while Mr. Gaines' novels are regularly chosen as part of the Library of Congress's Center for the Book *One Book Community Reading Programs*.

Ernest J. Gaines received from President Clinton on December 20, 2000, one of the highest honors the United States can confer: *The National Humanities Medal*. On the craft of writing, Mr. Gaines says, "Sacrifice time; put a lot of time into your work. If you are a writer, read good writers, whether they are white or black, Chinese or Japanese, or Russian or writers from Mars. Read the best to see how they do things because any good writer can help

you. So, study hard, and spend a lot of time at the desk. Read, read, read! Write, write, write!"

Ernest J. Gaines was born on January 15, 1933 on the River Lake Plantation in Oscar, a hamlet in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, which is the Bayonne of all his fictional work. His novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*, published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1993, has sold two millions copies. It is the story of a young black man wrongly condemned to Louisiana's electric chair by a white jury in 1948 and of the teacher who tries to help him meet his death—as a man and not as "a hog," the characterization given him by his defense attorney's summation to the jury.

Nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, *A Lesson Before Dying* 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*. HBO premiered the TV film in 1999, which subsequently received two Emmy Awards for *Outstanding Made-For-Television Movie* and *Outstanding Writing for a Mini-Series or Movie* (South African writer Ann Peacock). Romulus Linney wrote the play, also a Southern Writers' Project, based on the novel and having the same title. Its World Premiere took place at the Alabama Shakespeare Festival in January 2000 and Off-Broadway in September 2000.

Raised by his maternal aunt, Augusteen Jefferson, who served as the principal role model for his best-known character, Miss Jane Pittman, Ernest Gaines is the oldest of 12 children. At the age of fifteen, he rejoined his mother and step-father in California to continue his education since there was not a high school he could attend in Pointe Coupee Parish and because it was against the law in Louisiana in the 1940's for people of color to enter public libraries!

Ernest Gaines visited a public library for the first time at age 16. He says, "I discovered the Russians, Turgenev, Gogol, who spoke of the peasants. Then the French, Flaubert, Maupassant, Zola. But no one was telling me the story of my people. Thus, a teenager, I decided to write. At San Francisco State University I continued reading, James Joyce, Thomas Mann, Ernest Hemingway and William Faulkner. I studied creative writing at Stanford University with Wallace Stegner and worked and worked."

Wednesday, April 1, 2009
Freeman P. and Carrie E. Hodge Center

"Big Read" Opening Reception (5:00 p.m.)

Live Video Conference with Author Ernest Gaines (6:00 p.m.)

Wiley College and its "Big Read" partners launched the celebration of "A Lesson Before Dying", by Ernest J. Gaines (Photo by Jason Miccolo Johnson) with a community wide reception on Wednesday, April 1, 2009 in the Freeman P. and Carrie E. Hodge Center on the Wiley College Campus. The reception began at 5:00 p.m. followed by a live videoconference with author Gaines. "Arrangements for the appearance of Ernest J. Gaines were made through Tanya Bickley Enterprises, Inc., New Canaan, CT 06840, www.bickley.com."

A variety of events in several locations in Marshall-Harrison County will be held April 1-30, 2009. For further information on the "Big Read" coordinated by Wiley College, visit the Wiley Web site www.wileyc.edu or the "Big Read" site at www.neabigread.org

"The Big Read is an initiative of the National Endowment for the Arts designed to restore reading to the center of American culture. The NEA presents The Big Read in partnership with the Institute of Museum and Library Services and in cooperation with Arts Midwest."