

Lafayette Reads Ernest Gaines: One Book, One Community

BY ELIZABETH NEHRBASS

It's a "novel idea" whose time has come. I'm talking about One Book projects, in which communities around the country and in Canada select a book to read and then spend time wrapping their arms and heads (and hearts) around it. The first One Book project was initiated in 1998 by Nancy Pearl and Chris Higashi in Seattle, Washington, with their If All of Seattle Read the Same Book project, but in the four short years since the debut of Seattle's project, at least 70 other communities—from Long Island to Peoria to Duluth to Vancouver—have taken the cue and adopted their own community-wide reading initiatives. And in the spring of 2002, Lafayette, Louisiana, joined the growing list of towns promoting literacy when the National Writing Project of Acadiana, led by Ann Dobbie, sponsored Lafayette Reads Ernest Gaines.

The goal of the Lafayette Reads program echoed those of other projects around the country, where planners sought to promote community by fostering literacy through sharing books and discussing the important issues their readings brought up. And with that primary goal in mind—to promote community through literacy—Lafayette chose a book that was perfectly suited to teach us how to accomplish this end, one that would help us begin the process, to "walk the walk" of community-building by telling its story of the necessity of social responsibility in a man's maturation: Ernest Gaines' award-winning *A Lesson Before Dying*. Set in the fictitious town of Bayonne, Louisiana (modeled after New Roads, a little town in our own backyard), Gaines' story of his characters Grant and Jefferson's struggles to become men in a pre-civil rights era gave us the special opportunity to look at ourselves, our history, and our community closely—"to make ourselves more aware of who we are, what we have been, and what we want our society to be," in Dobbie's words.

To achieve this lofty goal, Lafayette Reads succeeded in garnering the support of schools and university and community groups—entities that have, in the past, been more likely to view each other as sources of competition and criticism rather than collaboration. Though the project was spearheaded by Ann Dobbie and the National Writing Project of Acadiana in

association with the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, it was cosponsored by the Lafayette Public Library and our community newspaper, *The Daily Advertiser*, endorsed by the Lafayette Parish School Board, and supported by the Junior League of Lafayette. With each of these groups on board and pulling in the same direction, our discussions were better able to reach, and to include, voices from our whole community—young and old, black and white, male and female, scholarly and unlearned.

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Before our six week project began, writing project teacher-consultants Caroline Ancelet and Harriet Maher conducted workshops for area educators to introduce lesson plans for both the novel, which would be read in all area high schools, and Gaines' short story "The Sky is Gray," to be read by middle-school students. By the time the community-wide reading had begun, teachers from just about every school in Lafayette were reading Gaines' works with their students.

Outside the classroom, many of these young adults joined their older counterparts at weekly evening discussion groups, facilitated by teacher-consultants, university professors, and local citizens. Together, we explored questions central to the novel, and to our community—questions about the "lessons" of the novel, for both the characters and the readers; questions about the nature and significance of religious faith (and its absence); questions about the responsibility of the educated black male in America; and questions about our own Louisiana, the Louisiana depicted by Gaines and the one we live in now.

The questions introduced in these weekly book discussions were amplified by those arising from three panel presentations led by experts in various fields probing some of the hardest issues in the novel and in our community, issues such as the changing role and image of teachers, the criminal justice system, and the challenge of working with the imprisoned.

Our answers were not often easy. More times than not, they simply brought us to more questions. For instance, one black man asked, why ponder the role of the educated black male? Why not the educated male, or the male, or the American citizen, period? And at one of the panel presentations, an audience member asked the experts to explain how so many in our state claim to be "pro-life" when the practice of capital punishment suggests we are "pro-death"?

What grounded us, what allowed us to go on talking when the discussions got hard, was, of course, the novel. We did not always agree, and we did not ever leave our discussions with all our questions answered. What we did leave with, though, was a better understanding of the book, and of each other.

"You know," 78-year-old Margie Hanna told high-schooler Jeremy Sonnier, "After your comment last week, I went home and reread the novel. And I think you're right. I may have been too hard on Grant."

What we left with was another piece of the big lesson we all need to learn before dying: how to talk to each other, how to listen, how to *be together*.

Our six-week project culminated in two public readings by our celebrated author, Gaines himself, one in which he spoke to us about the process of writing the novel and about how he seeks to "develop characters with character." At the second reading, Gaines mesmerized an auditorium of students with a reading of "The Sky is Gray."

"For a writer, perhaps a book read in their own community is the best thing ever," said Gaines in an interview with *The Daily Advertiser*. For a reader, perhaps a book read in their own community, *about* their own community, *with* their own community, is the best thing ever.

For more information on community-wide reading initiatives such as Lafayette Reads Ernest Gaines, check out the One Book Reading Promotion Projects page at the Library of Congress Center for the Book (www.loc.gov/loc/cfbook/one-book.html) or contact Ann Dobbie at anndobbie@bellsouth.net.

ELIZABETH NEHRBASS is a teacher-consultant with the National Writing Project of Acadiana, Louisiana. She teaches English at Acadiana High School in Lafayette, Louisiana.