

ANALYSIS

The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman (1971)



Ernest J. Gaines

(1933-)

“Louisiana-born author, since age 13 resident in the San Francisco Bay area, has drawn on his background for stories of blacks in his native state. His novels include *Catherine Carmier* (1964); *Of Love and Dust* (1967); *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), a saga of black history in the South seen through the reminiscences of a 110-year-old woman; and *In My Father’s House* (1978). *Bloodline* (1968) collects stories of children’s views of adult life.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-1983) 272

“Ernest J. Gaines is one of the most accomplished storytellers among contemporary American writers of the South.... By age nine Gaines...the oldest of twelve children, was working in the fields, chopping cane for fifty cents a day.... Gaines was graduated from San Francisco State College with a B.A. in 1957 and spent the 1958-59 academic year at Stanford University on a Wallace Stegner Fellowship in creative writing.... In 1984, Gaines became a writer-in-residence at the University of Southwestern Louisiana.... All of his published fiction is firmly rooted in rural Louisiana, particularly in ‘the quarters,’ to which he has given distinctive expression in his fictive Bayonne and its environs....

Gaines published his first novel, *Catherine Carmier*, in 1964. The book drew virtually no reviews and earned no money for its author. In 1967 Gaines’s second novel, *Of Love and Dust*, appeared. Like *Catherine Carmier*, this book was a tale of thwarted love, of human relationships destroyed by racial prohibitions. With the publication of *Bloodline*, a collection of five stories, in 1968 and of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in 1971, Gaines achieved a well-deserved national reputation. In their strikingly effective first-person narratives, both books demonstrated Gaines’s mastery of diverse speaking voices, and both reflected the increasing impact of the Civil Rights movement on his fiction. Never a political activist, Gaines has nevertheless always emphasized the need for social change. In *Bloodline* this commitment is most apparent in the title story, but all five stories focus on experiences of change and growth, on the achievement of manhood, and the qualities such growth requires.

Gaines’s masterpiece, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, moved beyond the individual drama recorded in *Bloodline* to present a panoramic perspective on black history. Yet Gaines retained the

immediacy and emotional power of his short fiction by filtering the novel's events through the consciousness and the language of his 110-year-old narrator, who provides a dramatic account of black life from the Civil War to the Civil Rights era. In this novel Gaines succeeded in writing a quintessentially American book, one that celebrates both a particular individual and the larger community she represents. The 1974 television film based on Miss Jane's story assured Gaines a popular place among contemporary American writers....

Gaines's fiction is marked not only by humor and compassion but also by his profoundly democratic conviction that ordinary people matter. This conviction finds expression in his choice of characters and in his skilled use of the first-person narrators who reflect the oral tradition of folk cultures. His central theme—the quest for human dignity and freedom in a society scarred by racism—is apparent in all of his books. While giving voice to characters and experiences and values that are often slighted or ignored, Gaines has, at the same time, emphasized universal human qualities that ultimately transcend racial categories. He invests his best writing with a breadth of vision and a generosity of spirit that affirm human potential. As he himself has remarked, 'Survival with sanity and love and a sense of responsibility, and getting up and trying all over again not only for one's self but for mankind—those achievements I find worth writing about'."

John Lang
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 2
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 569-70

"The year after *Of Love and Dust* Gaines's publisher, Dial Press, brought out *Bloodline* (1968), a collection of five previously published stories, in which he had explored at length the aspects of black manhood and continued his depiction of change in the Deep South. He expanded the range of that depiction in his third and most popular novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* (1971), with a central character based in part upon the aunt who had reared him. Miss Jane is the principal observer, and her remarkable longevity enables her to present the story of black people in Louisiana over the course of a century from the Civil War to the civil rights movement of the 1960s, the women providing a spiritual continuum for their community while the more aggressive men initiate its advances, frequently at the cost of their own lives. This work, publicized by a remarkably effective television version, prepared a wide public for the three novels to follow."

J. A. Bryant, Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 162

Michael Hollister (2015)