

A Lesson Before Dying

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Since 1976, four hundred and ninety four blacks have been executed in our country. This is more than half the amount of executions of whites, although Caucasians make up a much greater percentage of our population.

This powerful short novel tells the story of Jefferson, a young black man, who was sentenced to execution in the Jim Crow days of the 1940s in Cajun Louisiana. Grant Wiggins, one of the few college-educated blacks in the area, narrates the story.

It opens with a liquor store robbery where Jefferson unfortunately happens to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. Soon an all-white jury convicts the young man, and he is sentenced to the electric chair.

Attending the trial are his godmother, Miss Emma, who raised him, and Tante Louise, who brought up Grant and with whom he still lives.

Grant teaches the young black children, and is big fear is that they will grow up and live under the same oppressive system he does. Grant wants desperately to leave, to go to California where things are not perfect, but much better for black Americans.

At the trial, someone says Jefferson will die like the hog he is. This makes Miss Emma, old and weary of life, very angry and she seeks out Grant to educate her son, so he can die proudly like a man.

Grant has problems of his own. His girlfriend, Vivian, seeks a divorce but is having trouble getting one from her husband with whom she is separated. Grant cannot leave Vivian whom he loves deeply.

Soon Grant is standing for hours up at the big house waiting for the sheriff to decide whether the teacher will be allowed to visit the prisoner Jefferson. Finally, after being ignored for hours, the sheriff grants Wiggins permission to visit but only if he does not make trouble.

The book describes the lowland country, the sugar cane, the flooded river, the quarter where many of the people live, the church where everyone sings a favorite hymn before describing where they will spend eternity.

Gaines speaks to the power of brotherhood, kindness, and self-respect in a world that mistreats and abuses you, and in Jefferson's case, kills you. The chapter written in Jefferson's own words is poignant and offers hope in the power of the word to heal even when it cannot change things, at least immediately.

This wonderful novel will inspire you.

We will discuss it on Sunday, Feb. 7th in Room 2B at 2 p.m.

Posted by Dory L. on February 4, 2016

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