

ERNEST GAINES ranks among the premier American writers of the second half of the 20th century.

Gaines grew up in the old slave quarters of River Lake Plantation in Oscar, Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, a setting and culture that permeates his fiction. He moved to Vallejo, California when he was 15, joining the black diaspora from the American South. He earned a degree in literature in 1957 from San Francisco State University and later won a creative writing fellowship to Stanford University.

Gaines became writer-in-residence at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 1983 and, for many years, split his time between Louisiana and San Francisco. He retired in 2004 and is now writer-in-residence emeritus.

A gifted storyteller, Gaines is an artist whose work explores the endurance of human dignity. Gaines illuminates the intricacies of black-white relationships in the mid-20th-century American South and the experience of black Southerners in coping with and rising above a sense of powerlessness.

Gaines is best-known for “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,” written in the voice of a black woman who lived from the period of slavery to see the civil rights movement in full bloom. Published in 1971, it was one of the first widely read works to shed light on a largely neglected point of view of the American experience. In 1974, the book was made into a television movie and won nine Emmy Awards.

His 1983 novel “A Gathering of Old Men” is a riveting story of a black community’s encounter with power. His 1993 novel “A Lesson Before Dying” centers on a young black man unjustly sentenced to death and a young teacher’s visits to his cell. This work won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. In 2005 he published “Mozart and Leadbelly,” a collection of short stories and essays. To date, he has published six novels, two collections of stories and a children’s book. Four of his works have been made into television movies.

Gaines still resides in Louisiana in a house he built along the False River on land within the boundaries of the same plantation where he grew up. In 1996, as a visiting professor at the University of Rennes, he taught the first creative writing class ever offered in the French university system.

Gaines’ honors include Chevalier de l’Ordre des Artes et des Lettres, the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the National Humanities Medal, the Dos Passos Prize and a “genius” grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. In 2004, he was nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature. The University of Louisiana at Lafayette formally opened the Ernest J. Gaines Center, an international center for scholarship on Gaines and his work, on October 31, 2010.

Each year the Baton Rouge Area Foundation presents the Ernest J. Gaines Award “to inspire and recognize African American writers of excellence.”

For outstanding accomplishment in the field of American literature, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill is pleased to confer on Ernest James Gaines the degree of Doctor of Letters *honoris causa*.