



**TOWARD JUSTICE**  
REFLECTIONS ON A LESSON  
*BEFORE DYING*

EDITED BY ROBIN A. BEDENBAUGH



# Toward Justice





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Reflections on *A Lesson Before Dying*

Edited by

Robin A. Bedenbaugh



Newfound Press

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The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.

Martin Luther King Jr.

(paraphrased from abolitionist Theodore Parker, c. 1850s)





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## Preface

In 2016 the citizens of Knoxville, Tennessee, joined in the Big Read, a community reading program sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA). Supported by funding from NEA and the leadership of the Knox County Public Library, a series of lectures, book discussions, film screenings, and other events immersed community members in a five-week conversation on racism.

Knoxvillians read Ernest J. Gaines's book *A Lesson Before Dying* and shared their reactions in book-discussion groups. The book presents a moving narrative about a young black man who was wrongfully sentenced to die in the electric chair but learns to face his death with dignity. Students from a local magnet school expressed their reactions through works of art. A public forum featuring community leaders delved into the book's themes of racism, justice, and human dignity. The Clarence Brown Theatre on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, campus performed Romulus Linney's dramatic adaptation of the novel, holding special matinees for students from the Knox County Schools and a Pay What You Wish Night for the community.

This book of essays is the UT Libraries' contribution to Knoxville's Big Read. The Libraries put out a community-wide call for written responses to *A Lesson Before Dying* and was richly rewarded with the thoughtful and heartfelt commentaries gathered here. It is our hope that this book preserves and extends the enlightening conversations begun by Knoxville's Big Read.

Robin A. Bedenbaugh





No apology, no matter how sincere, can reconcile generations of brilliant children denied an education; no reparations, no matter how generous, can restore Emmett Till to his mother; no prayer for forgiveness, no matter how heartfelt, can retroactively recognize the dignity denied generations of women and men, children, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons, daughters, cousins, grandparents, teachers, poets, laborers, entrepreneurs . . . .



Lee Cole, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

# Finding Our Humanity in *A Lesson Before Dying*

*Ralph Hutchison*

The characters who populate *A Lesson Before Dying* live full lives. We glimpse moments, interactions with other characters, snatches of history that inform the story we are being told. But mostly what we know of them is how they relate to Grant Wiggins. The story revolves tightly around him; Ernest Gaines cast that die when he decided to tell the story in the first person and chose Grant as the “I.”

Readers who grew up in the United States over the last sixty years might be struck by the quietness of the story. In our experience, conversations about race most often arise from moments of high, violent drama played out in the streets and on our screens, moments that provide the context for sorting through what W. E. B. DuBois called “the problem of the twentieth century.” In *A Lesson Before Dying*, we see the dustup in the Club, but we don’t go into the death chamber. Paul tells us of the preparations in detail but then relieves us of the necessity of attending the actual event. “I’ll be there,” he tells Jefferson. He will stand in for Grant and for us.

Gaines’s refusal to make violence, even the terrible violence of an execution, a loud and noisy stage for his story opens the door for serious conversation. Instead, he weaves a tapestry from the threads of lives that spool out around Grant Wiggins and captures a scene, a series of scenes, which offer us the chance to reflect and to learn.

My first reading of the book took most of a day, interrupted only a few times by phone calls that wouldn't wait. Once, about halfway through, I picked up the book to resume reading and was caught by the cover. *A Lesson—singular—Before Dying*. Already it was clear to me the book is filled with many lessons, lessons for every character. For Grant, of course, and for Jefferson; for the Reverend and for Paul; for Vivian and for Tante Lou and for Miss Emma—why wasn't the book titled *Lessons Before Dying*? Why no hint that it would open the reader to new ideas about race, about becoming fully human, about human dignity, about violence, about justice, about friendship, about love and family ties and the difficulties that accompany both, about all of that and more?

When a writer is good and has taken the time to write well, I'm a slow reader. I like to appreciate the words and honor their creator that way. I'm even slower at figuring things out. But finally it came to me that the primary Lesson of the book applies to all of the characters and to each of them—human beings are capable of changing or not changing, of being changed or not being changed, by the events of their lives, the people they meet, and the stories they are part of. A Lesson that applies to institutions, like racism and justice and family, as well as to individuals: We have a fixed amount of time—we rarely know how much—to become the best human beings we can be. But we do have time.

For those of us who live in the United States in the twenty-first century, where race permeates every institution and relationship we have, ignoring the reality and power of racism is not an option. A popular quotation, usually attributed to the eighteenth-century philosopher Edmund Burke, declares, "All that is necessary for evil to prosper is for good men to remain silent." If we aspire to be moral human beings, we must speak to the reality of racism in our culture, and we must act to break its grip on our society.



A 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center found nearly half of those polled believed race played no part in the non-indictments of the white police officers who killed Eric Garner and Michael Brown, suggesting that a significant number of people may imagine we live in a post-racial society. Of those people, we can be sure of only two things: they are white, and their imaginations are dissociated from reality.

Growing up in rural Pennsylvania in a tight-knit clan, I was insulated from almost all of life outside my extended family. There was one African American student in my high school, a foster child placed with a white family. He was not in my grade. It did not occur to me to be curious about him. I cannot recall having any contact at all with a person of color until I arrived at a small college in a tiny South Carolina town, out of range of television.

The journey that people who think they are white must take to find themselves in a place where they understand the relentless, ubiquitous power of racism that permeates every aspect of our lives, begins not with a click moment where you “get it,” but with a click moment when you realize you cannot get it, will never get it; it cannot be gotten by you, anymore than a man can know what it means to be a woman or vice versa. There are some things you can understand, and it is important that you do, and among them there is this really important one: there are places in the world where this isn’t a problem the way it is here in the United States.

Racism—the problem of the twentieth century, and now the twenty-first—in the United States is not a fact of nature. It is a creation of humans who believe themselves to be white. It cannot be undone. The history can’t be erased: the Middle Passage, the sale of human beings, slavery, Dred Scott, segregation, Jim Crow, Selma. . . . Its effects cannot be wiped away; there is no clean slate. No apology, no matter how sincere, can reconcile generations of brilliant children

denied an education; no reparations, no matter how generous, can restore Emmett Till to his mother; no prayer for forgiveness, no matter how heartfelt, can retroactively recognize the dignity denied generations of women and men, children, husbands and wives, fathers and mothers, sons, daughters, cousins, grandparents, teachers, poets, laborers, entrepreneurs, barbers, housecleaners, farmers, horsemen, masons, carpenters, drivers, scholars, preachers, writers, deacons, seamstresses, launderers, attorneys, doctors, nurses, midwives, soldiers, marchers, sanitation workers, students, apprentices, locksmiths, roofers, mailmen, cooks, waiters and waitresses, porters, landscapers, miners, bankers and laborers who bore not only the violence of individual bigots but the crushing weight of institutional violence that denied loans, the vote, the lunch counter, the bus seats, that sought and far, far too often succeeded in stripping away the fundamental feeling of worth that inhabits each of us.

When I came to Tennessee to serve four small churches in Jefferson County, I was still naïve. One of the churches was a small African American congregation that had not had full-time pastoral services for more than twenty years but had persevered faithfully nonetheless. By nature, for better or worse, the desire to be of help to someone who needs help is a driving force in my life. I felt called.

So I came to be pastor of those four small churches, bound in a new cluster arrangement by the new presbytery formed when the Presbyterian church reunited 133 years after splitting—two of them formerly northern churches and two of them southern, three of them white. One evening, after a session meeting at the Hebron church, I lingered in the drive with two of the young men of the congregation. We talked about our lives, the cluster arrangement, and our hopes for the future of the churches. I don't know how the conversation turned to the interaction between the churches, but it did, and one of the men said casually, "Well, I don't expect any problems.

We've never had any problems with the blacks around here. They know their place." This was a thought that had never entered my small mind before, and it took me a second to process it. I remember saying, "And what would that be, their place?" which was followed by a modest attempt to walk it back and an end to the conversation shortly thereafter.

Thus began my real education, for the next twenty years, when I was privileged to pastor the small African American church—even after things went to hell with the other three churches, the presbytery dissolved the cluster as a failed experiment, and I was publicly denounced as a Negro-file [*sic*]. Pressures were brought to bear on the members of the "white" churches to do something about their pastor, and the only thing they could think of to do was to run the guy out of town like they had the last nine pastors. But when those same pressures were brought to bear on the members of the black church, the only thing they could think of to do was to defend their pastor. Lucy Cox, then in her eighties, still cleaning houses, a brilliant woman always quick to inform acquaintances of her status as an orphan who was kicked out of school in the third grade for sassing the teacher, reported to the session that she had been confronted by her employer, who asked, "Was that your little preacher I saw on the TV the other night?" She and everyone in the room knew the question was really a message in disguise. But Lucy's answer was blunt and closed the conversation: "Yes, it was. He believes in speaking up for what he believes in, and so do we." This, despite the fact that she needed that job to buy coal for the winter. One lesson I learned: dignity, despite all attempts by others to deny it, cannot be taken away from a human being.

Over twenty years, I learned a lot, and it has informed my life since I left that church. I understand something of the power of racism, the parts seen and some of the parts unseen, that affect our communities

and our lives every day. I understand that I will never understand what racism feels like from the side of those on the receiving end, not even an inkling. I learned that when Calvin Ballinger said to me one day, “Hutch, you know you’re black when your feet hit the floor in the morning.”

I learned that racism is a one-way street. From time to time, people who were not African American came to worship at our church; if it was their first time, and they didn’t already know the members of the church, they often expressed surprise at the warm welcome they received—nothing standoffish, no sense of differentness, even though they had expected it. Of course, they thought they, a “white” person in a black church, would be made to feel the same way a black person would no doubt feel if they attended a “white” church in the community. A slightly arm’s-length, cautiously sincere welcome, with maybe a little excessive courtesy thrown in, riding on an undercurrent of worry. Instead, they found a community that just didn’t care what color their skin was, at least not before God in church on Sunday morning.

I am not an idealist anymore, but neither am I a complete cynic. I don’t know that I believe we shall overcome, at least not completely, though I believe completely that the quest to overcome is a compelling imperative and should be our motivating force. I don’t think the map to overcoming can be drawn out, or it already would have been. My lack of confidence stems from my certainty that the power of racism derives from forces within the hearts, minds, and culture of people who think they are white; it is a force that can only be rendered powerless by those same people, each of them, one at a time; and the truth is they rarely feel a sense of urgency. The detrimental effects of racism on “whites,” the corrosive effect on the soul, the cost to society is lost on most people who consider themselves white—but just imagine the unrealized wonders born in the minds of hundreds



of thousands of brilliant young black boys and girls who were left unnurtured, unencouraged, their dreams and ideas suppressed and eventually lost to all of us and, most tragically, to them. Those few who broke through suggest how great our loss has been.

I suspect one reason many good church/synagogue/mosque/temple-going folks don't make dismantling racism a central focus of their lives is because they can easily be unaware of it. Another reason may be that racism is too often for white people an "issue"—a social malady, a huge cultural problem, institutional and intractable. White people rarely understand that racism is intensely personal; its destructive power is felt by individual human beings in countless ways every day. It crushes people, though often so slowly we pretend not to see it. It only gets personalized when a sensational headline appears from Ferguson, Missouri; or Cleveland, Ohio; or Fruitvale Station in Oakland, California.

Mary Emma Hairston, by the time I met her, was widely considered to have lost some of her grip on reality. She owned a house full of cats and cast-iron pans in Dandridge but spent a lot of her time traveling to other places to live in and work in the homes of white people. She talked to herself a lot, and when she talked to others, it was often a little too loud, and maybe not at the most opportune moment. I came to believe her craziness was a survival mechanism—her mind had no way to reconcile who she knew herself to be with the identity forced upon her by the culture that surrounded her. She saw no way out. Racial discrimination, the idea of her inferiority, was simply incomprehensible to her. Racial discrimination, the daily reality, was equally undeniable. She disconnected herself, popping in once in a while with an idea or comment or opinion. She was whip smart, and funny, and filled with compassion at the same time she burned with a quiet fury.

There is no one grand act or gesture that can fix the world for today's Mary Emmas and those who suffer as she did.

The change must take place in individuals; though, clearly, social movements have taught us that can happen to a lot of people at the same time when conditions are right and events fall into place. The nature of those events—court cases, public tragedies, emerging leadership, some other event—can't be known in advance. But we can prepare for them in advance. And we can move people through institutional changes—the election of a black president, for example, or the challenging of redlining by banks, or the ruling by courts against segregation, or maybe even something as simple as choosing *A Lesson Before Dying* for the Big Read . . .

It may be generations before young people are able to look back in wonder and say, "Really? People thought there was a difference?" It should give us hope that even now young people in most of the country, when they learn about Jim Crow, are baffled. The fact that my granddaughters will grow up in a world where gay marriage is taken as an unquestioned matter of fact—because it's obvious that anyone can marry anyone they love—should give us hope about how dramatic social changes can happen suddenly, even when the long struggle has made us wonder for years if change is possible at all. Whether you celebrate the idea of gay marriage, or have trouble wrapping your mind around it, or just outright oppose it, it doesn't change the fact that a momentous social and cultural shift happened faster than even many dedicated activists could imagine.

So what does overcoming look like?

The Black Lives Matter movement has caused a lot of people to reflect on that question, to evaluate strategies in light of past efforts to establish equal protections under the law—by the NAACP, SCLC, SNCC, CORE, the Black Panthers, the Urban League, the Montgomery Improvement Association, and many more, all working

in their own ways, with their own constituencies, sometimes arguing with each other, and maybe not even agreeing on what the Promised Land looked like, exactly, but believing there is a Promised Land, where justice rolls down, and the past no longer controls the future we make.

I am not sure we who seek the Promised Land today have to have a one-size-fits-all answer, anymore than the movement had one back in the day. There are a number of agendas and a number of ways of pursuing them. And, as long as they are all leading toward a common goal, we can think about alliances and cooperation without insisting on either a forced unity or an enforced separation.

Essential to the success of our journey is the Lesson Before Dying—that humans are capable of changing, of learning, as we move through our lives and are touched by people and events. In this lesson we find the grace required to live together, and in our best moments, to forge friendships and alliances.

The Big Read has been significant in my life; it has stimulated reflection that has finally led me to this conclusion, not original to me. The journey is as important as the goal, maybe even more important when the goal appears distant. And a fundamental question on this journey to the Promised Land, to be asked by each of us and of each of us, is captured in the hymn “On Jordan’s Stormy Banks,” with a chorus that asks: “Oh, who will come and go with me? I am bound for the promised land.”

We find our humanity, and confirm our dignity, when we go forward together.



The most moving part of the recording was when the words “with liberty and justice for all” were heard. The fact that Jefferson was about to be executed because of his skin color, for a crime that he did not commit, made the Pledge sound cruelly ironic. The Pledge of Allegiance was even more piercing for being spoken in the voices of the black children in the plantation school.



Antoine Ferguson, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

# *A Lesson Before Dying:* Racism and Injustice in the Deep South

*Connor Hess*

The production of *A Lesson Before Dying* at the University of Tennessee's Carousel Theatre interweaves themes of racism, injustice, and education. Through staging, acting, directing, and sound design, this impeccable production showed how racism and injustice were stuck in a cycle in 1948 rural Louisiana, each continuously fueling the other.

One example of how racism was expressed through staging happened early in the story during Sheriff Guidry's (David Kortemeier) first scene. There was a clear separation on the stage between the two white characters and the two black characters. As tension grew in the power struggle between Sheriff Guidry and Miss Emma Glenn (Celeste Williams), the sheriff began to creep toward Miss Emma in a clear attempt to intimidate her. As the sheriff closed in on Miss Emma and began to break the division of race on the stage, Grant Wiggins (Trequon Tate) also began to challenge the invisible divide. Grant subtly moved closer to Miss Emma to give her support. The subtlety of the characters' movements established a tension that was not expressed in the dialog. Through the staging in this early scene, the racial tension was reinforced nonverbally to the audience.

One way that the themes of education and racism were displayed through the acting, staging, and directing was in the characterization of Paul Bonin (Connor Hess). The director (Andrea Dymond)

and I worked to establish a character arc for Paul that showed his gradual realization of the evils of racism and injustice. The director chose to have me help move set pieces during the transitions without any dialog and without it being indicated in the script. These transitions allowed the audience to briefly see Paul in an intimate setting without any other characters on stage. My reactions and demeanor were unfiltered by other characters on stage so the audience could really see the change happening in me. I did not have as many lines as the other characters to show my transformation, so I had to rely more on movement and nonverbal communication to tell my story. During the transition to the “last meal scene” near the end of the play, I had to set up the storeroom for Jefferson’s (Jude Carl Vincent) final meal. While setting the room, I decided to move slower and with a certain heaviness, to convey the remorse that I was feeling at my powerlessness to stop the injustice of which I was a part. This heaviness was in marked contrast to my efficient and deliberate movements earlier in the play when I had to search the African American character’s belongings. The differences in movement showed how Grant and Jefferson educated Paul over the course of the play. My variations in movement and the directing choice to have me on stage during a handful of scene changes helped to show the audience how Paul’s education about black culture caused his passage from indifference to remorse.

The sound design reinforced the themes of injustice and racism throughout the show. A recording of the Pledge of Allegiance was played at different points in the production. The most effective use of this device was immediately before Jefferson’s execution at the end of the story. The most moving part of the recording was when the words “with liberty and justice for all” were heard. The fact that Jefferson was about to be executed because of his skin color, for a crime that he did not commit, made the Pledge sound cruelly ironic. The Pledge



of Allegiance was even more piercing for being spoken in the voices of the black children in the plantation school. The children had to recite the Pledge every day, even though the country to which they were pledging allegiance was constantly discriminating against—and killing—they. This one recording revealed how injustice and racism had infiltrated every aspect of American society, including the education system.

Ultimately, the production of *A Lesson Before Dying* at the Carousel Theatre was very effective in presenting the themes of racism, injustice, and education. The acting and directing developed the themes of racism, injustice, and education through the characterization of Paul. The staging embodied racism through the stark divide between the black and white characters early in the play. The sound design supported themes of education and injustice by juxtaposing the Pledge of Allegiance with Jefferson's execution. Multiple aspects of the production established each theme and assured that the performance delivered a powerful message.



**F**or them to be enslaved, Africans were made to assume the curse of Canaan: their blackness determined their destiny. . . . To dehumanize a people is to first convince others that oppression is not an injustice but a preordained burden that the enslaved must endure.



Dontaisia Dailey, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

“Who you calling a –”:  
*A Lesson Before Dying* and  
How Words and Symbolism Fuel Racism

*André Canty*

Jefferson, the central character in *A Lesson Before Dying*, has been conditioned throughout his entire life to believe that he was a hog. That indoctrination resulted in a man internalizing what society has done to African Americans since slavery. His whole life has been dictated by how the world viewed and treated him. For the teacher Grant Wiggins to humanize him turned out to be a Herculean task. Every step of Jefferson’s life was a reminder of how society perceived him, and he embraced it because no one took the time to humanize him. For Jefferson to see himself, he had to meet Grant, and they both had to embrace their own humanity.

Jefferson’s story recalls the Biblical story of Canaan and its misappropriation to shame and subjugate African Americans: we were marked at birth, and every waking second should be an attempt for us to make society comfortable. For racism to work, someone had to create a devil for people to rally against. The manifestation of evil and savagery was attributed to black people from Biblical times forward.

“He said cursed is Canaan, a slave of slaves he will be to his brothers” —  
Genesis 9:25

It was never stated that Canaan was cursed to be black, but the story was used as a way to justify the kidnapping of Africans for the slave trade of early America. For them to be enslaved, Africans

were made to assume the curse of Canaan: their blackness determined their destiny. The very concept of race was unheard of prior to the slave trade. To dehumanize a people is to first convince others that oppression is not an injustice but a preordained burden that the enslaved must endure.

The word *nigger* has been a buzzword for racial contempt for centuries. The word itself has resulted in countless bruised and battered bodies. In “My Dungeon Shook,” James Baldwin explained to his nephew how so many black people perished by internalizing the word, which thus dictated the trajectory of their lives. Baldwin’s wish was for his nephew to break that cycle of indoctrination, warning him that “you can only be destroyed by believing that the white world considers you—a nigger.” Jefferson’s case was similar: he saw himself as swine. Grant didn’t understand how Jefferson could see himself that way, but Grant couldn’t see that society held both their lives in contempt. So, though Grant was never called a hog per se, the systems and those in power treated him as such.

There have been attempts among younger African Americans to reclaim the word and its variations as a term of endearment. It has been used in popular black music, specifically hip-hop, which has been polarizing. The word also has stirred debate on who is the gatekeeper of the word and who is allowed to say it. In the past, the word *nigger* has been used to demonize but in modern times has been used lovingly and, for some nonblacks, as a symbol of acceptance and access into our culture. Comedian Paul Mooney has used “the nigger moment” to illustrate the moment a black person realizes racism for the first time. He describes how, no matter how much one wants to ignore race, something happens to reinforce the reality that race is alive and thriving. Another take on the “moment” comes from the cartoon *The Boondocks*, in which the main character, Huey Freeman, sees the moment as an explosion of ignorance and violence.

As recently as a couple of years ago, the word *thug* replaced the routine buzzwords as a disparaging term directed, primarily, at African Americans. Being called a thug is not limited just to criminal activity. Though he was acting in self-defense, Trayvon Martin was labeled a thug as a way to justify his death. *Thug* also has become a dog whistle intended to delegitimize civil resistance or unpopular speech. For fighting against racial injustice, organizers in the Movement for Black Lives have all been called thugs. NFL players Colin Kaepernick, Cam Newton, and Richard Sherman have been called thugs on the basis of nonconformity, not violence. Richard Sherman’s “crime” was calling out his rivals in a competitive sport, without one curse word. Sherman himself questioned how he could be labeled a thug while hockey players fight each other almost every game. Newton simply danced around and smiled during his breakout season, and letters were written decrying his behavior. Kaepernick has simply kneeled to the ground as a silent protest against the killing of black people, and he has been vilified. For Kaepernick, people only saw his value in his athletics but not the value in his conviction to address social justice. Quarterback Johnny Manziel has committed many offenses during his tenure in the NFL and has been treated more as a victim of fame. Again, all men were cursed for not making America comfortable enough. That same critique is nonexistent when sports “fans” cause property damage.

For good or ill, we internalize the definitions and connotations that society endorses. Even a positive epithet can be inhibiting. That is why Grant explains to Jefferson what it means to be a hero. A hero is counter to what Jefferson has heard all of his life. In a sense, Grant was giving Jefferson a way to readjust how he saw himself. Grant had realized that the system denigrated him as well. He saw that words could either build or destroy.





## About the Artwork

As part of Knoxville's Big Read, students in Melissa Wilkinson's art class at the Austin-East Magnet High School created works of art. Students first responded artistically to the prompts "What does it mean to be human?" and "What does dignity mean?" Students created a second piece of art after viewing a dramatic performance of *A Lesson Before Dying* at the University of Tennessee's Carousel Theatre. The following artworks, as well as those reproduced elsewhere in this book, are the creations of Austin-East students.

Gentleman of the jury, be merciful. For God's sake, be merciful. He is innocent of all charges brought against him. But let us say that he was not. Let us for the moment say he was not. What justice would there be to take his life? Why, I would just as soon put a hog in the electric chair as this.

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*



Savannah Covington, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

**D**o you know what his nannan wants me to do before they kill him? The public defender called him a hog, and she wants me to make him a man.

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*

Believe in Yourself



Kylan Campbell, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

**H**ow do people come up with a date and a time to take life from another man? . . . Twelve white men say a black man must die, and another white man sets the date and time without consulting one black person. . . . They sentence you to death because you were at the wrong place at the wrong time, with no proof that you had anything at all to do with the crime.

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*

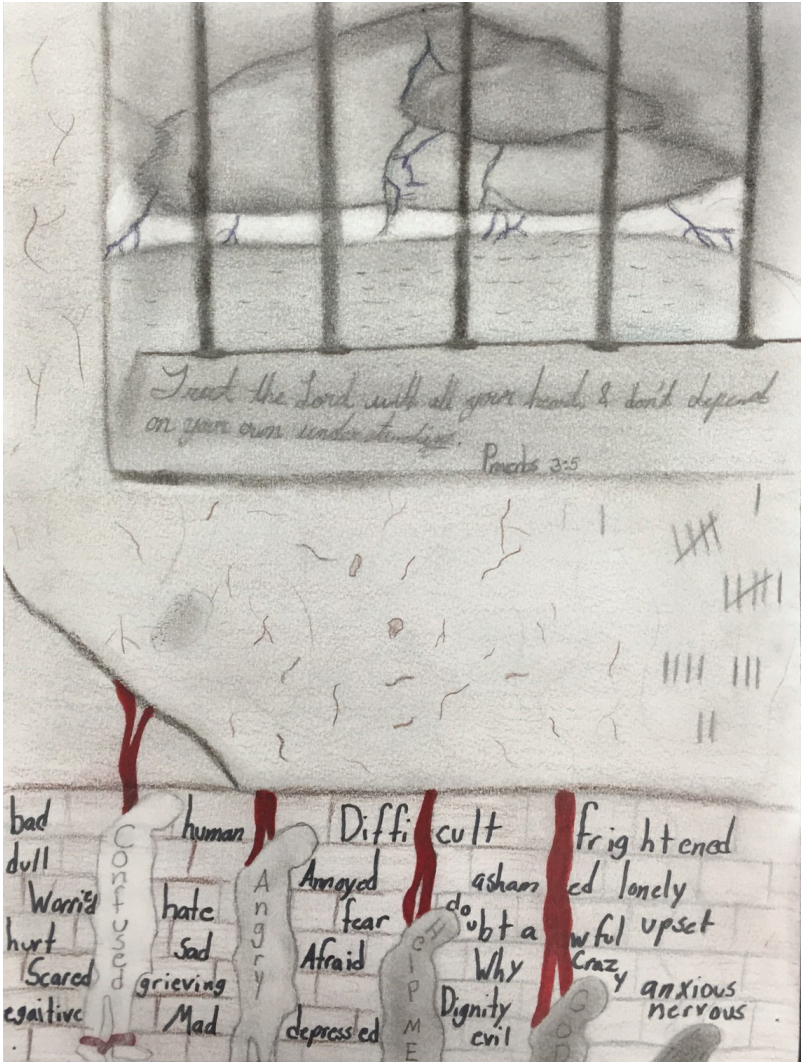


Nautica Hodge, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

What do I say to him? Do I know what a man is? Do I know how a man is supposed to die? I'm still trying to find out how a man should live. Am I supposed to tell someone how to die who has never lived?

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*

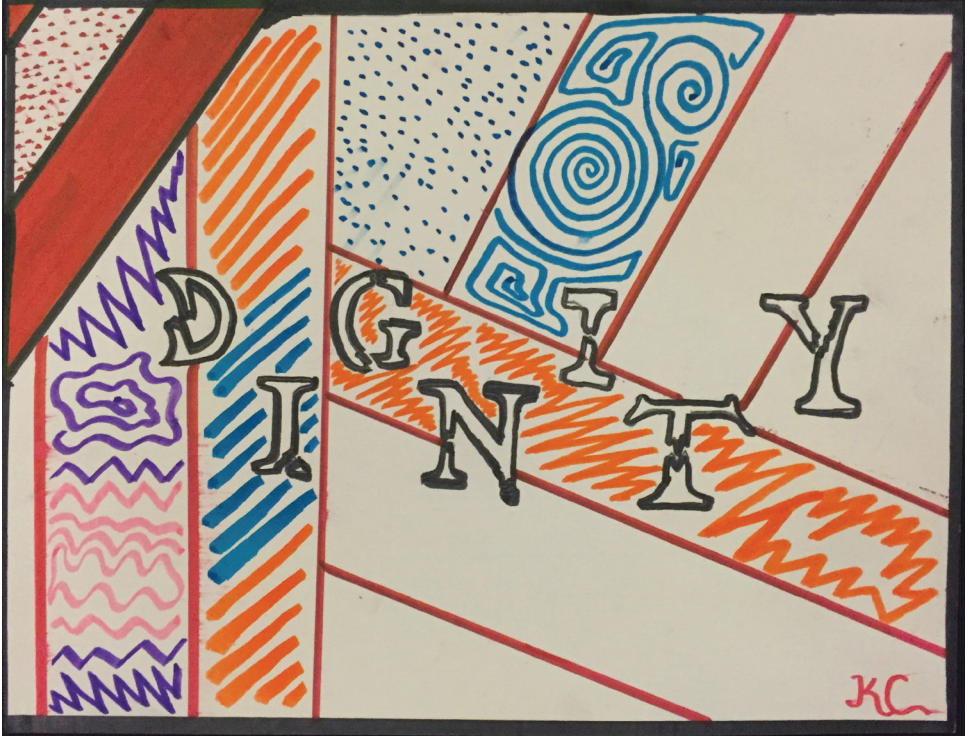




Centofanti Frazier, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

“Do you know what a myth is, Jefferson?” I asked him. “A myth is an old lie that people believe in. White people believe that they’re better than anyone else on earth—and that’s a myth. The last thing they ever want is to see a black man stand, and think, and show that common humanity that is in us all.”

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*



Kylan Campbell, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

I want you to chip away at the myth by standing. I want you—yes, you—to call them liars. I want you to show them that you are as much a man—more a man than they can ever be. That jury? You call them men? That judge? Is he a man? The governor is no better. They play by the rules their forefathers created hundreds of years ago. Their forefathers said that we're only three-fifths human—and they believe it to this day.

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*



Keon Fulwood, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

I want you to show them the difference between what they think you are and what you can be.

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*





Jazmin Cullom, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

**D**o you know what a hero is, Jefferson? A hero is someone who does something for other people. He does something that other men don't and can't do. He is different from other men. He is above other men. No matter who those other men are, the hero, no matter who he is, is above them.

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*





Octavia Weatherly, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

And that's all we are, Jefferson, all of us on this earth, a piece of drifting wood, until we—each one of us, individually—decide to become something else. I am still that piece of drifting wood, and those out there are no better. But you can be better.

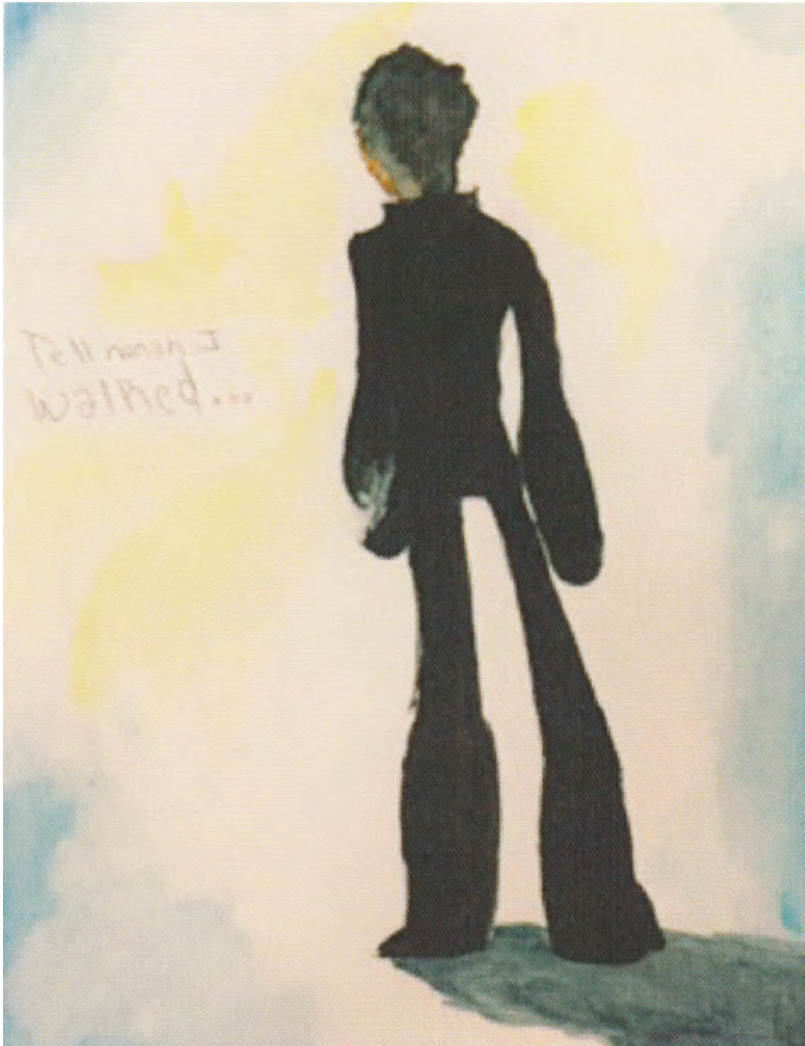
Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*



Briana Whitman, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

**W**e all stood jammed together, no more than six, eight feet away from that chair. We all had each other to lean on. When Vincent asked him if he had any last words, he looked at the preacher and said, “Tell nannan I walked.” And straight he walked, Grant Wiggins. Straight he walked. I’m a witness. Straight he walked.

Ernest J. Gaines, *A Lesson Before Dying*

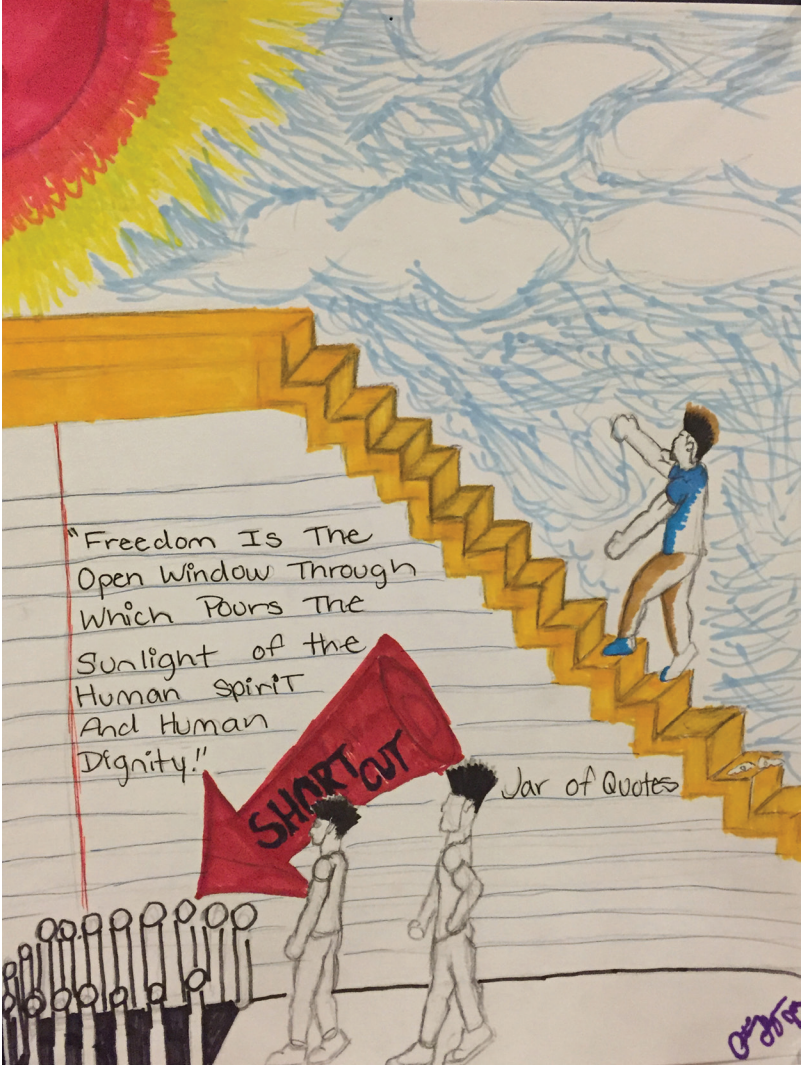


Lee Cole, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016



Several years after the highly contentious desegregation of Clinton High School, the school was dynamited. . . . How interesting that no arrests were ever made and that community residents who had expressed such outrage at the prospect of school desegregation could muster no similar outrage at this act of terrorism.





Antoine Ferguson, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016



# The Big Read: A Law Student's Reflections

*Kaya Grace Porter*

As part of Knoxville's Big Read of *A Lesson Before Dying*, Stephen B. Bright delivered a public lecture on the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, campus on "Race, Poverty, and the Death Penalty—Then and Now." Bright is president and senior counsel at the Southern Center for Human Rights and Harvey Karp Visiting Lecturer at Yale Law School. —Ed.

It had been well over a year since I had last seen professor Stephen Bright. As he walked down the stairs into the auditorium, I saw immediately that professor Bright was well and as passionate as ever. In the fall of 2014, I had the great pleasure of studying under Bright in our law school's Right to Counsel course, co-taught by professor Penny White. Because of my previous familiarity with the speaker, when professor White welcomed the audience and began her introduction, I anticipated what she might say about the man before us. However, she surpassed my expectations, describing him as "the most important voice in criminal justice reform in the country today." I was instantly reminded of how great a privilege it had been to study under Bright during my legal education. White went on to assert that Bright was leading the conversation on criminal justice reform because he had *started* the conversation, and that he has

never stopped believing that every life matters. In her closing, she characterized Bright as “a true drum major for justice.” Those words called forth the first of several connections I would make to the Law and Literature course I had taken.

Bright began by saying, “We’d like to pretend that history was yesterday . . . but it seeps into the present and is with us all the time.” I wholeheartedly agree with this assertion. Furthermore, I think that attempting to rewrite history to make it more palatable is even worse than being the heirs to a sometimes-shameful past—however much we might wish to obscure certain historical realities.

Bright’s talk focused on the role that our courts have played in perpetuating *injustice*. We were instructed that terrorism is a means of maintaining the balance of power and that terrorism has, at times, been carried out in the courts. I had never heard of “convict leasing,” but Bright explained that during the Jim Crow era this practice was administered through the criminal courts and was worse than slavery. It reinforced the notion that African Americans convicted of crimes are “disposable people.” While the enterprise of convict leasing was new to me, the attitude that African Americans incarcerated by our criminal justice system are disposable human beings certainly is not. That presumption even seems to be ingrained within certain of our social institutions. I wonder if in the future this part of our history will be overwritten by those who would rather assign institutional discrimination to a remote past.

Bright discussed the South’s economic development and how it can be traced to the blood of its prisoners. (This was yet another point in the lecture at which I thought of the Law and Literature course. On several occasions that semester, the class debated whether our government is truly “of the people, by the people, for the people.” We also discussed the history of the Civil War and why it was really fought.) It is painful to contemplate that criminal courts have, at times in our

history, been “a corrupt and capricious entity, utterly undeserving of respect,” as historian David Oshinsky has described Mississippi justice before the civil rights era. Courts were, and are, supposed to provide equal protection of the law. Bright underscored past failures of our courts by recounting the case of the Scottsboro Boys, nine black teenagers who were falsely accused and convicted of raping two white girls. Their appeal to the US Supreme Court led to the landmark 1932 decision that affirmed the right to be represented by counsel. Bright furthermore made the troubling assertion that we still have “legal lynching” in the United States today.

Also discussed was the tension between law enforcement and the African American community today. Maintaining that there are two key factors that have changed present-day criminal prosecutions (DNA evidence and video surveillance), Bright stressed that we must pay more attention to what happens to defendants from the very moment they enter the criminal justice system. This reminded me of another part of my legal education, my participation in Advocacy Clinic. There, we emphasize helping people to break away—and stay away—from the criminal justice system, because positive outcomes are less likely the longer an individual remains in the system. Bright also touched on the death penalty and plea bargaining. He charged us to be vigilant of the “glaring racial disparities in the infliction of the death penalty.” He talked about the quality of counsel as a key factor and cautioned that a client should never be executed because of a lawyer’s malpractice. Interestingly to me, we also discussed the peremptory challenge in jury selection and the effects of the jury upon criminal justice.

“We must complain. Yes, plain, blunt complaint, ceaseless agitation, unflinching exposure of dishonesty and wrong—this is the ancient, unerring way to liberty and we must follow it.” W. E. B. DuBois spoke these words long ago. On February 11, Bright spoke

them again at the close of his talk, leaving us all feeling inspired and ready to go forth as drum majors for justice.

Being a professor, Bright naturally saved time for questions. One young person asked what students can do to further the cause of criminal justice reform. Bright recommended attending court and really watching what is going on, and volunteering one's time to help alleviate the disparity between the ample resources available to the prosecution and the very limited resources typically available to provide representation for the poor. He quoted former United States Attorney General Robert Kennedy, who once remarked that "the poor man charged with crime has no lobby." However, the very first thing Bright mentioned in his response was very much aligned with our Law and Literature course, and that was, simply, to *read*. Educate yourself on the deep-rooted problems of our justice system—enduring problems from our history that threaten to become problems of the future.

By the time I exited the auditorium, I had compiled a new reading list of titles that Bright had recommended over the course of his lecture. Among them are *Worse Than Slavery* by David M. Oshinsky; *Slavery by Another Name*, Douglas A. Blackmon; *Contempt of Court: The Turn-of-the-Century Lynching That Launched a Hundred Years of Federalism* by Mark Curriden and Leroy Phillips; and *The Warmth of Other Suns* by Isabel Wilkerson. I sincerely appreciated that Bright recommended reading as a route to discovering solutions to problems that plague the criminal justice system. As a second-semester, third-year law student, I now have far more time to read for pleasure. And I find it a pleasure to read widely on topics such as those explored in Bright's profound and necessary lecture—topics that are my passion.

Community events surrounding the Big Read also included a screening of *Say It Loud*, a documentary on Knoxville's civil rights era. *Say It Loud* was edited by UT librarian Louisa Trott from film clips in the Knox County Public Library's Tennessee Archive of Moving Image and Sound. —Ed.

Highlighting rare, historic footage of African American life in Knoxville during the Civil Rights era, the film *Say It Loud* offered but a glimpse into the early protests and marches in downtown Knoxville and on Cumberland Avenue during the early 1960s. From my perspective, this documentary was especially interesting because I am not a native Knoxville nor am I a native Tennessean. My knowledge of East Tennessee history is limited. Just as one may often have experiences that cultivate awareness of one's own state history—such as my taking Georgia History in the eighth grade, or going on field trips to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s home, or visiting the Herndon Home in Atlanta—I'm sure that many of my native Tennessee classmates have been exposed to some of the same truths that I learned about for the first time on a Sunday afternoon during Black History Month.

This documentary, created to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Civil Rights Act, does an excellent job of challenging the viewer to consider what race relations were really like in Knoxville and East Tennessee during the '60s. *Say It Loud* was not merely a compilation of archival footage; it painted a picture through many different points of view of the thoughts, feelings, and actions of communities regarding civil rights, social progress, and race relations in this part of the country just a few decades ago. Some might argue that race relations in East Tennessee were not as bad as in other regions of the South. I myself had heard this proposition put forward prior

to attending the screening. Being from Georgia and having familial roots in Mississippi, and in light of my knowledge of race relations gained through my family, I am prepared to accept that proposition as true.

I was truly moved by the photos and video clips that comprised the documentary. As a student at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and the recipient of an entirely public school education, I was able to *see* and *understand* just how much of a struggle it was to earn a public education in Knoxville not that long ago. Claims of “separate but equal” sound more hollow than ever after seeing video clips of the types of “lessons” that black students were taught and given the types of “resources” present in black schools. Perhaps the most poignant footage was the story of the Clinton 12, the twelve black students who integrated the first public school in the Southeast. Several years after the highly contentious desegregation of Clinton High School, the school was dynamited. (The documentary footage made more real the ordeals of school desegregation that we had discussed in our Law and Literature class earlier in the semester.) Prior to that screening of *Say It Loud*, I had never heard of Clinton High School or its historic role. But as I sat intently watching the screen, I experienced a “light bulb moment.” I was especially affected by interviews with parents opposed to desegregation; I was fascinated and amazed by the ignorance so clearly revealed by those interviews. There were clips of journalists asking *why specifically* white parents did not want their children to attend school with black children. Featured clips showed individuals truly unable to articulate an answer to that question; yet, these same people seemed to have no qualms about the bombing of Clinton High School in 1958. The bombing was described as an “enduring and deeply disturbing East Tennessee mystery.” How interesting that no arrests were ever made and that community residents who had expressed such outrage at

the prospect of school desegregation could muster no similar outrage at this act of terrorism.

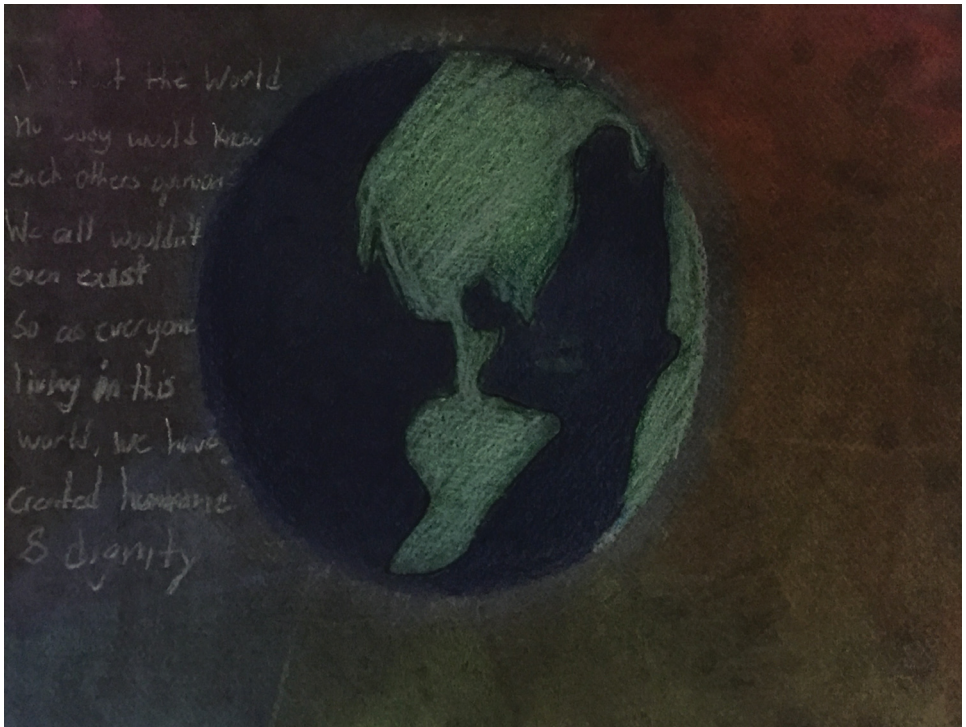
The footage of protests in downtown Knoxville was also remarkable. *Say It Loud* noted the irony of *To Kill a Mockingbird* being shown at the movie theater at the same time that protests were being staged at nearby restaurants and businesses. One black commentator remarked that Knoxville could not be described as an “All-American” city *because all Americans were simply not bestowed equal privileges*. Nevertheless, the Knoxville civil rights movement was described as “for the most part orderly” and as requiring far less intervention by law enforcement than some other southern cities.

The music in *Say It Loud* had a profound impact as well. The hate boldly displayed on faces at Ku Klux Klan rallies was emphasized by the song I later learned was entitled “Go to Hell” by Nina Simone. At the end of the movie, James Brown’s song “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud” was featured. In that moment, I was not only proud that James Brown has ties to Georgia and that we celebrate him as a part of Georgia history, I was also especially proud to be black. And I’m gratified to have furthered my knowledge of black history expressly through my pursuit of higher education in the state of Tennessee.





The audience feels Grant's despair over both of his teaching jobs, instructing young students destined to be field hands and guiding a wrongly convicted man awaiting execution. One such grammar lesson—"conjugate the verb 'to be' in past, present, and future tense"—seems particularly poignant. For, while the teacher palpably struggles to come to terms with past, present, and future, the once wordless pupil shows him how to make peace with himself. It is Jefferson who is the master of death and the teacher of life, not Grant.



Centofanti Frazier, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

# The Possibilities of *A Lesson Before Dying* as a Social Studies Teacher Education Text: A Teacher Educator's Thoughts

*Erin Adams*

For five years I have been working in the field of teacher education; that is, I train people who want to be teachers. Specifically, I work in social studies teacher education, training people who want to teach history, geography, government, and economics—in other words, people who want to teach about many of the topics also addressed in *A Lesson Before Dying*: social structures, racism, history, (in)justice. With these ideas in mind, and after viewing the dramatization of *A Lesson Before Dying* at the University of Tennessee's Clarence Brown Theater on March 9, 2016, I offer the following inquiry into using a viewing of the play as a social studies teacher education text.

As a former teacher and now a teacher educator, I was drawn to the pedagogy depicted in the play. There was the surface-level teacher-student relationship between schoolteacher Grant and prisoner-sentenced-to-die Jefferson, as Grant sought, somewhat reluctantly, to teach Jefferson how to die (like a man).

On another level, there were the subtleties of Grant's classroom life. In the first scene, Grant is shown as the teacher, standing at the front of the class, lecturing his (unseen) pupils about their mistakes and warning them not to end up like Jefferson. The actor's lecture was so exuberant that spit flew from his lips as he spoke.

Grant's blackboard is divided into sections for math, spelling, and grammar. Spelling words are listed in neat cursive, as are the

rules of grammar. Implied within these exercises, and hinted at in Grant's lecture, are his students' "lessons." In the wake of grave injustices in the Jim Crow South—in a school located on a plantation and with innocent Jefferson found guilty of murder and sentenced to die—spelling, grammar, addition, and subtraction were the lessons du jour.

As Grant delivers his lecture, he never glances down at the chairs but directs his gaze straight ahead. Of course, no pupils are actually seated onstage, presumably because doing so would mean casting child actors. Their absence only heightens the effect: the children are essentially as invisible to Grant the teacher as they are to the audience. Jefferson eventually remarks about his time in Grant's classroom, "You can't look at me, the whole fourth grade . . ."

The great poststructuralist philosopher Jacques Derrida wrote of teaching how to live: "*To learn to live*: a strange watchword. Who would learn? From whom? To teach to live, but to whom? . . . It vibrates like an arrow in the course of an irreversible and asymmetrical address, the one that goes most often from father to son, master to disciple, or master to slave ('I'm going to teach you to live')."<sup>1</sup> The problem in *A Lesson Before Dying* is that Grant is no master of life, a truth laid bare as the play unfolds.

As I viewed this blackboard lesson, I could not help but wonder about the relevancy, and futility, of teaching and schooling. The audience feels Grant's despair over both of his teaching jobs, instructing young students destined to be field hands and guiding a wrongly convicted man awaiting execution. One such grammar lesson—"conjugate the verb 'to be' in past, present, and future tense"—seems particularly poignant. For, while the teacher palpably struggles to

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1. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York: Routledge, 1994), xvii.

come to terms with past, present, and future, the once wordless pupil shows him how to make peace with himself. It is Jefferson who is the master of death and the teacher of life, not Grant. Thus the questions are raised: What is learning? How do we do it? What is worth learning, and what is learning worth? What is mastery? Must a teacher be a master, or does a master make a slave?

Attending a performance of *A Lesson Before Dying* is not just about watching a play; it is about witnessing an event. The playgoers are asked to witness a lesson learned the hard way and, moreover, are challenged to learn one themselves. Thus, the performance and the affect it provokes are the best of teachers—and the best of teachers of teachers. I, along with the rest of the mostly white audience surrounding the stage that night, was profoundly moved in ways a (text) book is unlikely to effect. Thus, *A Lesson Before Dying* seems, to me, a social (studies) text in its own right and one that I would assign to all my students given the opportunity.



All indignities, enabled by a culture that sanctioned each affront as “the natural order of things,” were intended to remind blacks of white superiority and black inferiority. . . . Among many powerful messages in *A Lesson Before Dying* is the double-edged assault of everyday racism coupled with an internalized self-abasement.



Jazmin Cullom, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016



# Everyday Racism

*Ginna Mashburn*

In a 2005 essay entitled “Writing *A Lesson Before Dying*,” Ernest Gaines quotes a line from Toni Morrison’s story “Home,” in which one character says to another, “Who told you you was trash? And why did you believe?” Both questions are amplified in Gaines’s novel: whites’ treatment of blacks as if they are “hogs,” and blacks’ acceptance of that label.

We can acknowledge that slavery was the root cause of blacks’ coming to believe themselves inferior. However, a different sort of slavery persisted into the twentieth—dare I say, twenty-first—century, as whites, even those of lower social or educational status, demeaned blacks with seemingly small indignities. Gaines portrays these supposedly minor incidents—almost as insidious as calling a person a hog—as a standard part of whites’ behavior toward any person of color: the sheriff who lets Grant cool his heels for hours as he awaits an answer about visiting Jefferson in jail; the saleswoman at the store where Grant buys a radio, who interrupts the sale to chat for fifteen minutes with a white woman as Grant stands idly by; the endless and meaningless searches at the jail. All indignities, enabled by a culture that sanctioned each affront as “the natural order of things,” were intended to remind blacks of white superiority and black inferiority.

The other and perhaps more pernicious reality that Gaines describes is that many blacks came to accept their inferiority. Grant's teacher, Matthew Antoine, conveyed to his pupils his own self-hatred and contempt for his students, giving them no choices in their lives but to "run and run." Jefferson behaves like a hog when he is given that label—that is, until Grant's efforts, inspired by two strong black women, convince him to stand and act like a man, even if that means walking to his death.

Among many powerful messages in *A Lesson Before Dying* is the double-edged assault of everyday racism coupled with an internalized self-abasement. This emerged, in a group discussion during Knoxville's Big Read, as one of the most compelling topics. How often have adults said to their children, "Don't let someone else define who you are"? Imagine that as a people you haven't received that message. And then think of summoning the strength to refuse the labels an entire race has been given for most of our country's history. No doubt this phenomenon underpins much of the racial problem we experience today. Whites must stop their racist behavior, treating and thinking of blacks as "trash" and demeaning them on a regular basis; and blacks must believe that they alone are the ones to say, "I am a human being worthy of respect and dignity."

### **A Personal Memory**

I grew up in a small town in deep East Texas, not too far from Ernest Gaines's home, rural and almost evenly divided racially. While my perspective is that of a white, middle-class person, I identified strongly with Gaines's story, especially the descriptions of place and the racial divide that defined my life from the mid-1940s into the '60s.

While I knew of white mistreatment of blacks, I was only directly aware of it on a few occasions over the years. My parents were both educators and were enlightened about many topics. They also took

their Christianity seriously and insisted we treat all blacks with respect. I eavesdropped as my mother alone stood up to her friends, the women of the Presbyterian Church, while they debated, in our living room, whether the church should ever allow a black person to worship with us. Mother was outnumbered but not outtalked as she asserted that welcoming blacks was the only Christian option, and I was very proud of her.

Further back in my heritage was a grandfather whose family owned slaves, and after emancipation, many continued to live and work on the farm. He died at age 103, and I recall witnessing as a small child the numbers of black people who filed by his coffin and spoke of what a good man he was. As an adult, that sentiment was hard for me to reconcile with the knowledge that my grandfather had been part of a ragtag Texas regiment who wanted to fight in the Civil War but were a little too west of the action. He was also the man who, on his deathbed, when asked where he was when the South surrendered, declared that they never had!

Given my background, I was taken aback by my reaction to the novel. As much as I knew firsthand the segregated world of the Deep South, and as much as I have read southern writers who described that world, the travesty of justice hit me in a visceral way—a man condemned to death who was only guilty, at most, of a minor theft and very bad judgment. It reminded me that beneath the surface of my snow-white world lay one that was often cruel, immoral, and devastating to real human beings. How pitiful it is that a man's only way to gain dignity, to prove he was not a "hog," was to hold his head high as he walked to his death, no matter the grave injustice of his arrest and trial. As far as we might have come in achieving greater rights for blacks, recent headline-grabbing stories affirm that we have a long way to go. Indeed, as a society, we must learn some important lessons before dying.



I am disheartened that I may never be able to convince all public health students and practitioners of the salience of social determinants of health and disease, and the imperative of a social justice perspective if we are ever to eliminate health inequities. . . . Like Wiggins, Jefferson, and all the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*, we must not surrender but press on, toward solutions that achieve equity.



Chloe Pennington, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

# A Public Health Response to *A Lesson Before Dying*

Jennifer M. Jabson

The characters in Ernest J. Gaines's *A Lesson Before Dying* and the complex social context of their life experiences illustrate two key, interrelated tenets of public health.

First, fundamental causes of inequities in health, disease, and death are social, not individual. Public health, as compared to medicine and other disciplines that emphasize the individual, stresses population-level factors known as social determinants—social forces existing beyond the control of any single individual—as fundamental causes of health and disease. The characters' experiences in *A Lesson Before Dying* demonstrate how the many, multilevel, interrelated, and intersecting social domains contextualize and produce health and health inequities.

Second, because fundamental causes of inequity in health, disease, and death are social and exist beyond any individual's control, interventions that operate at the individual level do not eliminate health inequities. Consequently, public health aims to eradicate inequity with solutions implemented at multiple, interrelated levels of social influence. However, as a discipline we are limited in our ability to meet this ideal and often fall short, overemphasizing single and/or individual-level interventions that do not result in desired or equitable change.

Gaines's characters and the problems they face illustrate the futility of solutions that operate at a single level of influence to resolve radical population-level problems that affect health. From a public health perspective, this essay will consider how these topics are represented in *A Lesson Before Dying*.

According to the World Health Organization, health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, not the mere absence of disease or infirmity. Most people mistakenly view health through the lens of market justice, an approach that emphasizes individual responsibility in health and disease. Inherent to this philosophy is the assumption that, if individuals work harder, smoke less, exercise more, eat better, and generally make *better* decisions, physical and mental health will improve. Unfortunately, extensive and rigorous empirical evidence disproves the market-justice view of health.

Innumerable, rigorous, empirical, published, population-based studies have repeatedly shown a causal association between social determinants and health, length of life, and disease. Therefore, the discipline of public health is rooted in the social justice paradigm whereby individual choices are de-emphasized, and population-level factors, social determinants—existing beyond the control of any single individual—are emphasized and accepted as determinants of health and disease.

Social determinants of health include economic stability, education, social and community context, access to health care, and neighborhood and built environment. It could be argued that the market justice perspective on public health would be acceptable *if* access to education, economic stability, quality neighborhoods, social and community context were equally accessible across the population. Sadly, they are not. Rather, social determinants are directly related to the individual's position within systems of oppression: racism,



sexism, heterosexism, cis-sexism, ableism, and classism. This is to say that individuals, based on no choice of their own, are assigned social value based on their position within hierarchical social systems of oppression. One's position within these systems weighs heavily in the likelihood of attaining economic stability, education, and where one is able to live—and therefore on one's health and disease experiences.

In *A Lesson Before Dying*, the health of several of the characters illustrates the ways in which individual health is influenced by social determinants. However, for the sake of clarity, this essay will focus on Jefferson's experience as an example.

Jefferson's health is characterized by chronic stress, social isolation, mental distress in the form of depression, and ultimately death by execution. The theory of *minority stress* depicts how chronically high levels of stress that result from exposure to racism and low socioeconomic status (including limited educational and employment opportunities) result in elevated rates of depression, anxiety, and psychological distress. Although Gaines does not reveal much about Jefferson's physical health issues, it is possible that his experiences and exposure to minority stress resulted in elevated blood pressure and hyperlipidemia (high blood lipids), significantly elevating his risk for cardiovascular disease—a chronic disease that disproportionately affects black/African American men. However, Jefferson does not die from risk for, or diagnosis of, chronic disease; he is executed after being found guilty, based on the pigment of his skin, for a crime he did not commit. Black/African American men are incarcerated at a greater per capita rate than other racial/ethnic groups and are more likely to be executed for crimes. This is the direct result of racism and social determinants.

One objective of public health is to implement health education programs within communities and health departments. Health

educators are often the individuals who do this job. They connect high-risk individuals to disease prevention and health promotion activities, and, by default, they become the face of public health. Unfortunately—in part because of the wider, culturally accepted, market justice ideology—health educators are often provided resources and tools sufficient only for intervention at the individual level of disease prevention and health promotion, irrespective of the broader social levels known to influence health. This is problematic: if wider social determinants produce health and disease, intervening at the individual level will not address the social fundamental causes of disease, and interventions will likely fail to produce the desired outcomes.

The characters in *A Lesson Before Dying* confront multiple social fundamental causes of disease and death, including racism, sexism, economic inequality, lack of educational opportunity, and unequal treatment before the law. These causes exist far beyond the ability of any individual to resolve. Yet, Grant Wiggins, the young, black, male schoolteacher who serves as the sole teacher at the one-room schoolhouse that educates all children of color in the Quarter, is presented to readers as the essential key to improving the lives of the many characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*, including Jefferson, the black man on death row for a crime he did not commit.

Overreliance on individual health educators to resolve major public health problems is unwise public policy: individual health educators and their programs are not able to change the fundamental causes of disease. If individuals use tobacco to cope with discrimination and prejudice, then, without redressing these social ills, smoking cessation programs will never achieve the desired outcomes. Similarly, despite his community's hopes, Wiggins, one individual acting as the community educator, could never achieve the desired outcome of saving Jefferson, because the circumstances that

positioned Jefferson on death row are fundamentally beyond any individual's control. From the outset of the story, the reader readily understands the hopelessness of Wiggins's efforts. Nevertheless, Wiggins is seemingly expected to single-handedly save Jefferson—if not from execution, then from the indignities of imprisonment, apparent lack of spirituality, poor social interactions, unsightly physical appearance, and poor health and quality of life. And yet, though Wiggins helps Jefferson, as a single person he is not capable of changing the intersecting, multilevel systems that have brought about Jefferson's predicament.

As an academic public health professional, I spend a great deal of my time training the current and future public health workforce, as well as conducting research with the ultimate goal of resolving health disparities. Yet, like Wiggins, I sometimes find myself frustrated by a cultural and professional milieu that emphasizes market justice and retains a pervasive disregard for empirical public health. I am disheartened that I may never be able to convince all public health students and practitioners of the salience of social determinants of health and disease, and the imperative of a social justice perspective if we are ever to eliminate health inequities. In times of my own frustration, I find some solace in a sentiment from Allan Johnson. He wrote that these problems require “complex and long-term change. . . . This means that if we're going to be part of the solution, we have to let go of the idea that change doesn't happen unless we're around to see it.”<sup>1</sup> Like Wiggins, Jefferson, and all the characters in *A Lesson Before Dying*, we must not surrender but press on, toward solutions that achieve equity.

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1. Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 2nd ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006), 131.



Our goal wasn't to change minds nor even to provoke. It was our objective for the play, in addition to readings of the book, to spark meaningful dialog in our community.



Keii Welcome, Austin-East Magnet High School, 2016

# A Play in My Pocket

*David B. Byrd*

What does one do when they experience a piece of art that has touched them profoundly, challenged their thinking, and made them question how they previously viewed the world? In some cases, one can simply write it off as an experience never to be felt again. Or maybe it's the first of many similar experiences to be encountered throughout one's life. But it's also possible the experience is best remembered, best revered, by simply placing it in one's pocket and carrying it forever.

I first experienced *A Lesson Before Dying* during the early summer of 2002. The novel, by Ernest J. Gaines, had been selected as the community read for the One City, One Book program sponsored by the Greensboro Public Library. I was working at Triad Stage, the brand-new regional theatre located in the heart of downtown Greensboro, North Carolina. We were scheduled to present the play adaptation by noted playwright Romulus Linney in the fall of 2002, as part of the theatre's second season. There was already a ton of buzz in the air about the production, the novel, and the many ancillary programs associated with both. I cozied up in a comfortable armchair at my favorite coffee shop and dug in. Little did I know the book, and subsequent play, would follow me for another decade and a half.

The writing, the subject matter, the age of the main character—all of these particulars jumped out at me immediately as I was newly

graduated from college. Jefferson, one of the central figures of this story, would never see his high school graduation, let alone a college commencement. This was profound for me. And as I sat thumbing page after page after page, it also wasn't lost on me that, just two blocks away on February 1, 1960, the Greensboro Four staged one of the most influential sit-ins of the civil rights movement. It's an event one could surmise had a significant impact on Ernest J. Gaines as he came of age in the Jim Crow South.

Gaines was a lauded writer. His novel *A Lesson Before Dying* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction in 1993. He was also a Wallace Stegner Fellow, a Guggenheim Fellow, and in 1993, the year this particular novel was released, a MacArthur Foundation Fellow. I didn't know much about the author until this first encounter with his work but remembered his novel *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* adorning the shelves of school libraries throughout my youth.

Our production at Triad Stage was a hit. The play itself was incredibly well produced, but even more striking were the connections made with the Greensboro community. Never before had the theatre connected in such a way with its various stakeholders. The partnership with many community organizations—the Greensboro Public Library chief among them—proved to be meaningful and substantial. The impact of true community engagement would stick with me and later become a significant focus of my career.

I left Greensboro and Triad Stage to pursue graduate school but was never the same. This novel and play had started to influence the type of work I was drawn to and how I viewed the world around me. It seemed a fortunate opportunity to be in that place, at that time, and to have a hand in something as special as creating theatre that not only reflected the community but reflected common humanity.



Hopefully, there would be healing, conversation—and maybe at some point there would be change.

Fast forward to the fall of 2015 in Knoxville, Tennessee, where life would bring new opportunities, and again I was able to be in a special place at a special time. *A Lesson Before Dying* would again play a part.

The Clarence Brown Theatre at the University of Tennessee was in the midst of season selection—a long and laborious task. In concert with Producing Artistic Director Cal MacLean, we went back and forth with various season scenarios and possibilities. You see, there was a lot to consider: productions that would captivate and provide ample training for our students, plays our community would embrace, theatre offerings that had a point of view or would create opportunities for meaningful community engagement. Bingo! I reached into my pocket and pulled out a project that would be an excellent addition to our robust season.

After initial conversations with our colleagues at the Knox County Public Library regarding their interest in a community partnership, *A Lesson Before Dying* at the Clarence Brown Theatre was officially a sure thing. It would be included in our 2016–17 season. In addition to attracting top talent from outside Knoxville, the project provided an exciting opportunity for two of our MFA Acting candidates to flex their muscles in an important play. Jude Carl Vincent would portray the central character, Jefferson, and Carlène Pochette would bring Vivian to life. The production's design team, comprised almost entirely of MFA Design candidates, created an extraordinary physical world for the story. The joint mission of the Clarence Brown Theatre and UT's theatre department was well represented by this outstanding production.

The timing of the production and its inclusion in our season wasn't an accident. Tamir Rice, Michael Brown, Freddie Gray, and so many others were in the forefront of our brains amid a rising number of African American deaths in police custody. A quote from one of the American regional theatre's pioneers, Zelda Fichandler, still rings true: "Theatre is a space where we test out and witness what it means to be human; in finding these meanings, we become still more human. . . . If we need to be told it, the theatre tells us that we're all in this together." Our goal wasn't to change minds nor even to provoke. It was our objective for the play, in addition to readings of the book, to spark meaningful dialog in our community. With the help of our many partners throughout the entire process—most notably the Knox County Public Library and the Big Read program—I believe we succeeded on that particular front.

Our slate of ancillary programs was rich with diverse offerings. We partnered with the YWCA and Knoxville Area Urban League on a CBT Family Feast, an event that included a buffet dinner followed by a performance of the play, at the bargain price of \$10. The only stipulation was that patrons attend as a family unit, whatever that looked like for them. It was beyond heartwarming to see multiple generations of families attend the theatre, most for the very first time, together. Another program that is seared into my brain is a partnership with Austin-East High School. We collaborated with the school's art class on an interdisciplinary project in which the students were assigned a prompt ("What does it mean to be human?") and asked to respond with some sort of artistic expression. The art works the class created were stunning—personal, profound, and (unlike Jefferson at the start of Gaines's novel) very much full of life. We displayed the pieces in our lobby throughout the run of the play. We also celebrated partnerships with on-campus entities such as the UT Libraries, engaging those in our most immediate community. These

are just three of some two-dozen programs coordinated in fruitful collaboration with eighteen community partners. The programs laid the groundwork for future connections and engagement—more than we ever could have imagined.

This production was just a start. Its inclusion in our season, the substantial engagement with our community, and the many doors it opened at the University of Tennessee and in the greater Knoxville region had a profound impact on us as an organization. The theatre, an ephemeral art form, helped expose what is oftentimes hard to discuss and process. Perhaps we found that little bit of healing? It's my hope that everyone who witnessed the work, either in person as told by wonderful artists or in the crisp pages of the book, saw themselves, their community, and humanity in general. I'd like to think they tucked *Lesson* in their pockets as well.



## Note on the Editor

Robin A. Bedenbaugh is coordinator of library marketing and communication at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Libraries. Her research addresses changes in scholarly communication and publishing, as well as new models for disseminating and evaluating academic research.



## About the Contributors

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CONNOR HESS, a junior in theatre and psychology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, portrayed Deputy Sheriff Paul Bonin in the Clarence Brown Theatre production of *A Lesson Before Dying*, February 24–March 13, 2016.

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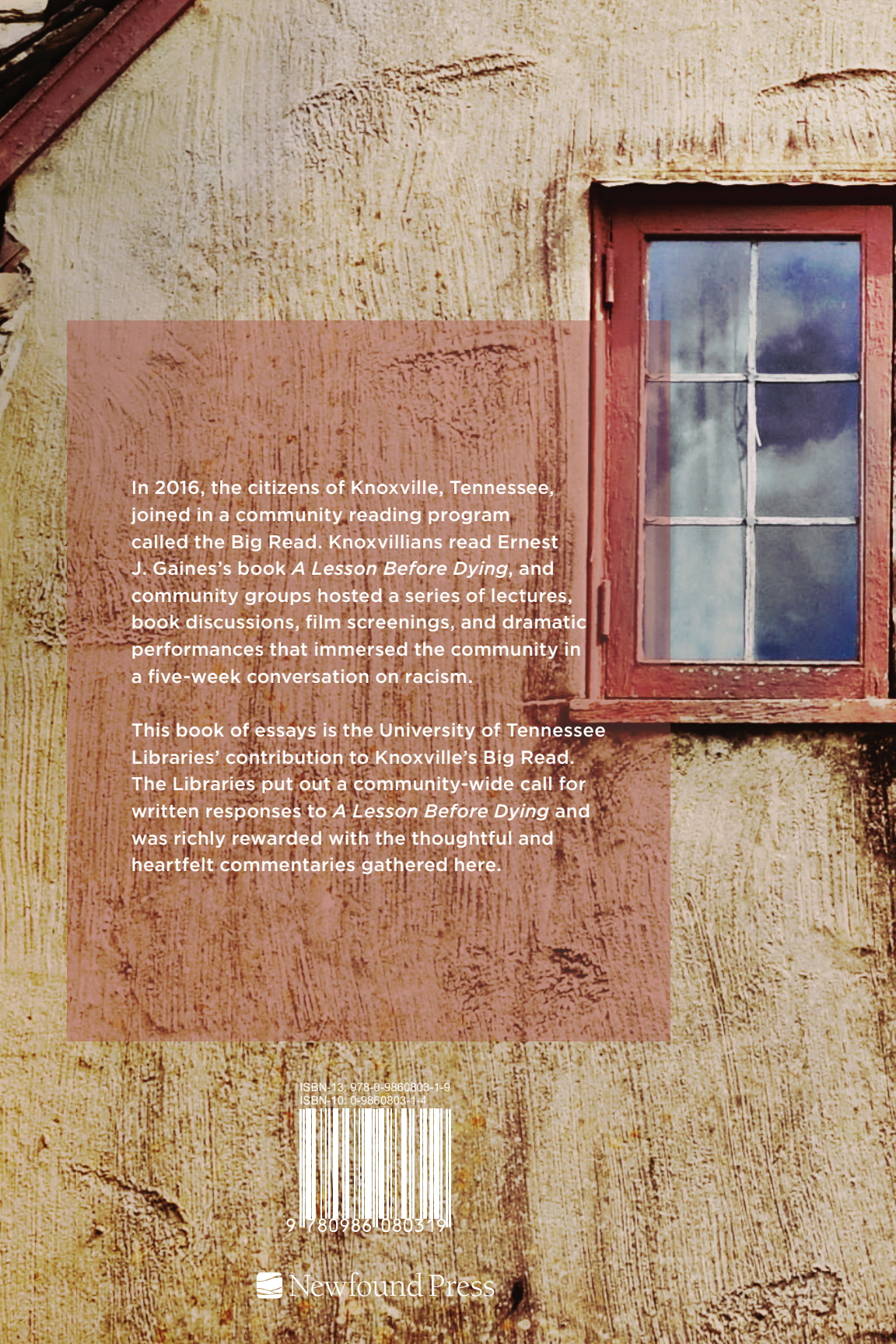
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In 2016, the citizens of Knoxville, Tennessee, joined in a community reading program called the Big Read. Knoxvilleians read Ernest J. Gaines's book *A Lesson Before Dying*, and community groups hosted a series of lectures, book discussions, film screenings, and dramatic performances that immersed the community in a five-week conversation on racism.

This book of essays is the University of Tennessee Libraries' contribution to Knoxville's Big Read. The Libraries put out a community-wide call for written responses to *A Lesson Before Dying* and was richly rewarded with the thoughtful and heartfelt commentaries gathered here.

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