FOR MOST OF HIS LIFE, THERE WAS NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT TO ERNEST GAINES THAN WRITING. NOW, AFTER A CAREER THAT HAS SPANNED ALMOST 30 YEARS, GAINES HAS EARNED A PLACE FOR HIMSELF IN AMERICAN LITERATURE. HIS SIXTH NOVEL, "A LESSON BEFORE DYING," WAS PUBLISHED THIS YEAR. EARLIER THIS SUMMER, HE WON THE PRESTIGIOUS MACARTHUR FOUNDATION AWARD. AND, AT AGE 60, HE HAS REACHED A POINT WHERE WRITING IS IMPORTANT, BUT NOT EVERYTHING.

BY KATHLEEN THAMES

Illustration By Aletha Reppel
"THE GREATEST OBSESSION IN MY LIFE RIGHT NOW IS that I can own and preserve the cemetery where my people were buried for the past 100 years," he said.

To understand that obsession, it’s important to know that the cemetery is all that is physically left of where he was born and grew up on a sugar cane plantation in Pointe Coupee Parish.

The rows of shacks once inhabited by slaves, known as “the quarters,” are no longer standing.

The cemetery remains, but Gaines said farmers are tilling the earth within 20 feet of where his ancestors and friends are buried.

“I don’t know what’s going to happen to it next,” he said.

“Most of the people who are buried there have no marks,” he continued, referring to tombstones, or markers. Without tombstones, there are no inscriptions to tell survivors the names of those who lie beneath the Louisiana soil, when they were born and when they died.

He estimates that in the past 100 years, there have been two dozen tombstones erected, although 10 times as many people are buried there.

There was a time when Gaines wanted his own epitaph to state: “He was a good man who wrote well.”

“I think I’ve changed that to ‘To lie with those who have no marks,’” he said, referring to the dozens of graves that have no tombstones.

Now Gaines is driven by a need to give back something to the ancestors, relatives and friends who helped shape the man he is today.

He plans to buy the site where the cemetery is located and where he will someday join them.

Although he has residences in Lafayette, Miami and San Francisco, he does not own any land.

And he makes it clear that when he buys property to preserve the graveyard, it is so that those who are already buried there will own it, too.

Gaines was born in 1933 on River Lake Plantation, just west of Baton Rouge, La. When he was 15 years old, he left the riverbanks of False River to travel to California to join his mother and stepfather, who had relocated there in search of work. In a speech he gave when he was honored as the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities 1989 Humanist of the Year, Gaines described the simple, wood frame house where he grew up. Cracks in its bare walls were stuffed with paper or pieces of rags.

He also offered insight into his young life by telling how difficult it was to leave his beloved Aunt Augusteen, a crippled woman.

In this excerpt from Ernest Gaines’ “A Lesson Before Dying,” the protagonist, Grant Wiggins, is3 speaking to Jefferson, a young black man who has been falsely accused of murder and in jail awaiting execution. During Jefferson’s trial, his defense attorney referred to Jefferson as a hog, and a man who was not responsible for his actions because he wasn’t intelligent. Wiggins, who had left home to earn a college degree, has returned to teach at a black plantation school. He has been asked by an aunt to convince Jefferson of his own self-worth as he faces electrocution.

JEFFERSON, I SAID. We had started walking. “Do you know what a hero is, Jefferson? A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don’t and can’t do. He is different from other men. He is above other men. No matter who those other men are, the hero, no matter who he is, is above them.” I lowered my voice again until we had passed the table. “I could never be a hero. I teach, but I don’t like teaching. I teach because it is the only thing that an educated black man can do in the South today. I don’t like it; I hate it. I don’t even like living here. I want to run away. I want to live for myself and for my woman and for nobody else.

“That is not a hero. A hero
who was never able to walk, but who reared Gaines and his younger brothers with a blend of love and discipline.

Gaines wrote the speech in the voice of an omniscient observer, describing their parting this way:

"He would speak to the others first – the ones who had brought the food, those for whom he had run errands as long back as he could remember – read their letters for them because they could not read, wrote their letters for them because they could not write (or were ashamed for not being able to articulate their feelings.)"

He went on to say there were no formal goodbyes. "And because they had always put such trust in him, they knew he would always remember that."

Then it was time to say goodbye to his aunt.

"There was no touching. There was no leaning over to hug her. There were no tears. That would come later when he was alone and when she was alone. But not now. Not in public. He was the oldest. There was no place for

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**IN GOOD COMPANY**

Ernest Gaines' novels "express rare historical resonance which enable them to transcend mere regionalism."

That observation was made by a MacArthur Foundation spokesman in the announcement that USL's writer-in-residence is one of 31 MacArthur Foundation Fellows named this year.


The total grant amount he received is $355,000.

Among Gaines' peers tapped as MacArthur Fellows this year are men and women in the fields of health care, environment and energy conservation, music, anthropology, mathematics, geology, and philosophy.

All received fellowships which ranged from $160,000 to $375,000 over five years. Along with the no-strings-attached stipends, they received health insurance.

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation was formed after the death of John D. MacArthur. He was sole owner of Bankers Life and Casualty Company, the nation's largest privately held insurance company, according to a foundation spokesman.

"It is one of the largest private philanthropic foundations in the United States, with assets of more than $3 billion and annual grants of more than $140 million," the spokesman said.

The following are also among 1993 MacArthur Fellows. Information about their work was provided by the MacArthur Foundation.

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**DEMETRIOS CHRISTODOULOU, professor, Princeton University**

This scholar's work "is characterized by rigorous mathematical analysis combined with geometric and physical intuition. His approach places him in a unique position to achieve important results in the field of general relativity." Grant amount: $260,000.

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**THOMAS M. SCANLON, professor, Harvard University**

Scanlon's work "focuses on moral and political philosophy. He has made significant contributions to general legal theory and American constitutional law." Grant amount: $320,000.

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**MARION WILLIAMS, gospel singer**

"Williams is among the last surviving links to gospel's golden age. She started singing in church at age 3 and went on to become one of the greatest and most versatile singers of her generation, exerting a profound influence not only in gospel, but also in the development of rock and roll and soul music." Grant amount: $374,000.

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**CAROL LEVINE, director, The Orphan Project: The HIV Epidemic and New York City's Children**

"Levine is an authority on the legal, ethical and public policy aspects of the AIDS epidemic in the United States...Her current work with The Orphan Project is to define the social and policy options available to deal with the increasing number of children orphaned by the epidemic." Grant amount: $345,000.
a display of weakness. He had to have the same courage that she had. Just as she had crawled over the floor some 50 years without complaining in public, then he must show that same strength. She knew how he felt inside, and that was enough. She knew that he would do anything and everything to make her proud, and that was enough.”

Soon after he arrived in California, Gaines discovered the library. As a black person growing up in New Roads, La., he had never been allowed inside the public library, which was restricted inside the public library, which was restricted by whites. So he began to read and a new world unfolded through the works of Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, Willa Cather and many others. Later he would discover writers such as Ernest Hemingway and Eudora Welty. Gaines’ own work would ultimately be included along with theirs in anthologies used in English classes in hundreds of universities.

But as he read voraciously as a teenager growing up in California, he searched for books that were about his people, the ones he left behind in Pointe Coupee Parish. None existed.

Years later, as a struggling writer, he was determined to speak for them and about them.

The result was books such as “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,” “A Gathering of Old Men” and “A Lesson Before Dying.”

Finally, his people had their voice.

Gaines is an unpretentious writer whose work has universal themes that transcend race, social status and geography. William Faulkner called them eternal verities. In almost all of his books, there is a turning point where characters must “stand” for justice or respect. Gaines often refers to “survival with dignity.”

“The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” is dedicated in part to his Aunt Augusteen, “who did not walk a day in her life, but who taught me the importance of standing.”

In his newest novel, “A Lesson Before Dying,” the protagonist is Grant Wiggins, who returns home from college to teach at a black plantation school.

He is pressured to help Jefferson, a young black who has been falsely accused of murder, become a man as he faces electrocution.

Grant describes this gut-wrenching challenge to his girlfriend:
“‘The public defender, trying to get him (Jefferson) off, called him a dumb animal,’ I told her. ‘He said it would be like tying a hog down into that chair and executing him – an animal that didn’t know what any of it was all about. The jury, twelve white men good and true, still sentenced him to death. Now his godmother wants me to visit him and make him know – prove to these white men – that he’s not a hog, that he’s a man. I’m supposed to make him a man. Who am I? God?’”

In the process of helping Jefferson, Wiggins himself learns what becoming a man truly means.

Reflecting on his own life, Gaines can’t pinpoint when he himself became a man.

“I didn’t have one moment,” he said. Instead, a series of moments or epiphanies – and how he responded to them – ultimately determined his own self-respect.

“As a child, I had to learn very early when it was necessary to step off the sidewalk,” he said, matter-of-factly, without a trace of bitterness in his voice. He was referring to growing up at a time in Louisiana when blacks were not allowed on public sidewalks with white pedestrians.

Dramatic confrontations or decisions that mean the difference between life and death are not the only ways for a man to “stand,” Gaines added.

When he was writing in California and was distraught when he heard of violence against blacks in the South, he had a choice about how he would channel his anger and frustration.

“What did I do that day to make my point? I went home and tried to write the best paragraph I had ever written. I tried to write, trying not to shortchange a paragraph.”

Although few things have ever mattered more to Gaines than his writing, he clearly enjoys teaching at USL. He says he would give up writing altogether if he could find one or two students “who would be much better than Ernie Gaines” because of his guidance and their own talent and discipline.

“A teacher feels that way at a certain age,” he observed.

He recalls meeting up with a former instructor, “a white fellow, a little short guy,” at an autograph party in California a few years ago. The instructor had taught Gaines in 1955 while Gaines was studying at San Francisco State University. That year, Gaines had his first short story published in that university’s literary magazine.

During the autograph party, Gaines made a point to introduce the instructor to other guests.

“I saw tears in his eyes. He was so proud,” Gaines recalled. “I would have felt the same way if I saw that student who did his work, who worked hard and did something I had not done. I wish I could meet a student that I could be so proud of, as I saw in this man’s face.”

Receiving a MacArthur Foundation award that brings with it $355,000 might change an ordinary person. Not Ernest Gaines. Ask him what the award means to him and he answers quite bluntly: “I will have some security.” Along with cash, the award provides health insurance.

He is not a man who flaunts his good fortune. There is a Volvo in his garage, not a Mercedes. The gold and diamond ring he wears is understated, not flashy.

A big man with an easy, gentle smile, he is a familiar figure around Griffin Hall, where he teaches a creative writing class in the fall.

He is often spotted pushing a grocery cart at a supermarket near campus, wearing a beret that has become his trademark of sorts. He is approachable and friendly, the opposite of the clichéd literary figure who becomes pompous and stodgy as his professional stature grows.

And he doesn’t brag or dwell upon what it’s like to be among the elite whose contributions to society have drawn the attention of the MacArthur Foundation. Other MacArthur Foundation award winners this year include faculty.
members at Harvard and Princeton.
Candidates for MacArthur Fellowships are “nominated only by
designated nominators, who serve
anonymously,” according to infor-
mation provided by the foundation.

The fellowships “are adminis-
tered without project proposals or
applications, and without evalua-
tions or the expectation of specific
products or reports of any kind. The fel-
lows are intended to support
individuals, not projects.”

This prestigious award has been
given to a man whose work stresses
the importance of a person earning respect.

And, like respect, the MacArthur Fellowship can’t be bought. It can only be earned.

In August, Ernest Gaines marked his 10th anniversary as a writer-in-residence at the University of Southwestern Louisiana. He doesn’t sugar-coat why he came to USL. “No one else had made me this offer,” he said candidly while sitting in the cozy sunroom of his home. The offer was for a full-time position that would allow him time to write and to travel back to his home in San Francisco, when the Louisiana heat becomes too sweltering for his taste.

But he is quick to point out that USL’s offer was attractive, not only because it was for a permanent position. Acadiana offers exceptional cuisine, oak and magnolia trees, bayous, and sugar cane fields. All are familiar to him and remind him of the plantation on which he paradoxically got such a rich start in life amidst poverty and discrimination.

Now, as his professional reputation continues to grow, he could probably find a place at many universities. He has no plans to move on.

“Nobody can take me away from USL,” he said. The $355,000 from the MacArthur Foundation provides financial security, so money is not a lure.

He points to his relationships with university administrators and faculty as one reason he stays.

“I think I do what I can to contribute to the success of USL,” he said.

There is no doubt that USL officials realize his value to the university and Acadiana.

Dr. Gary Marotta, vice president for academic affairs, recalls reading “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” while at Long Island University. He read the book jacket and was impressed to

writing and arithmetic. Nothing else
—nothing about dignity, nothing
about identity, nothing about loving
and caring. They never thought we
were capable of learning these
things. ‘Teach those niggers how to
print their names and how to figure
on their fingers.’ And I went along,
but hating myself all the time for
doing so.”
in. As long as none of us stand, they're safe. They're safe with me. They're safe with Reverend Ambrose. I don't want them to feel safe with you anymore.

"I want you to chip away at that myth by standing. I want you – yes, you – to call them liars. I want you to show them that you are as much a man – more a man than they can ever be. That jury? You call them men? That judge? Is he a man? The governor is no better. They play by the rules their forefathers created hundreds of years ago. Their forefathers said that we're only three-fifths human – and they believe it to this day. Sheriff Guidry does too. He calls me Professor, but he doesn't mean it. He calls Reverend Ambrose Reverend, but he doesn't respect him. When I showed him the notebook and pencil I brought you, he grinned. Do you know why? He believes it was just a waste of time and money. What can a hog do with a pencil and paper?"

We stopped. His head was down.

see that USL had named Gaines as a faculty member.

Marotta credits Gaines with providing, through his books, "deep insight into the American culture and the American soul."

USL President Dr. Ray Authement said there is no question that Gaines' national and international reputation helps draw students from across the nation to USL.

Even those who may not have read his books probably know that "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" and "A Gathering of Old Men" were made into popular television movies.

Gaines said he feels a sense of loyalty to the university that gave him the chance to do what he does best.

And, there is something else:

"I think that I owe something to Ernest J. Gaines, in the sense that I gave my word. And yes, I accepted this position. USL made me an offer. I accepted that offer and I have accepted that position. And I owe that to myself as a man that I stick with this, with my responsibility."

Writing, and becoming the best writer he could be, has dominated most of Gaines' adult life. He chose early in life not to marry, for instance, deciding instead that writing would be his only devotion.

"Early on, I knew that I would never be a very good husband or father. I was going to be a writer. I was not going to let anything get in the way," he said.

Of course, there were always women in his life, but none for whom he would make the kind of commitment that he made to creating short stories and novels.

Just this spring, however, he married Dianne Saulney, who makes him smile even when she is several states away, working in Florida. She is the assistant county attorney in Dade County.

Gaines met Saulney, a New Orleans native, at a Miami book fair. She had read and enjoyed his books and had given them to her children to read.

She understands and shares his desire to preserve the cemetery in Pointe Coupee Parish and wants to be buried there with her husband.

Now, Gaines said, he is most interested in seeing his wife healthy and happy.

But acquiring the cemetery of his people on the sugar cane plantation "is the most important thing other than my marriage."

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