

Lesson Before Dying

Ernest J. Gaines

A. A. Knopf 1993

Reviews

- Booklist: (15 February, 1993. Starred review): "Gaines, author of "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman", sets his new novel in back-country Louisiana just after World War II. A local teacher, Grant Wiggins, is conscripted by his aunt to offer lessons in manhood, and in dying, for her friend's godson, Jefferson. Jefferson was just a witness, but he was the only person left standing after an armed robbery in which a white man was killed. He must die; the only defense his white lawyer can muster is that Jefferson is a hog without enough sentience to know what murder is. Poor Jefferson refuses to eat or even talk. He grovels on the jail floor pretending to be a hog. And Wiggins himself has trouble being a man, in this Jim Crow South where "most of us would die violently." He isn't religious, and so to counsel Jefferson on the afterlife, as his aunt's pastor advises, strikes him as fraudulent. Slowly, as he, too, learns to stand proud, he counsels love--that Jefferson must die like a man because his godmother loves him and believes he may yet join Jesus. Jefferson begins to keep a diary, revealing a tortured, innocent soul, yet one that has encountered a certain dignity. This is a heartbreaking but ennobling story reminiscent of "As I Lay Dying" both in technique and in its insistence that the human spirit may triumph no matter how it is violated".
- School Library Journal: "No breathless courtroom triumphs or dramatic reprieves alleviate the sad progress toward execution in this latest novel by the author of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (Bantam, 1982). The condemned man is Jefferson, a poorly educated man/child whose only crimes are a dim intelligence, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and being black in rural Louisiana in the late 1940s. To everyone, even his own defense attorney, he's an animal, too dumb to understand what is happening to him. But his godmother, Miss Emma, decides that Jefferson will die a man. To accomplish just that, she brings Grant Wiggins, the teacher at the plantation's one-room school and narrator of the novel, into the story. Emotionally blackmailed by two strong-willed old ladies, Grant reluctantly begins visiting Jefferson, committing both men to the painful task of self-discovery. As in his earlier novels, Gaines evokes a sense of reality through rich detail and believable characters in this simple, moving story. YAs who seek thought-provoking reading will enjoy this glimpse of life in the rural South just before the civil rights movement."
- [Publishers Weekly](#) (April): "Gaines's first novel in a decade may be his crowning achievement. In this restrained but eloquent narrative, the author of The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman again addresses some of the major issues of race and identity in our time. The story of two African American men struggling to attain manhood in a prejudiced society, the tale is set in Bayonne, La. (the fictional community Gaines has

used previously) in the late 1940s. It concerns Jefferson, a mentally slow, barely literate young man, who, though an innocent bystander to a shootout between a white store owner and two black robbers, is convicted of murder, and the sophisticated, educated man who comes to his aid. When Jefferson's own attorney claims that executing him would be tantamount to killing a hog, his incensed godmother, Miss Emma, turns to teacher Grant Wiggins, pleading with him to gain access to the jailed youth and help him to face his death by electrocution with dignity. As complex a character as Faulkner's Quentin Compson, Grant feels mingled love, loyalty and hatred for the poor plantation community where he was born and raised. He longs to leave the South and is reluctant to assume the level of leadership and involvement that helping Jefferson would require. Eventually, however, the two men, vastly different in potential yet equally degraded by racism, achieve a relationship that transforms them both. Suspense rises as it becomes clear that the integrity of the entire local black community depends on Jefferson's courage. Though the conclusion is inevitable, Gaines invests the story with emotional power and universal resonance. BOMC and QPB alternates”.

- Library Journal (December 1992): “What do you tell an innocent youth who was at the wrong place at the wrong time and now faces death in the electric chair? What do you say to restore his self-esteem when his lawyer has publicly described him as a dumb animal? What do you tell a youth humiliated by a lifetime of racism so that he can face death with dignity? The task belongs to Grant Wiggins, the teacher of the Negro plantation school who narrates the story. Grant grew up on the Louisiana plantation but broke away to go to the university. He returns to help his people but struggles over “whether I should act like the teacher that I was, or like the nigger that I was supposed to be.” The powerful message Grant tells the youth transforms him from a “hog” to a hero, and the reader is not likely to forget it, either”.
- [Kirkus](#) (15 February 1993, Starred Review): “Two black men (one a teacher, the other a death row inmate) struggle to live, and die, with dignity, in Gaines's most powerful and moving work since *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971). The year is 1948. Harry Truman may have integrated the Armed Forces, but down in the small Cajun town of Bayonne, Louisiana, where the blacks still shuffle submissively for their white masters, little has changed since slavery. When a white liquor- store owner is killed during a robbery attempt, along with his two black assailants, the innocent black bystander Jefferson gets death, despite the defense plea that “I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.” Hog. The word lingers like a foul odor and weighs as heavily as the sentence on Jefferson and the woman who raised him, his “nannan” (godmother) Miss Emma. She needs an image of Jefferson going to his death like a man, and she turns to the young teacher at the plantation school for help. Meanwhile, Grant Wiggins (the narrator) has his own problems. He loves his people but hates himself for teaching on the white man's terms; visiting Jefferson in jail will just mean more kowtowing, so he goes along reluctantly, prodded by his strong-willed Tante Lou and his girlfriend Vivian. The first visits are a disaster: Jefferson refuses to speak and will not eat his nannan's cooking, which breaks the old lady's heart. But eventually Grant gets through to him (“a

hero does for others"); Jefferson eats Miss Emma's gumbo and astonishes himself by writing whole pages in a diary--a miracle, water from the rock. When he walks to the chair, he is the strongest man in the courthouse. By containing unbearably painful emotions within simple declarative sentences and everyday speech rhythms, Gaines has written a novel that is not only never maudlin but approaches the spare beauty of a classic".

Awards

- [American Library Association Notable Books - Fiction: 1994](#)
- [American Library Association Outstanding Books for the College Bound and Lifelong Learners 2009](#)
- [BCALA Literary Award: Fiction Category](#)
- [National Book Critics Circle Award: Fiction](#)

Response to challenges

- [Virginia Beach City Public Schools](#) removed several books, including such award-winning books as *A Lesson Before Dying* by Ernest Gaines, *The Bluest Eye* by Nobel laureate Toni Morrison, and *Lawn Boy* by Jonathan Evison, from school libraries pending the outcome of an official challenge. NCAC, along with the Authors Guild, Comic Book Legal Defense Fund, National Council of Teachers of English, PEN America, PEN Children's and Young Adult Books Committee, and the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators, have written to school district to urge them to return the books to library shelves. Virginia Beach's District Regulation 6-61.2(A)(3) explicitly states: "Material may not be withdrawn from use with other students unless the decision is made to do so after following the process in this regulation." Thus, it appears that the district has ignored its regulations by removing the books from the school libraries.

References

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Toni Morrison Book Among Those Removed from Virginia Beach School Libraries. (2022). Retrieved from National Coalition Against Censorship: <https://ncac.org/news/virginia-beach-toni-morrison-lawn-boy-banned>