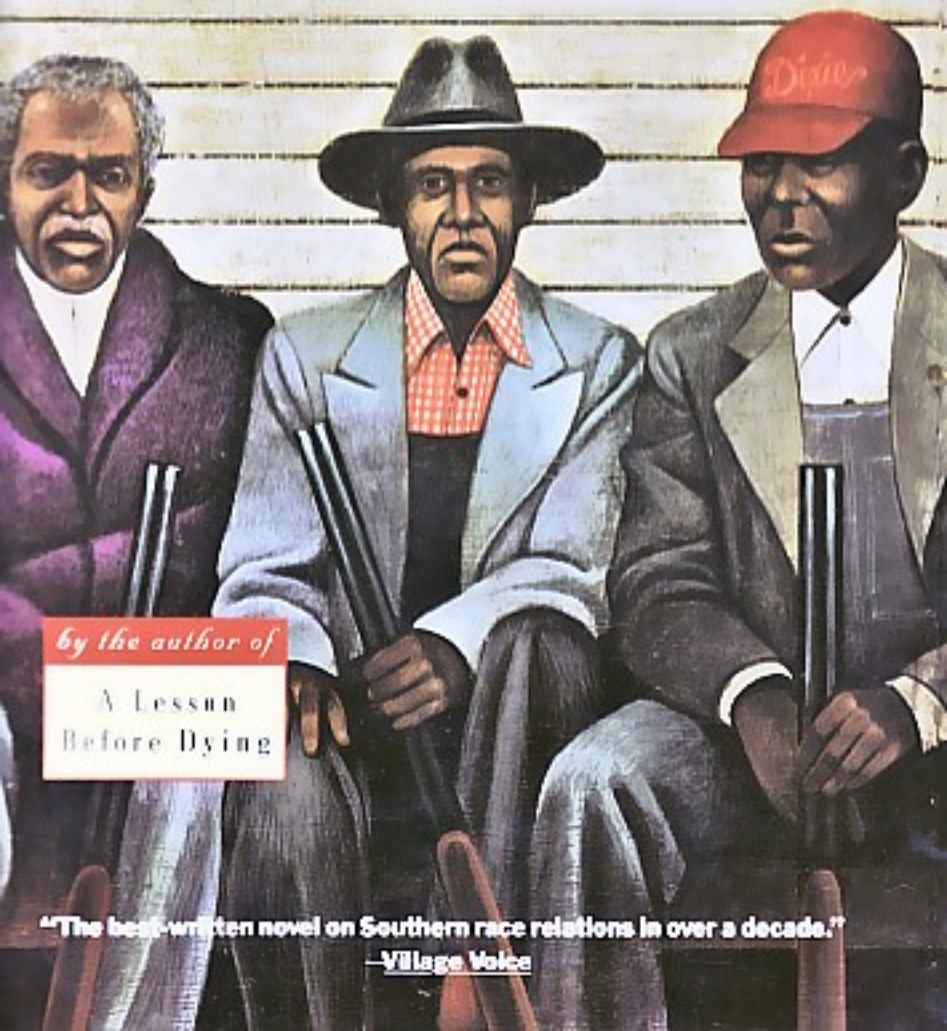


ERNEST J. GAINES

A GATHERING OF OLD MEN



by the author of

A Lesson
Before Dying

"The best-written novel on Southern race relations in over a decade."

—Village Voice

George Eliot, Jr.

aka

Snookum

I heard Candy out in the front yard calling Gram Mon. Me and Toddy and Minnie was sitting at the table eating, and Gram Mon was at the stove looking in the pot to see if she had enough food left in there for supper. I could hear Candy out in the yard, going: "Oh, Aunt Glo; oh, Aunt Glo; oh, Aunt Glo." I jumped up from my chair to go see what she wanted, but Gram Mon told me to sit back down there and finish my food, 'cause my name wasn't Glo, or Aunt. She looked at me long enough for it to set in; then she started toward the front door where Candy was still going: "Oh, Aunt Glo; oh, Aunt Glo; oh, Aunt Glo."

Old Toddy with his snagged-teef self looked at me and grinned, 'cause he thought Gram Mon had hurt my feeling when she told me to sit back down. I checked one of my fist, but he knowed I couldn't hit him, 'cause he had already caught me and Minnie playing mama and papa in the weeds, and he told me I had a year when I couldn't do him nothing no matter what he did me, and if I did he was go'n tell Gram Mon what he caught us doing. He told me he could grin at

me all he wanted to, and he could hit me, and kick me, and pinch me (in church, or home, he didn't care), and he could steal my cake if he wanted to, or my candy if I had any, and he could lose all his marbles to me, and I better not take them back, and I better not gig his spinning top when we played giggging, 'cause if I did he was go'n tell Gram Mon what he saw me and Minnie trying to do in the weeds. He said it was go'n be like that a whole year, if I liked it or not. It started just 'fore Candy started calling Gram Mon, 'cause we had just come in to eat dinner when I heard her calling out there in the yard.

I heard Candy saying: "Snookum in there?"

"At the table eating. What's the matter, Candy?" Gram Mon said.

"Get Snookum out here," Candy said.

"Snookum did something wrong?" Gram Mon asked her.

"Hurry, Aunt Glo," Candy said.

"Snookum?" Gram Mon called me.

Old Toddy and Minnie jumped up too, and Gram Mon looked over her shoulder and said, "Get back in there and eat them turnips. I called Snookum."

"How come Snookum don't have to eat his turnips?" Toddy said. "How come just me and Minnie got to eat turnips?"

"'Cause I called him," Gram Mon said. "Now, get back in there and finish them turnips."

"I ain't no turnip-eating machine," Toddy said.

"You better turn into one 'fore I get back in that kitchen," Gram Mon said. "Snookum, Candy want talk to you. Toddy, you and Minnie finish them turnips," Gram Mon said.

"Snookum can act a fool and laugh at me out there," Toddy said. "But he know I got something on him."

Candy was standing in the yard close to the steps when I came out on the garry. She wore a white shirt and khaki pants and brown shoes with little gold buckles. Her hair was light

brown and dark brown and cut short, almost short like a man's hair.

"Come here, Snookum," she said.

I jumped down on the ground where she was, and she grabbed me by the shoulders with both hands. She leaned over and brought her face close to mine, and her eyes, the color of blue smoke, looked wild and scared. I was thinking I had done something wrong and she was mad at me for it.

"Now, listen," she said. "I want you to run, and I don't want you to stop running. I want you to go tell Rufe and Reverend Jameson and Corrine and the rest of them to gather at Mathu's house right away. And I want you to go to the front, and I want you to—listen to me good, now," she said, squeezing my shoulders and hurting me a little bit—"go up to the house and see if Miss Merle's there. If she is, tell her I say come quick. No, if she's there tell her to call Lou and tell Lou to get here quick, then she get here quick. If she's not there, tell Janey to call her and Lou and tell them to get here quick. Don't waste time on that phone talking, just get here quick. Don't do nothing but get here quick. You heard what I said, Snookum?"

"What I'm telling all them people to get here quick for?" I asked her.

"That's none of your business, Snookum. You're nothing but a little boy. Now, get moving and don't stop running."

I shot out of the yard. When I hit the road, I saw the tractor in front of Mathu's house. The motor was running, I could hear it, I could see the smoke, but Charlie wasn't on the tractor. He had two big loads of cane hitched to the back of the tractor, but he wasn't on the tractor. On the other side of the road, in front of Mathu's house, I could see Candy's big black car shining in the sun. I knowed Candy didn't tell me to tell Mathu anything, but looked to me like since all them other people was gathering at his house, looked to me like he ought to know what was going on, too. So when I



Set on a Louisiana sugarcane plantation in the 1970s, *A GATHERING OF OLD MEN* is a powerful depiction of racial tensions arising over the death of a Cajun farmer at the hands of a black man.

"Early in this eloquent novel...a sheriff is summoned to a sugarcane plantation, where he finds one young white woman, about eighteen old black men, and one dead Cajun farmer. The sheriff is sure he knows who killed the Cajun—although each of the men is toting a shotgun, only one of them could hit a barn door—but threats and slaps fail to change their stories. Each one claims guilt, and all but one promise to provoke a riot at the courthouse if the sheriff tries to make an arrest. In the meantime, they wait for a lynch mob that the dead man's father—like his son, a notorious brute—is sure to launch.... Before it is over, everyone involved has been surprised by something: the old black men not least of all, by their first taste of power and pride."

—THE NEW YORKER

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