It's a slender offering: six novels of modest length and a collection of stories, written over a thirty-year period. But the fiction of Louisiana writer Ernest Gaines is as generous in spirit as it is unassuming in the amount of bookshelf space it occupies. Though each reader will have a favorite book, the body of work is remarkably consistent.

Gaines's subject matter could not be more volatile: the tangle of race relations within and between the African-American and white communities of southern Louisiana, from the age of slavery to the civil-rights era and beyond. But the shrewd clarity of his writing ensures that it is his portraits of people and place that sear themselves into readers' memories as much as the political questions he addresses. The heart of his artistry lies in the skill with which he focuses on his protagonists' inward dilemmas, the cadence of their thoughts, the meanings in what they refrain from saying.

Born in 1933, Gaines grew up in Pointe Coupee Parish near the town of New Roads, Louisiana (which appear as St. Raphael Parish and Bayonne, respectively, in his fiction). His best-known novel, The
Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), was made into a television movie starring Cicely Tyson. But readers who haven’t read beyond Miss Jane are missing some of his finest work. His first novel, Catherine Carmier (1964), about an affair between two lovers separated, not by race but by shades of complexion, has a melancholy power undimmed in the thirty years since it first appeared. Bloodline, his 1968 story collection, draws partly on his childhood experience, with results both humorous and dramatic. In My Father’s House (1978) offers a galvanizing portrait of a small-town minister and civil-rights activist whose past sexual indiscretions come back to haunt him.

Gaines’s latest novel, A Lesson Before Dying (1993), may be his best. Set in the 1940s, it concerns Jefferson, a young black man condemned for a crime he didn’t commit, and Grant Wiggins, a discontented schoolteacher who is talked into paying him jail-visits to help him find his dignity before he dies. The thrust of Jefferson’s defense in court is that he is too foolish to have taken part in the crime, and his attorney’s parting shot is to declare, “Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.”

Jefferson’s demoralization—his belief that he is indeed more “hog” than “man”—and Grant’s attempts to talk him beyond this (while navigating the tricky protocol of a segregationist South) are served up with intricate subtlety, as is Grant’s impatience with the demands his job and community make on him. The book won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction last year.

In person, Gaines is a handsome, full-fleshed man with a deep and sonorous voice and a serious courtesy—almost a courtliness—enlivened by quiet flashes of humor. He has long divided his time between Louisiana and San Francisco, and recently added Miami—where his wife works—to his round of residences.

UPCHURCH: You’ve been fairly sparing in the amount you’ve written. My feeling, after reading all the books together, is that there’s hardly a word out of place. How do you achieve that? Are the books written over
a long period of time? Or do they come quickly, with long intervals in between?

GAINES: Well, I do rewrite a lot, and they are written over a long period of time. For example, *A Lesson Before Dying* was written between 1985 and 1992, but only during the summer months—spring and summer—because I was teaching at the University of Southwestern Louisiana during the fall and winter.

But I'm never in too much of a hurry. I write every day, five hours a day, when I'm writing. I never try to deliver a number of pages or number of words, as Hemingway did, counting every word or page. I just write five hours a day and then I put it away. If it sounds good the next day, I'll let it stay there until I go through that entire draft. If it doesn't, I'll just go over it all over again the next day, until I get the feeling that it's what I want. I wish I could produce faster books and bigger books, but I've never been able to do that.

To my mind, each book has offered a tight treatment in brief chapters of big subject matter, very consistently over the years. When I read Catherine Carmier, I say, "Oh yes, this is the writer who did *A Lesson Before Dying.*" It has your mark on it.

I remember, with Catherine Carmier, I spent about five years writing that book—or even longer, really. When I was about sixteen years old I thought I'd written a novel, so I sent this thing to New York. And, of course, I was the only one who thought I'd written a book, because *they* surely didn't think so. I sent it there wrapped up in brown paper, strings, and all kinds of things. It looked more like a warehouse lunchbag than it looked like a novel manuscript. I didn't know anything about it. I was writing on both sides of the paper because that's how books are printed, you know. I cut my paper in half, because a book is about half the size of a standard piece of paper. So I had done everything wrong that you possibly could do. And, of course, they sent it back. We had an incinerator in our backyard, and I took it out there and I burned it. That was about 1949 or 1950.
Then I was at Stanford in 1959, writing short stories—that’s how I got there; I won a fellowship to Stanford writing short stories—and an editor or agent or whatever came down from New York and said during his talk that very few collections of short stories are published by unknown writers. And so, with that, I quit writing short stories. I said, “No more short stories—I’ll have to write something else.” And the only thing I could think of was the thing I had tried to write about nine years earlier. And it’s about—well, you know what Catherine Carmier is about. It’s about a young man who goes back to the old place and falls in love with a beautiful woman and, of course, loses her. And the same thing happens to Turgenev’s Fathers and Sons. The person whose work had the greatest impact on me in my earlier days was Turgenev. I used that book as my bible.

I must have had so much of Turgenev in me! I mean, Turgenev does that himself, writes those little chapters. His books were always very small. And although I love the big mid-nineteenth-century Russian classics, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, my favorite was the least known among the giants because of the structure of the smaller novel. And since then, since Catherine Carmier, I’ve stuck to that form.

Your prose is very clean, very understated, offering a low-key approach to volatile subject matter. As a Southern writer, were you never tempted to wade off in the direction of Faulknerian excess? Did you never say, Now I’m going to cut loose?

Well, you know, when I was at San Francisco State, I studied Faulkner and Hemingway, and all the others. And later when I went to Stanford, I wrote two short stories, one that was almost Hemingway and the other was Faulknerian. Malcolm Cowley was teaching at Stanford that year, and he told me, “One Faulkner’s enough in this world.” So from then on I thought, Let’s leave those long, convoluted sentences alone and stick to what you can do best.

But I was and still am influenced by Faulkner—not necessarily
the sentences—but his scenes, the characters involved. Mississippi borders Louisiana, of course, and you can see some of the same kind of physical things: trees and roads and fields and the people. And they eat some of the same food. Well, we have a distinct cuisine in the south of Louisiana, with a lot of Cajun and Creole influence, which you don’t have in Mississippi. But when I read Faulkner’s descriptions of his farmers and his small stores and the square and all these things, I can see those things in Louisiana as well. And, of course, it was Faulkner’s concentration on his Yoknapatawpha County which gave me the idea to concentrate on my parish of Bayonne, and to concentrate everything in one area and develop the stories out of that area. I guess Faulkner could have gotten it from Joyce.

I think the understatement stuff, the short sentences, was Hemingway-based. I learned a lot from him. But I studied American literature, you know, and I had a lot of influences. I studied Greek tragedy; I studied Shakespeare; I was reading all of that. And I think when I was writing *In My Father’s House*, I had Greek tragedy in mind—of a strong man falling. So it’s not only one writer or another, but a lot of writers, and then you find your own voice somewhere along the way.

*Along with the Bayonne setting, some of the books share minor characters (Sheriff Sam Guidry is one) and recurring names—Pichot, Hebert. And all the books seem to share certain types of characters: strong-willed aunts and desperate young men on a crusade. Do you see these as separate books or one big book?*

It’s, I think, one big book. Well, they’re like chapters, I suppose, in what you’d like to do. And that’s one of the reasons why you keep writing. If you can put everything in one book, there’s no point in writing another book. Because you fail! You fail in every book. And so you keep going, keep going, keep going. I see each one as a finished piece of work, yes, but what I would like to say in writing I have not said well enough. So I go to another book to try to get it better the next time—and you
won’t say it the next time, either. As Faulkner once said, “And once you’ve done it, you might as well cut your throat, because there’s nothing else to do.” And you never will do it. You never will do it.

The names that you mentioned are indigenous to the area where I come from: a lot of Creole-French and Cajun names out there. And another thing: When you brought up Sam Guidry’s name as sheriff—I think, since the Civil War, we’ve only had about four or five different sheriffs in that doggone place, so that’s why he can cover a long period of time. He can cover thirty or forty years as sheriff. You’ll find that, in any of these small towns like that: judges stay forever; sheriffs stay forever. This is their land—the physical land. The bayous are theirs; the trees are theirs. They just hang around. You could say all the natural things are theirs.

In A Lesson Before Dying, you’ve gone back in time to the 1940s. There’s a reason for that. I wanted the book to take place during the late 1970s or 1980s at first, and wrote to the warden at Angola—that’s the state prison in Louisiana—explaining who I was, that I had written The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, that I was teaching at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, all of that. And I told him I’d like to write a novel about a teacher visiting a young man in prison. I said, “Is it feasible that this could happen—that someone who’s not a minister, who’s not the attorney, and not a close member of the family could visit someone like that?” So he writes me back and says, “I would not have guards to protect that person.” I wrote him back, “Listen, I don’t want to visit the place. I said, Is it feasible? Can it be done? Are people allowed to visit people like that, say, once or twice a week?”

He didn’t answer my second letter. So I discussed the idea with a friend of mine, a colleague of mine there at USL, and he told me about a case back in the 1940s. Now, my book has nothing to do with this particular case, but I read that case very closely,
and since so much of my other work had taken place between the 1930s and 1960s—*Of Love and Dust* in the 1940s, and *Miss Jane* comes through the '40s—I thought, Hey, that could be good because, if I set it in the '40s, I can do something else. I knew that during the 1940s and up until about 1952, executions took place in the parish in which the crime was committed. That would be even better because then I could bring everything very close to home, very close to the people who were involved. I did research—and I met an attorney who had defended a young man who had been sentenced to the electric chair twice because the chair failed the first time.

Now, the electric chair, which was called Gruesome Gertie, was kept at Angola State Prison and they would bring it into town the night before or early that morning. They’d have to bring the generator, too, because, quite often, electricity in Louisiana was erratic and you had to warm that thing up. You could hear this generator warming up for blocks; you could hear this humming sound. So all of these things really hit me, and I said, “Wait, this is much better—to put it back in the 1940s.” In the 1970s or the '80s, the community, the people sentencing him, the children or the storekeepers or the bankers—nobody would know what was going on because he’d be executed miles and miles away. You wouldn’t hear anything. You’d read one paragraph in the paper—that’s it. But if you bring it into the '40s, you bring it in closer and you get something else.

So it was a blessing in disguise that the warden didn’t answer my second letter.

*What other research did you do, apart from sending fruitless inquiries to Angola State Prison? Did you do much newspaper reading?*

I did. I visited people. I met a sheriff who had seen an execution. I met a minister who had walked with a young man, a condemned man. I did a lot of research on one particular execution which took place not very far from where I’m teaching now in Lafayette, twenty miles away. And the man who
defended this young man the second time—who was sentenced to death a second time—told me about the generator thing. He also told me that the executions took place on Friday between twelve and three. I visited a couple of jails around that area and I saw the cells and the bunks and how they were fixed up.

I remember going to one jail that had been closed now for fifteen years, but as soon as you walked in you could still smell the stench of human waste. They tried to clean all this stuff out, but they never have done, because the jail still exists. If they'd knocked it over, I guess, and ploughed it under, maybe they would have got rid of it. But the odors are still emitted from the walls, the concrete walls, and the floor of the jail.

So that’s the kind of research that I did. And I read all sorts of short stories and novels about executions, and I’ve been haunted by executions most of my life. I knew whenever there was one in San Quentin, there across the bay from San Francisco. I could not rest the night before, or that day, or the day after. I had nightmares about them. I was telling some people about that last night. They said, “Okay, now that you’ve written about it, do you still have these nightmares?” I still have those nightmares! I haven’t had one recently, but that doesn’t mean that they’re gone.

In the nightmares, are you going up to the chair?

It’s always me, or it’s someone I know. It’s always there—and it’s awful.

What about Grant Wiggins, the narrator of A Lesson Before Dying, who’s not too happy as a teacher? You’ve been teaching a long time, but the experience he’s having seems remote from the kind of teaching experience I assume you’re having. What sort of background are you drawing on?

I went to a school such as the one I describe here. We were taught in a church and we had classes less than six months out of the year. We went to school between the crop seasons. If I’d set the story in the 1980s or 1990s, none of that could have been
involved because everyone goes to school nine months now, and they all go to school together, black and white.

You must understand another thing. This story takes place in 1948. During the 1930s and 1940s up until, I’d say, the 1960s, the teaching profession was one of the only professions blacks could go into in the South. They could not become bankers; they could not become large businessmen; they could not defend cases in courthouses in small towns. But they could be schoolteachers. Although we produced many wonderful schoolteachers, not everyone who became a schoolteacher really wanted to be one. But that was the only thing that you could do and remain there at home. So you’re going to find some who are quite good and some who hate it, but always in my books there’s something about the South that keeps holding them. They cannot get away from it.

So that’s where Grant is—torn between commitments to the community and wanting to escape the community. And he’s just running in place. He’s been running in place the last six years he’s been teaching. It’s the situation with Jefferson [the condemned man in the novel] that really makes him become that teacher. Before that, as he tells his aunt, he did what these white folks told him to: reading, writing, arithmetic. But he’s never taught his students who they are, or about pride and racial variety, anything like that. He says, I was supposed to do that and I never did do it. And now when it comes to Jefferson, he has to really become that teacher that he should have been all the time. So they save each other, in a way. And maybe both of them save Paul [the white deputy at the jail]. And maybe Paul will save somebody else. Maybe, because of Jefferson, Grant will save some more of the children. If there’s a bad boy who wants to play outside all the time and fight people all the time, maybe he’ll be saved.

*How different is Louisiana now from the time when you were growing up?*
Well, in 1948, when I left the South and came to California, my only entrance to the University of Southwestern Louisiana would have been through the back door with a mop, bucket, and broom. Today, I am a full professor there, a tenured professor at that university. However, sixty-five percent of the people in the state of Louisiana voted for David Duke for governor, and also for senator. Sixty-five percent of the whites, I should say. So as the French say: The more things change the more things remain the same. Yes, I can teach there and I have classes where most of my students are white. I teach advanced creative writing, and they’re the only people—especially the white women—who have free time to write. Most other people are busy doing other things. But at the same time, as I said, David Duke got sixty-five percent of the white vote.

So, you’ll see that certain things have changed and certain kinds of attitudes are still there. Some places are very nice, very liberal. Where I work, in Lafayette, is a nice little town to live in. But you can go to Baton Rouge, the state capital—it’s quite different. Also, there’s Shreveport or some of these other towns in the north of Louisiana that are quite different. New Orleans is a different thing, too—but next door to New Orleans is Metairie, and that’s where David Duke is from.

One thing I noticed in A Lesson Before Dying is that the racial conflict is more muted than in other fiction of yours set in the same period. It’s there—but it’s not as much on the surface as the conflict in Of Love and Dust, say, where it’s just vicious.

Well, that’s a different situation, altogether. Marcus [the protagonist in Of Love and Dust] is a rebel, and Marcus is rebelling against this all on his own. No one else is. Of course, Grant is also doing something that no one expected to happen, in visiting Jefferson.

But Grant is more tactful.

Yes, absolutely. He questions himself. He hates what he has to do. And he says that: Am I supposed to be the nigger they want...
me to be, or am I supposed to be the teacher that I am? What do I do? I must watch and see how the conversation will go, how everything flows, and then I’ll make up my mind line by line, or word by word, as to how to do this.

But even so, there are times when the deputy or the sheriff will do anything to embarrass him, to humiliate him, really—keeping him waiting for an hour, two hours; the searching of the food, or the patting him down. Those sorts of things.

Many of the older characters in A Lesson Before Dying and Catherine Carmier operate by a ferocious code of honor, demanding loyalty to the community and conformity to its religious practices. To some of your younger characters, it feels like an invasive demand. What resentments did you have as a young man against the community, and what rebellion did you go through, if any?

Well, I suppose I rebelled at the age of fifteen. I was baptized, in the river that I write about, when I was twelve. I grew up around these really devoted Baptist people—my aunt, who raised me, and all the old people on this plantation where I lived. Then I came to California, and I just could not continue to believe in it and go to church and things like that.

What brought you to California?

My folks came in during the war to work in the military plants, and I followed in 1948 because I finished a little local school in Louisiana, and there was no other school that I could go to. I could not go to the white school there, in that area where I lived. I must have been going to the ninth grade. I came to Vallejo, California, and I was in Vallejo for junior high school, high school, and junior college. Then I went into the army. When I came out of the army, I was enrolled in San Francisco State. That was in 1955. Graduated from State in 1957, and won a fellowship to Stanford in 1958, after working a year in an insurance company.

I worked as a mail clerk in an insurance company and, as a matter of fact, that’s when I started writing “A Long Day in
Different books—with the same house

November” [the opening story in Bloodline]. I used to sneak away from my work and lock myself in the bathroom. My boss always knew where I was, and he was always coming to kick on the door and say, “Gaines, come out of there.” And I said, “You’re disturbing a genius.” And he’d say, “Okay, genius, come out of that damn bathroom.”

The first drafts of “A Long Day in November” were written on face towels from that bathroom. Then, at night, I would rewrite them in my notebook at home. But I would be in there laughing sometimes because, even then, I thought it was a very funny story, and he could hear me laughing. He didn’t think it was a genius working in there if I was laughing at my own work.

What reaction have you gotten from people in the communities you portray? Do they see that as an invasion of sorts?

No. I don’t know if they’re proud of it or not. You know, the blacks are very proud that I’m successful—my family and the people who knew me as a child. So many of them are dead now, but some of the ones who are still around—they’re proud of it. And there are whites who like knowing that I made a success of it—people who know who some of the characters are.

For example, Candy, in A Gathering of Old Men, that person is still around and she knows I was somewhat basing Candy on her. Mathu, in A Gathering of Old Men, I based him on a guy I knew. As a matter of fact, I dedicated the book to him and his memory—he died a year or so before I finished the book. He was an old man. Whenever I’d come in from California, I would go back to that old plantation and all the people there then, and I would just talk to him for hours. He used to like vodka, so I’d pick him up a bottle of vodka. He knew my grandparents’ grandparents, so he knew those who had been slaves, and he could tell me all kinds of stories about those people and those early days. And I would just stand there and listen to him. We lived in that same place for six generations, in the same little area there: Pointe Coupee Parish.
I change the names of all these places, but I use my family names. For example, the parish, Pointe Coupee, where I come from, I call it St. Raphael Parish because my stepfather, who raised me, his name was Raphael. The town I call Bayonne, it’s based on the town of New Roads, Louisiana. But Bayonne was the maternal name of my grandfather’s people: his mother’s people. And the river there is called the False River, but I have a brother named Charles, so I name it the Charles River. So not only do I use the names and the characters indigenous to the area I come from, but I also use my folks’ names. In *In My Father’s House*, I used St. Adrienne, the town where Philip Martin is a minister. My mother’s name is Adrienne.

*So the family is in the books.*

Yes, the family names are in the books. And my latest book is dedicated to my wife—you know, to keep all that together!

You’ve lived in quite a few places, and presumably, when you were in the army, you did a lot of traveling—

Well, I was stationed on Guam. And I went to Tokyo. But, really, I don’t do much traveling. I’ve been to Paris a couple of times in the last two years.

*My question is: Have you ever been tempted to write outside the “Bayonne” area?*

That’s a good point, because I have lived in California almost forty-six years and everybody asks me, “Well, when are you going to write about California?” And I’ve tried! I tried to write bohemian stories. I tried to eat the bread and drink the wine, and I got sick on that. Got real sick on that wine. And I tried to write a story about my army experience—something like *Mister Roberts*, during peacetime, when I was in service. I was in service after Korea—between Korea and Vietnam.

I’ve tried to write those stories about San Francisco and the fog and all that sort of thing, but nothing’s really come of it. So I tell people that maybe I’ll write about some other place after I’ve written all that Louisiana stuff out of me. But Louisiana is an
interesting place: I don’t know that I ever will write it all out.

What about political involvement? You seem to be on the cusp of a generation that was ready to push civil rights forward, against considerable resistance of an older generation, both black and white. Often you portray this in your stories, for instance, with the conflict in the doctor’s waiting room in “The Sky is Gray,” from Bloodline, where the presence of a rebellious young college-educated black man is clearly unwelcome by his more conservative elders; also, with Grant and Reverend Ambrose’s conflict in A Lesson Before Dying, which one can see leading to a civil-rights activism. Do you think the writer’s role is to engage in some of that conflict, or simply to observe it? Do you stand aside, or do you have a political affiliation?

I always get asked this question, and I never know how to answer it. I remember, in the 1960s, whenever I heard about the atrocities that were going on in the South at the civil-rights demonstrations, I would promise myself that I would write the best paragraph that I could possibly write that day. And I felt that that was my political statement. Not just that paragraph because, in all of my stories, I was involved in some way or another—the latter part of Miss Jane Pittman is about the same thing. Jimmy [who appears in the final section of the novel] is a civil-rights worker: that’s how he’s murdered. The last story in Bloodline, “Just Like a Tree” [about an old woman who has to move because her young relative’s civil-rights activities have put her life in danger], that’s what that’s all about. So these themes always came up in the stories.

But the political thing was never the main thing in the stories. The characters were the main thing, how it affected these individual characters. None of my people worked out of Washington or out of the state capital, or were FBI people, or whatever. So my involvement as political involvement, I guess, is much more indirect.

When I was writing The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman in 1968, 1969, there were lots of demonstrations going on at San
Francisco State University for black subjects to be studied in the university, and I was quite often criticized for not being there. When I told the people what I was doing, they questioned it. They said, "Who wants to read some story about a 110-year-old black woman, when what is happening today is the most important thing?" And I said, "Well, I think if I write it well enough, it will last a little bit." I had to write well, though, because they were out there to get me.

And Miss Jane is still kicking around. She’s been around for a while, and she’s still there.

One thing that struck me while reading the early books is that they deal in a pretty rough, raw way with issues within the black community. “Three Men,” in Bloodline, has black-on-black violence. Catherine Carmier has what’s now referred to as the “color complex” as the engine behind its plot, and it’s dealt with very openly and disturbingly. Two questions: Did you ever have people saying, “No, you shouldn’t really bring these things out in the open: that makes black people look bad.” And did you ever have trouble getting some of your strong language and sexual content past the publisher back then?

I never had any problems with publishers about that. I was told very early on, by family, that I should tell people I came from New Orleans instead of coming from the country, that I should not disturb things, that there were certain things that you should not talk about. But I knew I wanted to be a writer, and if I couldn’t get my feet dirty, there was no point in trying to write. If you couldn’t go against advice like that, that keeps you from aiming at the truth—whether you get the truth or not—there was no point in trying to write.

The biggest issue underlying all the books is the issue of slavery and its aftermath. Drawing on my own perspective—I’m forty and white—I realize that when I was a little kid in the 1960s and was told slavery had ended a hundred years ago, I thought, Oh, that’s so long ago. It’s gone. It’s not a problem. But, of course, the older you get, the more you realize that a hundred years is nothing. I wondered if, growing up
in the place you did, the passing of time has changed your perception of the legacy of slavery. Does it feel closer to you now, perhaps, than it did when you were a kid?

Well, maybe it does because maybe I’ve concentrated so much on it now. At the time I lived there, it was not so openly discussed. I think it was much more hidden, you know. Maybe the old people didn’t want to think about it, and they didn’t want us to be aware of it. But since this is what I do write about—and I’m speaking for myself; I’m not speaking for anyone else but myself—since this is one of the themes in my writing, I concentrated on it a lot, so I do see the legacy of it very plainly by the way people get along today in the South: how black people lower their eyes when they’re speaking to someone white, how they change their voices, how they become that subservient character, or how a white person speaks to them.

Once, I was in a place in Baton Rouge—this was in the mid-1970s—and I was drinking sherry with these people who were white and wealthy. And while I was sitting there, in their house, I heard a tap-tap-tap on a side door, a knock on the side door. And obviously, if I heard it, the other people must have heard it, too. And it went on like that for maybe ten minutes. So, finally, the man said, “Let me go see what this boy wants.”

He went to the door—and it was obvious that the person he was speaking to was black, and obvious that the person he was speaking to was no boy. Had to have been older than he was, and this man was my age now, in his sixties. You still have this kind of thing going on, among many of the people there, many of them. Not only one or two, but many—this kind of relationship—and you see it in the faces of many of your blacks: you see it in their eyes, in their shifting of the eyes, something that Grant brings out in *A Lesson Before Dying*, when he’s supposed to look away after the white man has finished talking and he’s supposed to drop his eyes. You can still see that. It’s there; it’s there.

But, of course, I look for it! Being a writer, I’m aware of it.
I'm looking for something beyond what the average person will ever notice. I'm not looking for something to discredit any group or place or anything like that. But my antennae are out for sounds, for physical things that I can see, and they pick up all sorts of things. I suppose that's what makes the writer different from the other person, that his antennae can absorb these kinds of things.

_What about a certain kind of black conservatism? Many of the black communities you portray are strongly conformist, particularly where religion is concerned, and you seem ambivalent in your portrait of that conformity. What do you think are the virtues of that kind of community and what do you think are the limitations?_

I think, in the case of religion, it is the thing that has saved and preserved tradition, and given the strength to these older people, who, because of their strength, have allowed another generation, my generation and others, to go farther, to be educated, to do much more. But, I think, as we've gone farther, we've also looked back and seen that this same religion that gave so much strength to our own older people is supposedly the religion of the people who caused all the problems. The Ku Klux Klan does things in the name of God. The White Citizens Council does things in the name of God. I think this is where the conflict comes in between, say, Grant and Tante Lou [in _A Lesson Before Dying_], or Jackson and Charlotte [the young hero of _Catherine Carmier_ and his great-aunt], and people like that: "I love you. I love you very, very much—but I can't accept this other thing because this same sort of thing is the thing that is suffocating me to death."

I think it's the most powerful component in your work. Those conflicts, they just grip you to the page.

The old lady and the younger guy ... yeah. When Reverend Ambrose, in _A Lesson Before Dying_, is accompanying Jefferson to his execution, he's braver than the ones who are doing the executing because he's going to use _their_ God to give him
Different books—with the same house

strength. He’s using theirs. And he believes in God. These others are just hiding behind it; they’re just saying they believe in Him. And that’s why he’s going to be the stronger man in that room.

One phrase keeps coming up in all the stories, about “being a man.” In the last lines of “The Sky is Gray,” the mother says to her young son, when he wants to turn his collar up against the cold, that he’s not a bum, he’s a man. In In My Father's House, when Philip Martin has a quiet moment and is asked what he’s thinking, he says he’s “just thinking about being a man.” And, of course, in A Lesson Before Dying, the whole novel turns on whether Jefferson is going to see himself as a “hog” or a “man.”

For a younger generation, the connotation of this phrase, “Be a man, be a man,” can raise a few hackles, suggesting machismo, and might be misinterpreted. Yet, it’s a consistent connecting thread in your work. How would you handle someone who’s bristling at being told, “You’ve got to be a man”?

Well, manliness is the taking on of responsibility. It’s not machoism. Who’s a greater man, John Wayne or Gandhi? John Wayne could knock out anybody; Gandhi could not. But how does one live? How does one live with oneself and how does one live with others, regardless of status or color or whatever: What does one do? What does one do? Do you tuck your tail under and go out and drink, or do you stand up for anything? Stand up against pain, stand up against hunger, stand up for someone else, or stand up for an idea. Each and every one of us confronts something like this sometime in our lives, at a given moment. There are so many examples.

For example, the old men in A Gathering of Old Men decide to stand up one day. Well, even Mathu, the likely murderer, says, “I never thought of you as men before.” And Mapes, the sheriff, feels the same way: “There’s only one man here, and that’s Mathu. That’s the only one who could have killed Beau [the book’s villain] out there.” And that’s only one example.

As you pointed out, the kid who wanted to turn his collar
against the cold—the mother was just trying to say, “After the things that we have gone through today, to do that is almost an insult, to turn that collar up. You can take a little more cold, okay? You can be a little bit more cold now. We’re going over there now and we’re going to get this together. So take a little bit more cold.”

I don’t know how to explain it to someone who doesn’t want to hear the word “man.”

I’ve got one last question, and it’s to do with all the food in your books. In A Lesson Before Dying, someone has a “smothered steak,” and I wondered what the hell is a smothered steak?

What it is is lightly oiled, and the food is put in there, and the seasoning, the garlic or the onions or whatever, salt and pepper, and it’s sort of steamed. It’s not really fried, but halfway between fried and a boil or a bake. It’s just sort of… cooked! And you can have a good gravy with it, too. It’s in one of the frying pans, in a “skillet” as we call it at home, in Louisiana, and it’s topped over, with a lid over it.

One lady wrote me a letter—I got several letters after A Lesson Before Dying came out—and she said: “There’s so much food in that book that I found myself going to my refrigerator. I was always crying—and when I wasn’t crying, I was in the refrigerator.”

Several other people pointed out that there’s food all over the place. Well, in the South they believe in feeding you, and giving you coffee, of course. Whenever you go in anybody’s house, there’s coffee. There’s always coffee, coffee, coffee, whoever’s house you’re in.

My mother-in-law—she’s ninety-one years old—this lady cooks all the time. We wanted to take her out for Mother’s Day in New Orleans this past Mother’s Day, but she didn’t want to go anywhere. She wanted to cook—for us.

That’s why, when Grant says to his aunt, “I’m going to Bayonne,” that’s the worst thing he could have told her, because
she believes, "I cooked that food; you eat that food." And when he says, "I don’t want to. I’m going to Bayonne, get away from these people for a while," that’s a betrayal. They don’t like that.

My grandmother was like that. She’d always dish up the food herself. She would never let you dish your own food up. She would put a pile of it on there, and you had to eat it. And then you got the cake later. If you didn’t eat it, you didn’t get the cake, so you’d force yourself to eat the food to get a little piece of cake. And she was a great cook.

She had been the cook in this big house where I grew up on this plantation, just like Miss Emma, Miss Jane, and so many of my older people—Aunt Charlotte. And my paternal grandfather was the yardman. He did all the sharpening of the tools and all that kind of stuff there, fixed the steps and boards that were loose on porches, whether it was at the big house or whether it was at the plantation houses down in the quarter. He would be the one who did that.

When I’m writing, I always have that same house in mind. It’s different books—with the same house.

MICHAEL UPCHURCH is a Seattle writer whose new novel, Passive Intruder, will appear this fall.