THE LAST REGIONALIST?
An Interview with Ernest J. Gaines

by Rose Anne Brister

Although Ernest Gaines laughingly referred to himself as an “old relic” in this interview, he still possesses confidence in his writing and a demeanor indicative of a long and prosperous literary career. Gaines enjoys a personal and professional poise accrued over the last four decades that I observed as I interviewed him on two occasions: in person on November 27, 2001, at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette and via the telephone on December 11, 2001. We visited familiar themes in his fiction and discussed his current projects, literary and otherwise. Also, he exhibited a willingness to explore the present state of southern literature and to contemplate its future state. Gaines’s textual concerns, such as a sense of place and community, are an endangered species in contemporary literature. Just as these “pet themes” recur in his texts, similar themes recur throughout interviews he has given and in criticism about those texts. If Gaines himself does not adopt contemporary literary concerns, likewise many interviewers have deferred discussion regarding his position in the contemporary literary environment and his recapitulation of, by his admission, ideals not valued in today’s culture. To this end, I presented several excerpts from previous interviews for his analysis in order to encourage him to evaluate his career retrospectively. I found that, while he does not consider criticism about his texts nor does he read much contemporary fiction, Gaines continually exorcises the “Louisiana thing” that drives his fiction. But, even in light of this possible obstacle and his warning that he “said some stupid things in the past,” I observed an introspective and retrospective Gaines, willing to review his distinguished career, to analyze his position in the current literary world, and to anticipate his future work.

BRISTER: I have researched the southern pastoral and a sense of place in your writing. I focused on your use of imagery, location, and the extent to which the pastoral is manifested in Catherine Carmier and Of Love and Dust. I want to ask you some questions regarding a sense of place, and also I want to talk about your craft and teaching.

GAINES: What do you mean by pastoral?

BRISTER: Well, valuing the rural space over the urban, the simple over the complex. In my research, I read many of your interviews and much criticism on the two novels. I want to ask you about a few statements you have made in the past and see if you still feel the same way now. A lot of these are older quotes and . . .
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GAINES: [laughs] Well, I said some stupid things in the past.

BRISTER: [laughs] You did? To begin, I am interested in your relationship to the land, given that you went into the fields at age eight. In 1976, when you were living in San Francisco, you said, “I come back to the land to absorb things.” Since home is now only one hour away, how often do you go back?

GAINES: I was there just yesterday because my wife and I recently bought a piece of that property. A few acres on the plantation where I grew up, where my mother grew up, where my grandparents grew up, where my folks probably had been slaves. We also have a camp down on the river in the area that I write about. It’s Point Coupee, which I call St. Raphael Parish. New Roads is Bayonne. The river is the St. Charles River because I named it after my brother, and Raphael is my stepfather who raised me. I sort of name things after them. Yes, I am very closely related to the land because, until I left from here, that’s about all I knew. That’s where my family had been for many, many, many generations. You could probably go back to slavery, and they were there. So the land is very important to me and to my work and to all the things I write about. It is one of the main characters in my work.

BRISTER: In 1990, you told Marcia Gaudet and Carl Wooton, “There is no future for blacks on this place at all . . .” You were referencing the area in and around River Lake plantation. What is the future now for River Lake?

GAINES: I’m the only one who has bought a piece of that property. I don’t think they’ll sell it to anyone else. I guess because of my name, I suppose, and teaching here [University of Louisiana at Lafayette] and because we’ve had a relationship with the owners of the property. We don’t call it a plantation anymore, just formerly River Lake plantation. They know who we are. So many people own parts of this place, sixteen or more. The people who sold it were not spending any amount of time there anymore. They just put it up for sale. We saw the sign, and, without knowing who they were, we called. It just so happened that we knew the people. We got together and bought the piece of land.

BRISTER: What are your plans for this land?

GAINES: We are planning to put a house there. I live a block from here (ULL); it’s a university house. It’s called the “Gaines House.” They might as well put a plaque up there now. [laughs] My wife feels that it’s better to have something out there on the land where my ancestors were, to have a “Gaines House” out there. So we intend to put a house there within the next year or so.

BRISTER: Is it true that you are involved with the local community to save the buildings at Cherie Quarters?
GAINES: I am not involved specifically with those buildings. I’ve been involved in saving the cemetery, which we have done. My wife, another friend, and I have established a nonprofit cemetery corporation which now owns the graveyard. We pay for the cleaning and the upkeep of the cemetery. We want people who have relatives buried there to come in and contribute. Once a year, All Saints Day, we organize a day to clean up the tombs, paint the tombs, cut the grass, get the weeds out of the tombs, plant flowers. Every month we send someone out there to cut the grass. We do that on our own. There are only about two old shacks remaining in the quarters, and I have no input there at all. Only the cemetery. There’s a church there; the same church where I attended school. We’re also interested in moving that particular building onto our property as well and restoring it.

BRISTER: Do you think that’s feasible? Are you in talks with the owners of that land?

GAINES: We’ve already discussed it, and it’s okay.

BRISTER: Perhaps due to my upbringing, it’s my impression that, even in the late 20th and 21st century, a native Louisianian usually doesn’t leave home, or, if he or she leaves home, will come back quite often. Does Louisiana cast a spell over its children?

GAINES: Well, not all of its children. I’m the oldest of my siblings, and there are twelve. Seven of us were born here; five in California. Besides myself, there’s only one other brother who would like to come back and stay here. He’s talking about coming back within the next few years or so. The others have forgotten about it altogether. They have good jobs and nice homes, so they have no plans to come back to Louisiana. My ties are here because of my writing. I was taken away when I was fifteen years old. I had to be taken away because I could not go to high school here. I couldn’t go to the library, and my folks wanted me to be educated. Because of segregation, there was no high school or library for blacks. I didn’t want to leave, leave my aunt who raised me. Something of me just stayed here. I was always coming back to Louisiana.

Then, finally, when USL made me a professor in 1981, I stayed here but not permanently, because I was only here during the semester when I was teaching. The rest of the time I was in San Francisco. But, since 1997, I have lived here and in Miami. I was always coming back here. I have done all of my writing in San Francisco. But the only place I could write about was Louisiana.

BRISTER: Do you feel that you can only physically do the writing when in San Francisco?

GAINES: I really don’t know. I’ve done some work here on what I hope turns out to be a novel, but I think it’s about the fourth or fifth thing I’ve tried to do since A Lesson Before Dying and I just hope that this does turn out to be a novel. Of course, I’m writing it here because I’m no longer living in San Francisco. I visit San Francisco. As a matter of fact, my wife and I are going to San Francisco for New Year’s. My mother’s out there. My brothers and sisters are there. So, we go back and forth.
BRISTER: You have anticipated my next question. You told Marcia Gaudet in 1985 that if you had gained access to Wright’s Native Son, you would not have been influenced by it because it deals with the urban space. In your childhood, you remained in and around Pointe Coupee Parish, in the rural space. Did your confinement to the rural encourage a strong sense of place in your writing?

GAINES: Oh, right. Definitely so. If I had lived in a city—New Orleans, for example—I could not have written about this part of the state. Yes, I was confined to the area; it was part of my everyday life. I suppose that’s why it is so involved in my work, because I didn’t know anything else as a child. A lot of the things that I recall in my work are from my childhood. Faulkner did all of this with his Yoknapatawpha County around Oxford, Mississippi. He concentrates all of his work in and around the town of Oxford. I thought if Faulkner can do this with Mississippi, then I can do that with Louisiana. So I concentrate all of my work in one area. I don’t know if that has been limiting or not. I’ve spent most of my life in San Francisco, and I have often thought about writing other novels about San Francisco, about my army experience. But nothing really came off. I think the body was in those places but the soul was not. Whenever I try to write these things [novels about San Francisco], they just don’t come out very well. So I discard the work and go back to my Louisiana. I suppose had I written about those areas I could have written four or five more novels, maybe short stories. I would save all my energy just to go back to the Louisiana thing.

BRISTER: You wrote three California novels early in your career and called them “bad.” What exactly makes them “bad”?

GAINES: They’re bad because there’s no soul in them. I think the three manuscripts are in the Dupre Library, drafts of these things. I call them “things” because they surely were not very good. [laughs] I have one about my bohemian experience in San Francisco, one about my army experience, one about something else.

BRISTER: How has living in San Francisco influenced your writing? Has it facilitated your writing?

GAINES: When I lived in San Francisco from the 1950s through the 1980s, I communicated with writers. I attended creative writing classes at San Francisco State and at Stanford. I never could have had that kind of exposure in Louisiana at that time. Maybe now I could do those things, but back in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, I never would have been able to get that exposure. Young writers should communicate with other writers, better writers, more mature writers. I really think San Francisco was a great place for any young artist in the 1950s and 1960s, especially the 1950s and 1960s with the Beat Generation. I was not caught up in it, but I was part of it. I stood outside of things. When I wanted to talk to people, I was at the university. There were always writers autographing their novels. So I thought it was quite healthy for a young writer at the time. For me, it was.
BRISTER: A good situation to observe, but not necessarily participate in?

GAINES: Well, I participated in some of it. For example, I was at Stanford with Ken Kesey. He was sort of the guru of the drug scene and that sort of thing. We were in class together, so we would get together. But I would never participate in the drug scene. I’d be around and watch these things. But I’d never get involved in it, because I could see that it could mess with your mind.

BRISTER: Do you know of any modern day equivalent of that creative atmosphere? Or has that atmosphere declined with the increase of technology?

GAINES: I really don’t know too much about it because I don’t follow it too closely. You have a lot of writers writing for conferences. Places all over the country that teach writing. Usually, I’ve been going to Sewanee [Sewanee Writers’ Conference] in the summer. I didn’t go last summer, but, previous to that, I’d gone about six consecutive summers. It’s where you get a group of people together for about two weeks. I don’t know that there is a community where you have the sort of thing that you had in San Francisco back in the 1950s or Greenwich Village in the 1920s and 1930s. I don’t know if we have those kinds of communities anymore.

BRISTER: You’ve said you won’t explore San Francisco in your work now because your soul isn’t in it. Do you foresee yourself ever writing about it?

GAINES: I don’t know. I know I have not succeeded in the past. There may come a time when all of the Louisiana stuff is all dried up. I haven’t written anything since A Lesson Before Dying in 1993. This is 2001. That’s eight years. Maybe if I had written a San Francisco story, I would have had a book out by now. I just haven’t had that drive.

BRISTER: You said in 1976 that you won’t write about California until you “get over” this “Louisiana thing.” After many years and an extraordinary body of work, have you gotten over that “thing”?

GAINES: I don’t know that it’s quite out yet. I am working on a project now that I hope will turn out to be a novel. It’s starting out really good, but I don’t know what’s going to happen with it. I’m sticking with my Louisiana stuff.

BRISTER: Do you think the reading public expects all of your fiction to be “Louisiana fiction,” to have that “Louisiana thing”?

GAINES: Well, I don’t know what they expect of me. I think they like to identify people with certain themes, certain subjects, and certain areas. I think it would be a surprise to quite a few people if I changed. But I never think about anything like that. How can I write a decent novel or story about the subject I’m interested in? I never think about what readers would think of me or how they would accept me.
BRISTER: Are all of the early manuscripts in the Dupre Library at ULL? Are those open to the public?

GAINES: No, they are not. Only the published material is open to the public. The other stuff I just don’t want anyone to read until I’m dead. [laughs] Then I won’t be able to answer for it. Then I won’t have to answer for that stuff, because it’s so bad.

BRISTER: I’d like to talk more about your craft and teaching. Is it true that you received Ds in composition class?

GAINES: Right, when I first came out of the army. I took “Expository Writing 110” at San Francisco State. I’ll never forget that number because of the teacher who was there in 1955—I just saw him again a year or so ago. My wife and I, whenever we go back to San Francisco, will call him and have dinner together. I always remind him about it. He says, “Well, Ernie, I bet you could teach me a little bit about writing today.”

BRISTER: Well, I bet he’d give you an “A” now.

GAINES: [laughs] Yes, I think so. Anyway, I was getting Ds from him and I approached him once and said, “Mr. Andersen, let me try to write a story.” He said, “This is not a creative writing class, but if you think you can prove yourself better than what you’re doing now, go ahead and write the story.” So I wrote the story, and he liked it very much and passed it around to the other creative writing teachers there. It turned out to be the first short story ever published in our literary magazine [Transfer]. We were just organizing a magazine at that time, 1956. And, my story, “The Turtles,” was the first short story published in that magazine. I keep reminding him that it was he who gave me that break.

BRISTER: I recently read “The Turtles.” And it’s a hard one to come by. It seems very “Gainesian,” if I may say so.

GAINES: [laughs] Yes, it was very early, when I was a young kid of twenty-three. I guess it has that rural and pastoral thing you were talking about.

BRISTER: Yes, it does. It also deals with fathers and sons, which is what you have called your “pet theme.” It’s also a good coming-of-age story as well. And, when you mentioned Faulkner earlier, it reminded me of the introductory literature class I’m currently teaching. I knew I wanted to have a section on southern literature. I taught “Barn Burning” and “The Sky Is Gray” together, and we compared the two, along with Ellison’s “Battle Royal” and Walker’s “The Flowers.” We looked at all of the stories as ones of initiation. The students enjoyed these stories because of the young protagonists, which are more readily identifiable to them.
GAINES: Did you see the National Endowment for the Humanities film version of “The Sky is Gray”?

BRISTER: Yes, several years ago. I think the interpretation of the end is interesting. What do you think about Octavia smiling at James at the end? I don’t think there’s any indication in the text to suggest that she would smile.

GAINES: Well, I always say, “They didn’t tell me how to write my stories. I won’t tell them how to make their movies.”

BRISTER: You recently attended a stage version of A Lesson Before Dying at the Southern Repertory Theater. How did you like it?

GAINES: Yes, they did a very good job. I think they’re going to try to bring it across the state. I know at one time they were thinking about doing that. Nichols State wanted it and a couple other places.

BRISTER: How do you feel your fiction translates to other genres: film, stage? Is there a certain flexibility in your fiction that lends itself to this translation?

GAINES: Well, I’ve been told that I write a lot of dialogue and have a lot of small settings. Maybe that’s why it’s adaptable. I know that the director there [the Southern Repertory Theater] told me that whenever she found that she got caught up—that the play itself was not explaining everything that she wanted—she would always go back to the book and see exactly what I was doing. And, if she had a question about the dialogue, she would go back and read the original dialogue. Ann Peacock, who wrote the script for the movie, also said the same thing, that she relied on my dialogue as closely as she could.

BRISTER: You’ve taught at the University of Southwest Louisiana—now the University of Louisiana at Lafayette—since 1981, permanently since 1983. You also taught at Denison University and other schools. Is it true what you said in 1986, that you accepted the Southwestern position because you were “broke as [you] could possibly be”?

GAINES: Yes, I was broke. I had just written In My Father’s House, and it hadn’t done anything. I said, “Well, I’ll teach; I need the money.”

BRISTER: Given that you do “double duty” in the academy as a writer and teacher, do you find the classroom arena rewarding?

GAINES: Well, I write one semester and teach one semester; I never write and teach in the same semester. As far as the classroom, yes, I think I can benefit from being in the classroom if I don’t have to teach the entire year. I took off an entire year to write A Lesson Before Dying; I had never done that before. I don’t think it hurt me but rather
GAINES: During the course, I was doing some work on Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina, and the experience was really helpful. Over the period of that year I think I began to grow. I began looking at things in a much broader way. These kinds of things came into the writing. The students would come in during the discussion. I was able to use material and ideas there. When I was doing the work for A Lesson, the students were professional people from whom I got help. I had several attorneys in my class. They introduced me to different books. I had one attorney who had someone on death row in Angola during the time I was writing the book. And then I had another student of mine who introduced me to an attorney who had witnessed the execution of a young man about forty years ago. It was he who described the electric chair and the generator and the noise and sounds. I was always asking them questions. If I had tried to write that book all in one year or two years, I probably would not have met those different people. Every one of them gave me something that I could use, through our conversations, our interviews. The book took me a period of seven and a half years. But I do get things from my students as well as from other people. As far as my students now, I don’t know that I receive any kind of help from them now. But this kind of thing soaks in. You might not need what they’re giving you at the moment, but eventually you can recall things. I know the students in my class are mostly white, and most are females. They can describe things and write about things that I cannot experience. Most of them are middle-class and educated women who come from a different kind of society than I have experienced. So they bring things like that into the classroom. I get something from all of them.

BRISTER: Which contemporary authors do you study? Which books are on your nightstand now?

GAINES: I don’t have any contemporary writers on my nightstand now. I usually read the old writers that I read many years ago. Now I’m reading parts of Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons and Salinger’s Catcher in the Rye. I’ll read a chapter out of someone else’s book.

BRISTER: You revisit the classics by which you were influenced. Do you find new and different ideas when you re-read these books, things applicable to your writing now?

GAINES: I don’t know. I like certain scenes and the way the writer addresses those scenes . . . what I learned from those scenes . . . dialogue. I’m still learning how to write. So I like going back to them. I read more manuscripts by contemporary writers than novels. I have former students always sending me manuscripts and people around me sending me manuscripts. I can’t read them, of course, because I have my students’ manuscripts to read. I let my wife read more of the contemporary novels. She tells me what they’re about, and, if they sound interesting, then I try to read some.

BRISTER: What do you mean by “I’m still learning how to write”?

GAINES: Well, you should see some of the first drafts of my writing. [laughs] It’s really awful. I go back and read a great passage from Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina. Tolstoy can work with such little details. He makes such things come to life. I think to myself,
“Why am I not doing that sort of thing?” It seems so natural to what he’s doing. These are things I know that I can do if I concentrated more. I remember a little scene not too long ago in Anna Karenina where she’s punishing one of her children for doing something bad, eating somebody’s cake. Then she sees him playing with the little girl whose cake he had eaten, and she [the little girl] is sharing with him. The way Tolstoy describes that scene is fascinating. Why don’t we do the same sort of thing, those little things? We always describe the great big things: explosions, violence. But that’s what I mean about still learning how to write. When you read the great masters, they show you much.

BRISTER: Are there any “up and coming” writers in your creative writing program?

GAINES: There are people with talent. But to write you must have more than talent. You must have discipline and time. You must have time to write. When I graduated from college in 1957, I gave myself ten years to make it. It took just about ten years for anyone to recognize my name, but students today want an agent after they write their first short story.

You ask if I find talent; yes, I find talent there. But not too many are willing to stick to the writing. They feel they must eat and have a television or home. They should marry a rich wife or husband. You just go out and do the work and give up all those luxuries.

BRISTER: In 1996, you gave an interview at the University of Bonn. When referencing sports heroes in A Gathering of Old Men, you said, “I don’t know where the heroes are.” Do you still feel this way? Are there any heroes in sports or otherwise?

GAINES: Well, I think as far as sports figures, there are no heroes as fifty years ago in the black community. We had Joe Louis or Jackie Robinson. They were definitely heroes to African Americans all over the country. There were no Martin Luther Kings at that time or political heroes out there. I think when I was saying that I don’t know where the heroes are I was thinking about the athletes. I don’t know if there are any heroes among athletes today . . . maybe Tiger Woods or Michael Jordan. I don’t know.

You know, when you start getting older and older, you don’t recognize the younger people. I’ve always felt that the heroes were those people who went to work every day, did menial work, and were able to keep their sanity with little pay and look after their families. Those are my heroes because those are the people I come from. I did not know the greater writers or baseball players or actors. I come from a farm. So I always saw those stronger men there. Those are my heroes.

BRISTER: What is the future of southern literature? Do you have an idea in which direction it’s headed?

GAINES: I don’t know that anyone’s going to continue writing what I’ve written about because the land is not there for the individual anymore. The land is there for the big machinery and the companies. So, you won’t find that kind of a place for the
individual. I have no idea where southern literature is going. I think eventually we’re all going to write alike. We will have our individual subjects to write about, but I can’t see a big distinction between a southerner in Atlanta and a southerner in New Orleans or a southerner in Jackson or a southerner in New Jersey. I think regionalism is going to be disappearing faster and is disappearing faster and faster. I think we’re going to write about general things that everyone else is writing about. I won’t be doing it because I have a novel in mind. And I should hope I have another one in mind before I kick off. So I won’t have to deal with that sort of thing. But, it seems to me that in my classes now—my advanced creative writing classes—that so few of my students are writing about “the South” as we knew, as I knew it. They’re not writing about the problems. They’re writing more about themselves or their relationships with their families or other relationships but not about the race thing or injustice or things like that.

BRISTER: You don’t feel they’re socially conscious?

GAINES: Right, yes. I see less and less of that happening. That’s what I mean by they’re all going to be alike. I don’t think so many of the southern writers feel that that [socially conscious fiction] is the only thing to write about. And a lot of them don’t want to be “southern writers,” just a writer who lives in Louisiana or Mississippi or Georgia but not classified as a “southern writer.”

BRISTER: So, there’s a sort of stigma attached to regionalism?

GAINES: Right, well, that’s what some people think. I know that William Styron said that and Walker Percy said the same thing: “I’m a writer, not a southern writer.” So, as far as where “southern” literature is going, I have no idea. There are those who will always write about the past, the Civil War. But I think you’ll find as many people writing about McDonald’s and Popeye’s chicken as anything else now. And you can write about Popeye’s and McDonald’s from anywhere in the country. It seems like this is what we’re up against.

BRISTER: Similar to that idea is a sense of community and family, which is just as prevalent in your fiction as a sense of place. It seems to me that community is an antiquated ideal in this hyper-technological age. Do you think so?

GAINES: Yeah, that’s what I’m talking about. I think it’s going to be a sad thing to happen, but it seems to me that’s where we’re headed. They’re [contemporary writers] not taking on these issues as Faulkner did or Eudora Welty or Carson McCullers or Flannery O’Connor. I don’t see them taking on those issues anymore. Maybe I’m one of these old relics that’s hanging on there, because I’m from the old school. [laughs] Those writers I just mentioned are the ones that I learned from, whose work I studied when I was in college. I suppose it still has influence over me. But I’m much older than the students that I’m teaching. I’m a generation or two older than they are. So it’s one of those things.
BRISTER: Well, I didn’t mean to imply that you are a “relic.” [laughs]

GAINES: [laughs] Oh, no, no. Sometimes I feel that I am. I question myself: “Why are you still writing about these things?” But it’s the only thing I can write about. I cannot write about anything else. I’ve tried to write about San Francisco and my army experience, but it didn’t come off as well.

BRISTER: Given your distinguished body of fiction/essays, do you see your influence on your students’ writing?

GAINES: I try to discourage it. I don’t want to see it. But, yes, they tell me that I’ve influenced them in structure, and I tell them to keep things simple for me. I was looking over a story last night, and the guy had several different references to other things, similes and metaphors, in the first opening sentence. And I said, “No, for the first opening sentence just make it simple, make the opening paragraph simple. Then later in the work you can go through all of the other things if you wish. I don’t want to see them at all. But, if you want to do it, do it later.” I’ve been told I have some influence. But I don’t want to see anyone write exactly the way I write. I know how much students do imitate for a while. I imitated Faulkner as well as Hemingway until Malcolm Cowley told me, “Ernie, one Faulkner at a time; one Faulkner per century is enough.” [laughs]

BRISTER: Well, it’s a new century and . . .

GAINES: [laughs] Well, someone else can write like Faulkner or Hemingway.

BRISTER: Even though you don’t keep up much with contemporary authors, do you see your influence on any contemporary authors besides your writing class?

GAINES: Oh, I don’t know. I know once Alice Walker had read everything that I had written, and she said she liked what I had done and short stories influenced her work, that simple way of writing “A Long Day in November” and “The Sky Is Gray.” But I never think about that when I read their work. I think we draw from everybody. When you draw from one person, that’s plagiarism; when you draw from a hundred, that’s genius. I draw from everybody. I’ve read the Russians, Shakespeare, Greek tragedy, American novels. I think I’ve learned something from all of them. After a while you find your way. So I’m sure at certain stages I picked up lines of Hemingway or tried to write long, convoluted sentences like Faulkner. I try not to.

I was at the Academy today in Grand Coteau, and a woman compared my fiction to Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha County. And I said, “Yes, I was influenced by Faulkner. He showed me that I could take my little postage stamp of land and write forever about it.” But, other than that, I’m sure some of his [Gautreaux’s] thinking and philosophy I agree with. I’m not sure that anything is influenced by much more than the idea [Gaines’s emphasis] of setting my work in one place, which I learned from Faulkner.
BRISTER: It seems you set up a relationship between your fiction, Faulkner’s fiction, and contemporary fiction—Gautreaux’s in this case. What is the parallel there?

GAINES: Well, I think most southerners have been influenced by Faulkner . . . southern writers my age and younger than I. I know definitely I have. I’ve been influenced by others as well, Hemingway and others. Well, Faulkner’s greatest influence on me is writing about place, and he shows us how to write about a place. I’ve said that I don’t know whether that’s good or bad because I write so much about place that I just don’t go out any further. Faulkner just went from the Civil War up to the contemporary so he had so many things to write about. I don’t know that I have those kinds of subjects to write about. But, yes, he has been a tremendous influence on me, especially writing about place, use of multiple points of view, and characters.

BRISTER: We can’t get around Faulkner can we? Is it inevitable that any southern writer . . .?

GAINES: [laughs] Well, that’s entirely up to those writers. Maybe they can get around Faulkner. I know that some of them feel that they don’t want to be influenced by Faulkner. But I don’t know that they can avoid him.

BRISTER: I am told that you have an interesting story about your first conversation with Oprah Winfrey.

GAINES: Well, she called one day. I usually don’t answer the phone, but I was sitting by the phone and answered. She said, “I would like to speak with Ernest Gaines.” I said, “Speaking,” And, she said, “This is Oprah Winfrey.” I thought to myself, “Oh, yeah?” She said again, “This is Oprah Winfrey.” And, I said, “Oh, how are you Oprah?” Just like that. [laughs] I didn’t believe her at first. She said, “We’ve chosen your book [A Lesson Before Dying] as the Book of the Month. This is to remain hush-hush.” I said, “Well, I have to tell my wife.” And, she said, “Yes, but not the papers. The publisher will have to know about it because, once I announce it, everyone will go out and buy the book.” The publishers had to have books in bookstores by the time she announced the choice. Well, she came down here because she wanted to come to Louisiana for the food and just to be here. She’s originally from Mississippi. We spent two days together, eleven hours on a Friday and a Saturday. She’s a wonderful person to be around, just as she is on television. We walked through the plantation where I’d grown up. We walked the row and went to one of the old cabins there. We went to the church-school where I attended my first six years of school. As a matter of fact, she got down on her knees as I showed her how we used to write our assignments either on our laps or got down on our knees with paper and wrote on the seat of the bench. She did the same thing. We went to the cemetery. There I pointed out graves to her where my folks have been buried for the last four generations. I broke a piece of sugar cane for her. [laughs] I had a pretty hard time breaking it across my knee. I had my knife and peeled it. I asked her if she knew how to chew sugar cane. And she said, “Of course, I know how to chew sugar cane. I’m from Mississippi.” So we had a wonderful time.
BRISTER: What is your feeling on her bookclub and television as an outlet for non-canonical or lesser known authors to reach a large audience?

GAINES: Well, I think it's the greatest thing to happen since paperback books. She has reached so many people. Before we had paperback books in the late 1940s and early 1950s, you had to go to the library to read books. But with paperbacks, if you had a quarter or fifty cents, you could buy the classics. I think what she has done is a tremendous thing for people who have never read a book. I know it benefited me with A Lesson Before Dying. It was on The New York Times Best Seller list. I can't see anything wrong with it, although some people lately have put it down.

BRISTER: I think a recent National Book Critics Circle award winner criticized the book club as literature for the masses, less intellectual.

GAINES: Yes, he thinks the people who read her [Oprah's] books might not understand what he's writing. But I think she's chosen some serious books out there. I should hope mine is sort of serious. [laughs] I think he's wrong for saying something like that.

BRISTER: And I think her audience is exactly the audience a writer would want to reach, a group that might not otherwise know about these kinds of books.

GAINES: Yes, sure. Well, that book of mine would not have sold nearly what it sold. And, because it was well known, many of the schools knew about it, the university level, high school level, and added it to their curricula. I think she did as much for it as anything else.

BRISTER: That's another benefit of the book club: to get the book to the students who should read these books. You said in 1986, "I don't think I'm taken seriously as a writer yet... [no] books have been written about me." Since then several books have been written about you, and you have received many honors and citations. Do you feel like you're taken seriously in literary circles?

GAINES: Well, since 1986, I've written two books, A Gathering of Old Men and A Lesson Before Dying. Maybe that's all my critics wanted out there. I think in each one of these books... well, I hope that I've grown. Maybe now I am taken seriously. But I really don't know. I might say things like that, but I really don't think that much about what critics say about me.

BRISTER: Much literary criticism has been written about your fiction. Do you keep up with the criticism?

GAINES: Well, not really. I've had several people to write their dissertations or master's theses. A book just came out by Mary Ellen Doyle, Voices from the Quarters.
There’re about as many books written about me now as I’ve written. Most of these have been published since 1986.

BRISTER: Well, Cliff’s Notes published a booklet on *A Lesson Before Dying!* I guess you’ve made it now.

GAINES: [laughs] I guess so.

BRISTER: Regarding Doyle’s new book, she recommends a compilation of your “college” stories and your nonfiction works. However, you said earlier that you will concentrate on novel writing for now. Will you consider the collection she suggests, or will you revisit the short story in the future?

GAINES: I really don’t know. If I came up with a good idea for a short story, I might do that if I have time. But I don’t know.

BRISTER: Earlier in our conversation, we discussed the direction of southern literature and the decline of the individual and regionalism. This reminded me of what you said in 1995, “I’m doing what the others are doing, just more quietly.” You referred to writers like James Baldwin and Richard Wright, who used their texts to effect political and social change. In light of this quotation and the shift in southern literature, do you see yourself as an activist or a historian now more than ever? Is there a greater need for that kind of writing now, given the literary changes?

GAINES: I really don’t aim at history or historical writing. I suppose it comes into my work. Other than *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, I don’t try to write “history.” I make references to history. My writing is different from their writing in that I write about where they came from and because I still live where they came from. Baldwin was born in New York, but Richard Wright was definitely from Mississippi. Baldwin’s folks were from the South. All I’m doing is writing about the place they came from, and they write about the places where they are. I never did go to a large northern ghetto. I went to a small town in California, a naval town. At the time, I went to a completely integrated community. So my views were quite different from theirs. I never did forget where I had come from, the old people here. My aunt who raised me. These are the ones I wanted to write about. I don’t know that Baldwin and Wright saw that in their writing. I don’t know that they thought about this sort of thing. I know that they’ve been hurt... hurt a lot. They’ve taken it with them to New York, to Chicago. So have my folks, and so have I. I saw racism and prejudice when I was here in Louisiana before I left. But, at the same time, I still had these old people there who I cared very much about, brothers and sisters here who I cared very much about. So, just because we’re all African American doesn’t mean that we all have to write the same way. I think unfortunately too many of our writers emulated Richard Wright’s *Native Son* and *Black Boy*. 
BRISTER: In that they are too political?

GAINES: Well, not only political. Someone said that every novel is a protest novel. But it’s that they felt that this was the only thing to write about. Even those who were not in “the ghetto” wrote about lousy housing and drugs and alcohol and whatever you find in large cities. They were very naturalistic about things, but not looking at the whole picture. As Ellison preached and preached it in Going to the Territory, our lives are not as narrow as some of these people make the world seem. Our experience is much broader than what they were saying. This is what I try to do. It’s not that I’m not writing about conditions. It’s that I’ve used a different approach to coming to my conclusions.

You mentioned the pastoral. That comes up in my writing where it does not come up in their writing. I can talk about the trees, the grass, the people working, the roads, the quarters and how it affects the lives of the people around them. Those are the things that really interested me, not just the hard concrete of a large, city ghetto. No, I didn’t experience this as they did. But I think we’re all writing about the human condition and especially the African-American condition in the United States. I think we’re all doing the same thing . . . just doing it differently.

BRISTER: In 1990 you said that, if you could rewrite Catherine Carmier or Miss Jane, you would include “people sitting around and eating gumbo and talking and shelling peas and making quilts and moss mattresses.” Is this an idea that you will explore, more of “the folk stuff” as you call it?

GAINES: Well, if it comes up. In the project I’m working on now, I put it in there. The book I’m working on now is told by several different people, from multiple points of view. So, all of these little things come in there, which distinguish the characters from one another. Maybe somebody will talk more about gumbo and have some more gumbo. Someone already told me that I have enough food in A Lesson Before Dying. [laughs] As a matter of fact, one of my former students wrote a paper on just the food in the story. I think she had it published. Well, there are things I could add to Catherine Carmier. But, once the child is there, you cannot reborn him again. He’s out there and on his way now. You just try to improve on the next book. Yes, there are things I would have included in Catherine and Miss Jane, if I had thought about it at the time. There are things I would have taken out of Miss Jane now. But I’m not going to explain what those things are. I would have taken some things out there and maybe even in Catherine Carmier. But the child is out there and running around.

BRISTER: That is a good metaphor for writing, given the amount of time and labor that goes into producing a piece of fiction. Do you feel that your books are your children?

GAINES: Yes, you fight with them for nine months—well, seven years with the last one. Then, after you’ve finished, you’ve lost something. You’re glad it’s over, but you feel very empty about it being over. It’s happened like that with every book. I would think a woman feels that way about carrying her little load for nine months.
BRISTER: You mentioned that your new project will contain multiple points of view. It seems a difficult feat to balance the characters' voices to produce a cohesive story. You accomplished this in "Just Like a Tree," for example. I'm also thinking of Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury. Do you find this device liberating or rather challenging?

GAINES: Once I find the voice of each character, then it's easy for me to do. For example, in A Lesson Before Dying, it's very easy to distinguish between Jefferson's voice and Grant's voice. I suppose if I had to tell the story from Miss Emma's point of view, I think I could get her voice down to be distinct from the others. Or from Paul's point of view, or Guidry's, or the sheriff's. I think I could do it. I think they are their own characters. They'll throw in words and phrases and nuances that others will not do. I think I can get six or eight voices out of it.

BRISTER: Well, it can be very rewarding for the reader—to get a "complete" picture. And I look forward to reading your new novel.

GAINES: Well, I don't know when that will be. I just have to take some time.

WORKS CITED