Community Read 2012
A Gathering of Old Men
by Ernest J. Gaines
A Reader’s Guide

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A Biography of Ernest J. Gaines

(born Jan. 15, 1933, Oscar, La., U.S.) American writer whose fiction, as exemplified by The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971), his most acclaimed work, reflects African American experience and the oral tradition of his rural Louisiana childhood.

When Gaines was 15, his family moved to California. He graduated from San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University) in 1957 and attended graduate school at Stanford University. He taught or was writer-in-residence at several schools, including Denison and Stanford universities.

Gaines's novels are peopled with well-drawn, recognizable characters who live in rural Louisiana, often in a fictional plantation area named Bayonne that some critics have compared to William Faulkner's mythical Yoknapatawpha County. In addition to The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, a fictional personal history spanning the period from the Civil War to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, his novels include Catherine Carmier (1964), Of Love and Dust (1967), In My Father's House (1978), and A Gathering of Old Men (1983). In 1994 he received the National Book Critics Circle Award for A Lesson Before Dying (1993), the story of two African Americans—an intellectually disabled man wrongly accused of murder and a teacher who visits him in prison—living in Bayonne. In 2005 Gaines published Mozart and Leadbelly, a collection of stories and autobiographical essays about his childhood and his writing career.

Introduction to the Novel

*A Gathering of Old Men* (1983) by Ernest J. Gaines is a novel about race relations in the American South. The action takes place over the course of one day in rural Louisiana. A white man has been shot dead and lies in the yard of a black man's house. Eighteen old black men gather at the house and each claims that he is responsible for the killing. The brutal white sheriff conducts his investigation as the old men await the revenge of the dead man's relatives, who have a fearsome, long-standing reputation for exacting vigilante justice against black people. By the end of the day, there have been many surprises, and many of the characters have changed in ways that they could not have imagined. The conclusion of the novel hints that although the wounds of the past run deep and still influence the present, times are changing, and in the future, black people can hold out hope for a new era in which everyone is treated equally under the law.

*A Gathering of Old Men* was Gaines's fifth novel. Gaines is an African American who was born and raised on a plantation in Louisiana, a fictional version of which is the setting for all of his work. His novels and short stories have been widely acclaimed for the accuracy with which he captures the language of rural African Americans in Louisiana, and the way he envisions the possibility of positive change for his characters, even those who are caught in the most difficult of circumstances.
Plot

The first narrator in *A Gathering of Old Men* is a black boy, Snookum. He says that Candy has instructed him to run and tell some of the local people to gather at Mathu's house. Snookum sees Beau lying in the yard, and Mathu tells him to go away. Snookum runs off on his errand.

At Marshall House, Jack Marshall is asleep and drunk on the porch, and his wife Bea is in the pasture. When Snookum arrives with his message, Janey, the housekeeper, calls Lou Dimes and Miss Merle. When Miss Merle arrives, Janey tells her there has been a killing. Miss Merle drives to Mathu's house where a group of men has gathered, some of them with shotguns. Candy tells her that she killed Beau, but Miss Merle does not believe her. Candy says that Mathu claims to have shot Beau and that two of the other old men also claim to have shot him.

Candy asks her to get more people there with twelve-gauge shotguns and empty number five shells, so they can all claim they committed the killing.

Chimley is fishing with his friend Mat when they get the message to go to Mathu's house. They are scared because they know the whites will seek revenge for the killing of Beau. But they feel they ought to go to Mathu's since he was the only one they knew who had ever stood up to the whites. They agree to get a ride with Clatoo.

Mat waits for Clatoo to arrive and argues with his wife Ella. He tells her not to try to stop him from going to Marshall. Clatoo arrives with Billy Washington, Jacob Aguillard, Chimley, and Cherry Bello. As they head for Mathu's house with guns, they are scared but determined. They pick up Yank and Dirty Red. As they near Mathu's house, Clatoo lets them off and goes back for more men. They walk together and reach a graveyard, where each man visits his family plot. Clatoo returns with more men.

There are now eighteen old men at Mathu's house. Mathu says that when the sheriff arrives he will turn himself in, but all the other men claim that they are the killers. Reverend Jameson pleads with Mathu to turn himself in and tells the others to go home, but no one listens to him.

Lou Dimes arrives from Baton Rouge. Candy again claims that she killed Beau, but Lou knows she is lying. He tells her that Fix, Beau's father, will come looking for blood. Mapes arrives and he does not believe Candy either. He slaps Billy Washington and Gable, but both men still insist that they killed Beau. Then Mapes hits Reverend Jameson. Mapes believes that Mathu is the killer, but he cannot persuade anyone to change his story. Billy Washington says he did it because thirty years earlier, Fix's men had beaten his son. But Mapes knows that Billy cannot shoot a gun accurately.

Mapes questions Mathu, who admits his guilt but refuses to tell the other men to go
home. Ding Lejeune says he killed Beau because of what the whites did to his sister's young daughter. Johnny Paul claims he did it to preserve the memory of his family who worked the fields with plows and mules before the tractors came. Tucker explains how all the best land has been given to the Cajuns, and how Felix Boutan beat his brother Silas to death. Yank recalls how he used to break all the horses, but has had nothing to do since the tractors came. Gable tells how forty years ago, his sixteen-year-old son was sent to the electric chair for raping a white girl on questionable evidence. Coot, a veteran of World War I, tells of injustices against black servicemen.

Gil Boutan gets the news that his brother has been killed. It is the day before a big football game between Louisiana State and Mississippi. Sully drives him to where the old men are gathered, but Mapes tells Gil to go home. Miss Merle brings food and they all eat. She is bewildered by the strange situation in the house. Sully drives Gil to his home where family and friends are gathered. Gil tells his father Fix that Mapes does not want him to go to Marshall until he is sent for. Luke Will and some of the others want to go there immediately and lynch Mathu. But Gil pleads with his father not to, because his own chances of making All-American at LSU will be shattered if he is involved in anything illegal. Gil's brother Claude says he will do whatever his father says, but another brother, Jean, agrees with Gil. Fix reacts bitterly and banishes Gil and Jean from his house. He tells the others there will be no lynch mob, although Luke Will does not accept his decision.

The narrative moves to Tee Jack's store, where there are several customers, including Jack Marshall and a quiet man who teaches at the University of Southwest Louisiana. Jack is uninterested in making conversation. Luke Will and his friends enter, and Luke hints at what they plan to do. When the teacher tries to persuade them not to, they force him to leave.

Back at the house, Mapes announces that Fix will not be coming, but at first the men do not believe him. Then Mathu says he will turn himself in, but Clatoo asks Mapes for a few minutes in which they can talk. Candy protests at being excluded, and Mathu tells her to go home. Lou hauls her off and throws her in the back of her own car. Mapes gives them fifteen minutes to talk. Clatoo says there is no one to fight and they should go home. The others protest and say they will go to jail with Mathu. Mathu says it is the proudest day of his life because he has finally seen the men stand up for themselves. He tells them to go home too, but then Charlie steps forward, saying Mathu does not have to go anywhere.

Lou and Candy return and hear that Charlie has confessed. He says that Beau attacked him with a stalk of sugar cane, and Charlie hit back. He ran to Mathu's house, and Mathu told him not to run from Beau, and gave him his own gun. Beau came into the yard, loading his gun, and Charlie shot him. Then Charlie ran away, asking Mathu to take the blame. But just before sunset he realized he must return.
Mapes and Charlie step out onto the porch, only to hear Luke Will demanding that Charlie be handed over. Mapes is wounded by a shot by Luke Will, and all the men except Jean Pierre and Billy Washington stream out of the house. They break up into three groups. There are several exchanges of gunfire, and one of the lynch mob is injured. Snookum tries to get out of harm's way. Outside, under the house, he sees that Mapes is unable to get up. Mapes tells Lou that he, Lou, is in charge.

Leroy Hall, the wounded man, snivels and pleads to give himself up. Luke Will kicks him and tells him to shut up. Luke asks Mapes to stop the blacks from shooting and he will turn himself in, but Charlie is in charge and refuses the offer. He heads for the tractor, which shelters Luke Will. There is more shooting, and Charlie and Luke Will are both killed.

For the trial that takes place later, the courthouse is packed, and half of those in attendance are from the news media. All the defendants, black and white, are put on probation for five years, and banned from possessing guns or being with anyone who has them.
Characters

**Jacob Aguillard** : Jacob is one of the old black men. His sister Tessie was killed by white men in 1947. He carries his gun like a soldier, and he takes part in the final shoot-out.

**Robert Louis Stevenson Banks** : See Chimley

**Cherry Bello** : Cherry Bello is a seventy-four year old black man who owns a liquor and grocery store. He is one of the men who gathers at Mathu's house.

**Grant Bello** : See Cherry Bello

**Charlie Biggs** : Charlie Biggs is a big, fifty-year-old black man. All his life he has been timid and submissive, but he finally learns to stand up for himself when he kills his employer, the abusive Beau, who is going to shoot Charlie. After the killing, Charlie hides for a while but finally realizes he must come back to face up to the consequences. He believes that by his actions he has finally become a man, and he insists on being called Mr. Biggs. He is killed in the shoot-out with the lynch mob.

**Myrtle Bouchard** : See Miss Merle

**Beau Boutan** : Beau is the aggressive, racist Cajun farmer who leases the plantation from the Marshall family. Beau attacks Charlie, who shoots him dead. He is mourned only by his own family.

**Claude Boutan** : Claude Boutan is one of Gil's older brothers. He drives a truck for an oil company. In the meeting at Fix's home, he says he will do whatever Fix decides.

**Fix Boutan** : Fix Boutan is the father of Beau. For many years he and his family and other like-minded whites have been able to take the law into their own hands. They have a long history of beating, killing, and abusing black people. As everyone expects, Fix wants to go to Marshall to lynch the killer of Beau. But two of his sons, Gil and Jean, oppose him, and Fix calls the lynching off. He says that the family must act as one, and if they disagree, he will not act. Fix says that he never wants to see his sons Gil and Jean again, but at the end of the novel there is a hint of reconciliation between Fix and Gil, as they sit together in the courtroom.

**Gil Boutan** : Gil is a student at Louisiana State University and he is an outstanding football player, the best fullback in the Southeastern Conference. Known as Salt because he plays so well with Cal, who is called Pepper, Gil desperately wants to be an All-American, like Cal. Unlike the rest of his family, he is not a racist, and after the killing of Beau he urges his father not to take the law into his own hands. He is bitterly upset when his father banishes him from the house.

**Jean Boutan** : Jean Boutan is one of Gil's older brothers. He is in his mid-thirties and owns a butcher's shop in Bayonne. Like Gil, he tries to persuade Fix not to send a lynch mob to Marshall, saying that they should allow the legal process to
Sidney Brooks: See Coot
Matthew Lincoln Brown: See Mat
Cal: See Calvin Harrison
Candy: Candy is the strong-minded, independent, thirty-year-old niece of Jack and Beatrice Marshall. Her parents were killed in an automobile accident when she was five, and she was mostly raised by Miss Merle and Mathu. Her boyfriend is Lou Dimes. Candy is small and thin, with close-cropped hair. She wants to protect Mathu, and she insists that it was she who killed Beau. It is also her idea to summon the men to bring shotguns and empty number five shells, so that they can all claim to have killed Beau. When Mapes arrives, Candy is vigorous in her defense of the black men, and contemptuous of Mapes. Later, she becomes resentful when all the men want to discuss the situation in private. Mathu tells her to go home, and Lou bundles her into the back seat of her own car. In the courtroom scene at the end of the novel, Mathu asserts his independence from her, while she and Lou are reconciled.

Chimley: Chimley is a seventy-two-year-old black man who is fishing with his lifelong friend Mat when he is summoned to Mathu's house. His first reaction is fear, remembering how the white people react after any violent incident, but he puts this aside and decides to go. Before he leaves he tells his wife to make sure his food is ready for him when he returns.

Antoine Christophe: See Dirty Red
Clatoo: Clatoo is one of the leaders of the black men. He drives many of them to Mathu's house in his truck, and he tells them to carry themselves like soldiers. He hates Fix because Fix's brother Forest tried to rape one of his sisters just before World War II. Like the other black men, Clatoo claims to have shot Beau. It is Clatoo who organizes the scheme whereby the men reload their shotguns, and it is he who stands up to Candy, telling her that the men are going to have a meeting without her. During the shoot-out, it is Clatoo who organizes the black men.

Coot: Coot goes to Mathu's house proudly wearing his World War I uniform. He says that when he got home from the war, a white man told him never to wear his uniform again, since people in that part of the world did not like black men wearing medals for killing whites. But the day of Beau's killing, Coot decided to wear his uniform and shoot anyone who laughed at him or told him to take it off. He claims he shot Beau when the Cajun would not stop coming toward him with his gun.

Lou Dimes: Lou Dimes is a white man who has been seeing Candy for three years. He works as a journalist for a newspaper in Baton Rouge, and appears not to share the racist attitudes of most of the white characters. He arrives at Mathu's house when Janey calls him and says that Candy needs him. Lou takes little part in
the action himself but he closely observes and reports on what happens. In the
shoot-out, the injured Mapes puts Lou in charge of the situation, and Lou
unsuccessfully tries to negotiate a truce between Luke Will and Charlie.

**Louis Alfred Dimoulin**: See Lou Dimes

**Dirty Red**: Dirty Red, one of the old black men, always has a self-rolled cigarette
hanging from the side of his mouth. He is the last of his family, and he has a
reputation for laziness. But he acquits himself well in the shoot-out.

**George Eliot, Jr.**: See Snookum

**Griffin**: Griffin is Mapes's young deputy. He is a slender, unimpressive man,
ready to bully the defenseless but wary of anyone he thinks might fight back. Just
before the shoot-out begins, he tells Mapes that he will not use his gun against
white men in defense of black men.

**Leroy Hall**: Leroy Hall is a boy of seventeen who associates with Luke Will and
his friends. He is wounded in the shoot-out and whines like a coward.

**Calvin Harrison**: Calvin, known as Cal, is a black football player who plays
alongside Gil so well that the two of them are known as Salt and Pepper. Cal has
been nominated for All-American.

**Glo Hebert**: Glo Hebert is the grandmother of Snookum, Toddy. and Minnie.

**Herman**: Herman is the coroner who collects Beau's body. He is in his mid-
sixties.

**Albert Jackson**: See Rooster

**Beulah Jackson**: Beulah Jackson is Rooster's wife. She says she is ready to go to
jail with the men.

**Jameson, Reverend**: Reverend Jameson is the only black man who does not have
a gun, and he is despised by the other men. He is short and bald, with a white
mustache and beard. He is scared of what may happen and pleads with the men to
go home, but no one listens to him. But even Reverend Jackson refuses to give
Mapes the answers he wants, even when Mapes hits him.

**Janey**: Janey is the housekeeper at the Marshalls' house. She is scared when
Snookum tells her about the killing, and repeatedly calls on Jesus to help her. Miss
Merle bullies her into making a list of people who do not like Fix.

**Bing Lejeune**: Bing Lejeune is a mulatto who is one of the men at Mathu's house.

**Ding Lejeune**: Bing Lejeune is Bing's brother. He has a grudge against Fix
because he believes his sister's child was poisoned by one of the Cajuns.

**Mapes**: Mapes is the white sheriff. He is in his late sixties, about six feet three,
and heavy. He is a bully and starts his investigation by hitting three black men in
quick succession. With the exception of Mathu, he does not respect the blacks.
However, Mapes does try to avoid more bloodshed by instructing one of his men to
keep Fix away from the house, and trying to persuade Mathu, whom he believes is
guilty, to turn himself in. He also learns to respect Charlie Biggs. Mapes is slightly
wounded in the final shoot-out, and has to sit on the porch, unable to get up. In the courtroom scene, he is embarrassed by having to admit his inability to do anything to stop or resolve the shoot-out.

**Beatrice Marshall** : Beatrice Marshall is Jack's sister. She shows no interest when she hears that Beau has been killed, since she has never liked him.

**Jack Marshall** : Jack Marshall owns the plantation but takes no interest in it, passing his responsibilities on to his niece, Candy. He drinks every day in Tee Jack's store, and seems to have no interest in anything in life. He knows that the situation at Mathu's house is dangerous but he refuses to do anything to defuse it.

**Mat** : Mat is seventy-two-years old; his closest friend is Chimley. He and Chimley decide that for once in their lives they are going to stand up for themselves against the whites. Mat refuses to tell his wife where he is going, and they quarrel. He weeps with anger over injustices that his family has suffered but he is determined finally to do something with his life.

**Mathu** : Mathu is a black man in his eighties. He is tall and dark-skinned, and is proud of having no white blood. His ancestors came from Senegal in Africa. Mathu is the only one of the blacks who all his life has stood up for himself, not letting the whites push him around. He once beat Fix in a long fistfight. This is why Mapes is so ready to believe that Mathu killed Beau, since Mapes does not think any of the other blacks would have been capable of it. Mathu helped to raise Candy, and that is why she tries to protect him, but he is willing to take the blame for the killing of Beau, even though he did not do it.

**Miss Merle** : Miss Merle is a family friend of the Marshalls. She helped to raise Candy and has known her for over twenty-five years. Janey thinks she is good-natured, but Miss Merle has a patronizing attitude toward the black men. When she takes sandwiches to the people in Mathu's house, she expresses anger to Candy and Mapes, and is bewildered by the strange situation.

**Johnny Paul** : Johnny Paul is one of the first of the old men to say he shot Beau. He reminisces about the past, when the blacks worked in the fields with hoes and plows from dawn to sunset, before the days of the tractor. He says he killed Beau to stop the tractors plowing up the graveyard and erasing all memory of his own people.

**Pepper** : See Calvin Harrison

**Gable Raund** : Gable Raund is one of the black men who claims he shot Beau, and he refuses to change his story even when Mapes hits him. He is angry because over forty years ago his sixteen-year-old son was sent to the electric chair after being unfairly convicted of raping a white girl.

**Cyril Robillard** : See Clatoo

**Janice Robinson** : See Janey

**Rooster** : Rooster is married to Beulah Jackson. Clatoo describes him as "yellow,
with nappy black hair."

**Rufe** : Rufe is one of the first of the black men to arrive at Mathu's house and one of the first to claim that he shot Beau.

**Russell** : Russell is the deputy charged by Mapes to stop Fix coming to Marshall.

**Salt** : See Gil Boutan

**Joseph Seaberry** : See Rufe

**Sharp** : Sharp is one of the whites who accompanies Luke Will in the lynch mob. Like Luke Will, he is a truck driver.

**Snookum** : Snookum is the young boy who is sent by Candy to tell the neighbors to assemble at Mathu's house. He lives with his grandmother, Glo Hebert, and has a sister, Minnie, and a brother, Toddy.

**Thomas Vincent Sullivan** : See Sully

**Sully** : Sully is a friend of Gil and Cal. Like them, he is a football player, although a mediocre one. His main hobby is watching television. It is Sully who drives Gil to his father's house.

**Tee Jack** : Tee Jack owns a grocery and liquor store. He is a racist and does not care who knows it. He is intimidated by Luke Will and his friends when they come into the store, and he has to be careful of what he says in case they cause trouble.

**Jacques Thibeaux** : See Tee Jack

**Horace Thompson** : See Sharp

**Cedric Tucker** : Cedric Tucker is a quiet black man who usually keeps himself to himself. At Mathu's house, he tells the story of his brother Silas, who was the last black sharecropper at Marshall. Silas was killed by the whites in a fight after he had dared to perform better with his two mules than Felix Boutan did on his tractor.

**Billy Washington** : Billy Washington is one of the old black men. He is a terrible shot, and could not hit the side of a barn. The others tease him about it. Mapes hits him but he continues to insist that he shot Beau. He says it was because Fix and his men beat his son so hard his brain was permanently damaged.

**Luke Will** : Luke Will is a truck driver and a friend of Beau. He is big and rough looking, and is a racist who leads the lynch mob to Marshall. He is killed in the shoot-out.

**Yank** : Yank is one of the black men who go to Mathu's house. He is in his early seventies, and he used to break in the horses. He resents the whites because their tractors rendered horses unnecessary.

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

FICTION

- *Catherine Carmier* (novel), Atheneum (New York, NY), 1964.
- *Mozart and Leadbelly*: Stories and Essays, Knopf (New York, NY), 2005

OTHER


Gaines's works have been translated into other languages, including German and French.

Discussion Questions

1. Each chapter of the novel is told by a different narrator. Discuss the effect that this narrative technique creates. To what purpose does it serve?
2. Many of the old men express gratitude for the fact that they can confess to Beau's murder, even though they did not kill him. Why would they feel grateful when they could be possibly punished for their confessions?
3. Discuss the character of Gil Boutan. Discuss the symbolism of his role in the "Salt and Pepper" duo on the Louisiana State Football Team.
4. Although book seems to deal mostly with men, black women are quiet but still strong characters in the novel. Discuss their role.
5. The book deals with many serious issues of miscarried justice. What do you think of the judge's final verdict? Why does the author choose to close the book with a comical courtroom scene after dealing with such serious issues?
6. Gaines frequently reports upon how the black characters have different skin tones. Why does Gaines think that this fact is important? Using at least three black characters as examples discuss their skin color in relation to their personality and the community.
7. On the way to Mathu's house, why do the old men linger in the cemetery? What does the graveyard represent?
8. Sheriff Mapes sits down and seems to give up during the shootout even though he is barely hurt. Why does he do this?
9. Discuss the character of Jack Marshall. Why does he spend his days in a drunken stupor? How do his daily actions relate to his family's history?
10. Originally, Gaines had intended to use as narrator, Lou Dimes, a sympathetic white reporter with ties to the quarters through his relationship with Candy, the niece of the white couple whose family had owned the plantation where the black sharecroppers had worked and their ancestors had been slaves. "The original idea," Gaines told an interviewer, "was that Lou Dimes was a 'liberal white guy' who's played basketball with blacks, who sees a relationship with Candy and Mathu and between Mapes and Mathu, sees something bout these old men, and from a liberal viewpoint is learning and trying to understand and tell it" (Conversations with Ernest Gaines, 167). But Dimes could not understand or reveal to readers all the inner thinking of the African-American characters. How would the impact of the story have been different if Dimes had been the single narrator?
11. There are obvious injustices spoken of in the stories told by the different first-person narrators. But, what are the small ways in which Gaines shows the everyday indignities to African Americans at the time the story takes place? For example, the white women are given the honorific title "Miss" or "Mrs." There is a climactic scene in which Charlie, an African-American man in his 50s, is finally addressed
as "Mr. Biggs" by the white sheriff. What significance does his choice of words represent?