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Lesson One

FOCUS: Biography

The author's life can inform and expand a reader's understanding of a novel. One practice of examining a literary work, biographical criticism, looks through the lens of an author's experience. In this lesson, explore the author's life to more fully understand the novel.

Ernest J. Gaines was born into a family of sharecroppers in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana. He attended grammar school in the plantation church, and was primarily raised by his aunt. *A Lesson Before Dying* tells the story of a young black man convicted of participating in the murder of a white man and consequently sentenced to death in Louisiana in the 1940s. Although a work of fiction, this novel reflects the racial discrimination and stereotypes Gaines would have encountered in the pre-civil rights South.

Discussion Activities

Listen to the Big Read CD. Students should take notes as they listen. What do they learn about Ernest J. Gaines? Based on what they learned about the novel, ask them to identify ways Gaines used elements of his own life to create the world of the novel.

Copy the Reader's Guide essays "Introduction to the Novel" (p. 3), "Ernest J. Gaines" (pp. 4-5), and "The Pre-Civil Rights South" (pp. 6-7). Divide the class into groups. Assign one essay to each group. After reading and discussing the essays, each group will present what they learned. Ask students to add a creative twist to make their presentation memorable.

Writing Exercise

Gaines believes that all great writers are regional writers but that their works are universal. Ask your students to choose a favorite book. Have them write a paragraph on how a novel about a particular place can cross regional boundaries and appeal to readers who have never lived in that period or place.

Homework

Read Chapters 1-4 (pp. 1-32). Prepare your students to read three to four chapters per night in order to complete the book in ten lessons. In the novel's opening lines Grant says, "I was not there, yet I was there. No, I did not go to the trial, I did not hear the verdict, because I knew all the time what it would be." Ask your students to consider why Gaines might open the novel in this way.