



## POSTAL NEWS

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### Postal Service Salutes Author Ernest J. Gaines *Newest Stamp in Black Heritage Series*

Lafayette, LA — The U.S. Postal Service today celebrated the life of author Ernest J. Gaines, best known for the novels “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” and “A Lesson Before Dying,” as the 46th honoree in the Black Heritage Stamp series in a first-day-of-issue ceremony at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

“Dr. Gaines brought worldwide attention to generations of men and women who asserted their human dignity in the face of racial oppression and violence,” said Donald Lee Moak, a member of the USPS Board of Governors, who served as the dedicating official. “His novels would shine a light on individuals who were too often overlooked and remind us of the dignity present in every human being, especially those being oppressed. That is just one reason the United States Postal Service is privileged to honor him with this new stamp.”

Joining Moak for the ceremony were E. Joseph Savoie, president of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette; Keith Clark, professor of English and African and African American studies at George Mason University; Lillie Anne Brown, assistant professor of English at University of Florida A&M University; Mona Lisa Saloy, poet laureate of Louisiana; and author Wiley Cash.

Cheyron Woods, head of the Ernest Gaines Center, served as master of ceremonies.

“Ernest J. Gaines was — and remains — an iconic figure at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, and we are deeply honored that the U.S. Postal Service has chosen to commemorate his literary legacy through this beautiful stamp,” Savoie said. “It captures the grace, strength and character he displayed through his life and through his words. For a quarter century, as a professor and writer-in-residence at the university, Dr. Gaines entreated aspiring writers to remember the inherent commonality of people and

obligation we have as individuals to treat each other with dignity and respect. His genius and influence made them better, and made our university better, and we are forever grateful for his enduring example.”

The stamp features an oil painting of Gaines based on a 2001 photograph. Mike Ryan designed the stamp with art by Robert Peterson. Greg Breeding served as art director.

The Ernest J. Gaines stamp is sold in panes of 20. News of the stamps is being shared with the hashtag **#ErnestGainesStamp #BlackHeritageStamps**.

### **Background on Ernest J. Gaines**

Ernest J. Gaines was born Jan. 15, 1933, on Riverlake Plantation in Oscar, LA, in former slave quarters his family had lived in for five generations. Raised primarily by a disabled aunt, Gaines attended elementary school in the one-room plantation church, then attended a Catholic school for African American students in New Roads, LA, for three years. In 1948, because his district had no high school for African Americans, Gaines moved to Vallejo, CA, at the behest of his mother and step-father, who had relocated there in search of better economic opportunities.

After completing high school, Gaines graduated from Vallejo Junior College and served for two years in the United States Army. He graduated from San Francisco State College in 1957, and the next year received a Wallace Stegner Fellowship to study creative writing at Stanford University.

Gaines’s fiction reflected a deep and unbreakable connection to his rural Louisiana roots. His first book, the 1964 novel “Catherine Carmier,” portrays a doomed love affair between a dark-skinned African American man and a light-skinned Creole woman against the backdrop of the community’s rigid color lines. In the 1967 novel “Of Love and Dust,” a young African American man chooses between legal servitude on a plantation or a prison sentence, a plot that allowed Gaines to explore how the legacy of slavery in Southern society tainted the lives of both the descendants of formerly enslaved people and those who had enslaved them — a theme he revisited in subsequent works.

He achieved fame and critical acclaim in 1971 with “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman,” a historical novel chronicling the recollections of its 110-year-old African American protagonist, whose life spans from slavery to the civil rights era. Dramatizing post-emancipation conditions for sharecroppers that were often little better than slavery, the novel received praise from reviewers for its epic scope and faithful rendering of Southern history. It was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize and adapted into a 1974 television movie that won nine Emmy Awards.

His next novel was “In My Father’s House,” the story of a mysterious visitor who returns to his native Louisiana. The return forces his father, now an affluent minister and civil rights leader, to reconcile with his alienated son. The book explored themes such as the conflicts between fathers and sons, how the past inevitably affects the present, and the complicated legacy of the civil rights movement among the activists who participated in it.

Gaines took a position teaching creative writing at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (then known as the University of Southwestern Louisiana) in 1981 and soon became the university’s writer-in-residence. Two years later he published “A Gathering of Old Men,” a novel about a group of African American men who assert their humanity in the face of prejudice and violence. The novel was praised for Gaines’s skillful use of different narrative viewpoints. An adaptation aired on network television in 1987.

In 1993, Gaines published what would become his most critically and popularly acclaimed work, “A Lesson Before Dying.” The novel tells the story of Grant Wiggins, a college-educated African American teacher in the late 1940s who is deeply disconnected from the impoverished rural Louisiana community he fled years before. As Grant struggles with the social conditions, family obligations, religious traditions and community responsibilities that burden him, he provides education and inspiration to Jefferson, a barely literate young farmhand awaiting execution for murder. Over the course of their difficult prison visits, Grant forms a bond with the condemned man that proves mutually instructive, showing both of

them the necessity of resisting those who would deny them their dignity and self-respect.

In addition to earning a National Book Critics Circle Award, "A Lesson Before Dying" resulted in Gaines receiving a MacArthur Foundation "genius grant." Among its many accolades, the novel was chosen as an "Oprah's Book Club" selection, further expanding its readership and helping to establish it as a modern classic.

In 1996, he spent a year teaching creative writing at the University of Rennes in France and received membership in L'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres from the French Ministry of Culture. When he returned to Louisiana, he and his wife, Dianne Saulney Gaines, established a nonprofit to preserve the historic church and cemetery on the former plantation where he was born. Gaines saw his preservation work as an act of gratitude to the community that inspired his fiction, and he spoke movingly about honoring the burial sites of the enslaved people and sharecroppers interred there. In 2015, the Gaineses were recognized by the Foundation for Historical Louisiana for their preservation efforts.

In 2000, Gaines received the National Humanities Medal from President Bill Clinton. He retired from teaching in 2004 but continued to publish essays and stories, including the 2005 collection "Mozart and Leadbelly." In 2008, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette established the Ernest J. Gaines Center to archive and promote the study of his work. In 2013, he received the National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama, calling it the greatest honor of his life. His final work, a novella titled "The Tragedy of Brady Sims," was published in 2017.

Ernest J. Gaines died on Nov. 5, 2019, in Oscar, LA, the town of his birth. The mayor of New Roads, LA, proclaimed Nov. 15 as "Ernest J. Gaines Day." In 2020, the University of Louisiana at Lafayette officially named his former home near campus the Ernest J. Gaines Writer in Residence House. The Baton Rouge Area Foundation continues to endow an annual Ernest J. Gaines Award for Literary Excellence, which recognizes African American fiction writers who are just beginning to rise to national prominence.

## Postal Products

Customers may purchase stamps and other philatelic products through the [Postal Store](https://usps.com/shopstamps) at [usps.com/shopstamps](https://usps.com/shopstamps), by calling 844-737-7826, or at Post Office locations nationwide.

Forever stamps will always be equal in value to the current First-Class Mail 1-ounce price.

A video of the ceremony will be available on [facebook.com/usps](https://facebook.com/usps). Information for ordering first-day-of-issue postmarks and covers is at [usps.com/shop](https://usps.com/shop).

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The United States Postal Service is an independent federal establishment, mandated to be self-financing and to serve every American community through the affordable, reliable and secure delivery of mail and packages to more than 163 million addresses six and often seven days a week. Overseen by a bipartisan Board of Governors, the Postal Service is implementing a 10-year transformation plan, [Delivering for America](https://usps.com/deliveringforamerica), to modernize the postal network, restore long-term financial sustainability, dramatically improve service across all mail and shipping categories, and maintain the organization as one of America's most valued and trusted brands.

The Postal Service generally receives no tax dollars for operating expenses and relies on the sale of postage, products and services to fund its operations.

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