

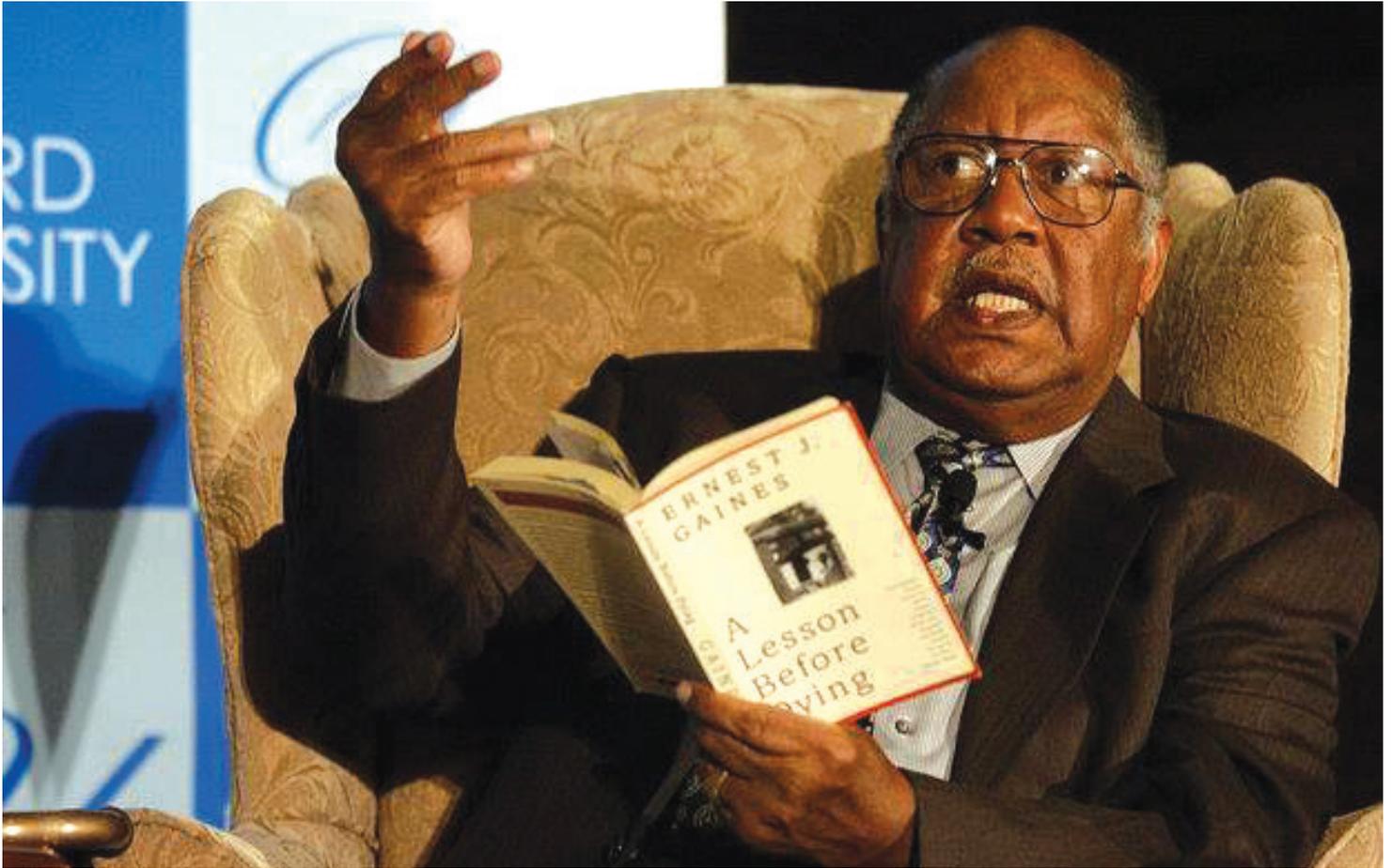
ERNEST GAINES,

JAN. 15, 1933-NOV. 5, 2019

THE POWERFUL VOICE OF A QUIET MAN

BY AGENT LANA HENRY

Ernest J. Gaines Facebook page



Those who knew Ernest Gaines describe him as soft-spoken, gentle, dignified, even quiet, yet they also recognize his gift for creating some of the most powerful voices in American literature. Snookum in "A Gathering of Old Men," Billy in "In My Father's House," and, of course, Miss Jane Pittman.

Growing up on a plantation in Point Coupee Parish, Gaines' understanding of home, his place in the world, and the history and identity of his people was fed by the talk of family and friends on the porch of the sharecropper cabin he grew up in. In fact, he began his literary life writing letters for these visitors, in which he improvised descriptions of the news they wished to share.

It was from this formative well of porch talk that Gaines would draw the characters in his fiction, giving the voices of his people a worldwide stage.

And the world responded. Gaines received a Wallace Stegner writing fellowship at Stanford, his novels became award-winning films, he became writer-in-residence at UL Lafayette, and received the National Humanities Medal from President Bill Clinton and the National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama. But perhaps the richest affirmation of the man and his talent are the accolades of former students and colleagues.

Dr. Billy Fontenot, former student and professor of English at LSUE, described his experience in

Gaines' fiction writing workshop: "You just knew he had an incredible command of the art and craft. He always got right to the point about a story's flaws, explaining what didn't work for him in plain language. He spoke to us like we were professionals, though we were anything but. I always appreciated that. He made students feel like their work had value, never dismissing anyone's story. A young creative writing graduate student couldn't ask for a better teacher."

Wiley Cash, former student and acclaimed author, credits Gaines with modeling how to "write what's true, not what's pretty" and become a North Carolina novelist by filtering story ideas through his own experiences. On the day Gaines died, Cash

wrote on Facebook, "A giant of heart and literary power has left this world. There will never be another like Ernest J. Gaines."

At a memorial hosted by the Ernest J. Gaines Center at UL Lafayette, founding director of the center and professor emerita in English Marcia Gaudet described Gaines as "a good, kind man; an incredibly loyal colleague; a wonderful friend." Former Louisiana Poet Laureate and professor emeritus in English Darrell Bourque delivered a poignant reading, punctuated by his grief, of Joy Harjo's "The Story Wheel." Through Harjo, Bourque reminded us that, as long as the voices live on in Gaines' stories, he will not ever really be lost to us at all.