Obituary: Ernest J. Gaines, Novelist of the Black South, Dies at 86

By Calvin Reid | Nov 06, 2019
Ernest J. Gaines, award-winning novelist and author of the acclaimed *The Autobiography of Jane Pittman*, and a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant recipient, died of a heart attack while sleeping at his home in Oscar, La. He was 86.

A member of a longtime family of Louisiana sharecroppers, Gaines was born in poverty on the River Lake Plantation near False River. He was schooled on the plantation by seasonal visiting teachers and eventually moved to California at the age of 15 (schooling for African American kids ended at the 8th grade). Gaines attended San Francisco State University, and served two years in the Army, before winning a writing fellowship to Stanford University.

In addition to works of nonfiction and multiple collections of short stories, Gaines published nine novels over his long career, including his first, *Catherine Carmier* (1964), *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), which was made into an Emmy award-winning TV film in 1974, and *A Lesson Before Dying* (1993), which was awarded the National Book Critics Circle award for fiction, and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. He was also awarded a National Medal of Arts in 2012.

Gaines was also active in support of the Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence, established 13 years ago by the Baton Rouge Area Foundation to honor literary work by emerging African-American authors.

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