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A story of a man brought to reckon with his buried past. Reverend Martin comes face to face with the sins of his youth in the person of Robert X, a young, unkempt stranger who arrives in town for a mysterious "meeting" with the Reverend.

In My Father's House Details

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From Reader Review In My Father's House for online ebook

Lawyer says

In My Father's House: Ernest Gaines' Novel of Living with One's Past

In My Father's House by Ernest J. Gaines, published in 1978, was chosen by members of On the Southern Literary Trail as a Group Read for January, 2015. Special thanks to Trail Member Jane of the UK, who nominated Professor Gaines' riveting novel of the inability to escape the consequences of one's past.

Ernest Gaines Walks Near his Birthplace

"In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?"--John 14:2, NRSV

"About a month ago I was talking with a newspaper man--a man who's covered executions all over the South. Not just here in Louisiana--Texas, Mississippi, Georgia--all over. He's seen fifty, sixty of them. Most of them, black men. Said he never heard one called daddy's name at that last hour. Hear mama called, heard gran'mon, nanane--Jesus, God. Not one time he heard daddy called." Reverend Phillip Martin

First Edition, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1978. I had the great pleasure of meeting Professor Gaines at the Louisiana Festival of the Book in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in November, 2014. Professor Gaines kindly signed first editions of several of my copies of his works, including this one.

Where Ernest J. Gaines portrayed the long struggle for freedom in The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman displaying the strength and courage of African-Americans in Louisiana, concluding with the active emergence of the Civil Rights Movement, Gaines turns to the personal tragedy of one man, Reverend Phillip Martin, the revered advocate for civil rights in the small town of St. Adrienne, following the death of Martin Luther King. Phillip continues to carry the flame.

With King's death, many blacks and whites have come to feel that the movement is over. However, Reverend Martin refuses to accept that as long as any injustice remains in his town. That injustice is in the person of Albert Chenal, a Cajun store owner who refuses to pay his black workers a fair wage.

Chenal Friday is approaching. Reverend Martin, the President of the St. Adrienne Civil Rights Committee will lead his people in a demonstration to either make Chenal treat his workers fairly or shut him down. Among the leadership of the committee is Mills, a deacon of the church, who once worked for Chenal's father. Mills knew that the older Chenal raped any black woman he found presentable. However, he never spoke out, out of what he shamefully admits was his own cowardice. Each of the committee identify with his cowardice with the exception of Reverend Martin and his young assistant Jonathan, the associate pastor, who has only been a member of the movement for eight years. As Martin is, he is fearless. But he lacks the wisdom of knowing what he is up against.

But Chenal Friday will not occur. For Reverend Martin is a man who has led two separate lives. For the past fifteen years, he has been a leader among his people. He has brought about positive change in racial relations in St. Adrienne. He is married, with two children. He is a paragon of strength, character, and courage.

However, Martin is haunted by a past in which he has made mistakes. Before he found God and his voice as an advocate for his people, Martin had fathered three children by a woman, Johanna, on the old Reno Plantation. Denying responsibility for his family because of his immaturity and his perceived lack of opportunity, Martin sent his children and their mother away. The last time he saw them was when his running buddy Chippo Simon took them away from the plantation in a wagon. Although he well remembers Johanna's name, he cannot even remember the names of his children. And he has eased his conscience over the mistakes of his past by the sacrifices he has made for his community.

Gaines, in a deeply introspective novel, examines the effects of the past on present. He asks whether there is ever a point when one's public actions counterbalance one's private sins.

The pivotal event occurs in the first chapter when a thin young black man shows up on the steps of a boarding house claiming to be Robert X, "one of them," a Black Muslim. The landlady, Virginia, is suspicious of the young man. Yet her conscience will not allow her to turn him away. Where will he go, if she does, she asks herself. Virginia recognizes that something is wrong with the young man, but he is resolute in maintaining silence in response to her questions.

Over the coming days, Robert X is frequently seen walking the streets of St. Adrienne. At times he is sitting on the back of Reverend Martin's church. At others he is seen standing across the street, watching the Reverend's house. When asked why he is St. Adrienne, his only answer is that he is there for a conference, that he is to meet a man.

Robert X attends a party at Phillip Martin's home with two young teachers who have been recruited in the upcoming demonstration against Chenal. Martin catches the young man staring at him and intuitively knows he is his son. As he crosses the room to acknowledge him, he falls. Immediately surrounded by concerned members of the committee, he allows a pharmacist to explain that the Reverend has exhausted himself. Martin does not refute the reason for his collapse.

Over the next few days, Martin will fail to reveal the reason for his collapse, not knowing how to disclose his past. Essentially he denies his son three times as Peter denied Christ.

Only when he receives word that his son has been picked up by the Parish Sheriff, Nolan, does he take action. Going to see the Sheriff, Martin offers to pay bail for the release of his son. Nolan is surprised that the good Reverend has had a family out of wedlock. Nolan knows of Friday's plan to demonstrate against Chenal. He refuses to take money for bail. He will release Martin's son only on the condition that Martin put a stop to the Chenal demonstration. In a moment of personal weakness, Martin makes the deal.

On obtaining his son's release, they can share no conversation. Ultimately Robert tells Martin that he has come there for revenge for what Martin had allowed to happen to his family by abandoning them.

"Revenge? Phillip asked him. "Revenge for what?"

"For destroying me. For making me the eunuch I am. For destroying my family: my mama, my brother, my sister."

"How did I destroy you, destroy the family?" Phillip grabbed his arm. The boy looked down at the hand a moment, then pried it loose and slammed it back.

"You my Son," Phillip said. "I have my rights. I can touch you if I want."

"I'm a moment of your lust," the boy said.

By evening word has spread through members of the Civil Rights Committee that Martin has betrayed his people's cause for reasons of personal interest. A quorum of the Committee votes Martin out as President of the Committee.

Speaking with his wife, Alma, Martin says:

"What brought my boy back here, or what sent him back here I'll find out in Baton Rouge. That's important to me. I want to reach my boy. What I did this morning it seems like it's wrong to a lot of people, but if he was in that jail right now, and that was all I had to offer, I'd do it all over again. I've paid some dues in this town, some heave dues. Your life's been threatened, my children's lives been threatened, mine been threatened. All because I kept pushing for the people out there. Crosses burnt on my lawn, my house been shot in, my church been shot up-- all because I kept pushing for the people out there. Well, this morning I pushed a little bit for myself, and I don't care what the people think."

Martin sets out on a search for his old friend Chippo Simon. Only Chippo might have been in a position to have seen his family. Martin must know what happened to his family in order to repair some form of bond with his own son whose name he cannot even remember.

Martin finds Chippo who reluctantly tells Martin the story of what happened to his family after he had sent them away. It is Chippo who tells him the name of his children and that Robert is actually Etienne. The things endured by Johanna and her children are almost to painful to tell. And it is a story that brings Martin's past crashing around his years.

I have deliberately excluded the details of what happened to Martin's first family. I will only say that the consequences of his past actions are not yet complete, and that Martin must question his reputation, his present life, his current family through the eyes of a man fully cognizant of what he has done throughout his life. Gaines drives home the point that a man's integrity in the treatment of family, no matter when sired, is a factor figured in to the action of public leadership and one's own self esteem.

Ah, Phillip, if only you had told Etienne, when he needed to hear it, you had many rooms in your home--for him.

This is the fourth novel by Gaines I have read. With each work, I am drawn to his novels more strongly than before. As with each of his books I have read, I recommend *In My Father's House* without reservation.

Rating: A solid 5 Star read

EXTRAS!

An Interview with Ernest J. Gaines discussing how he writes, what influences him, and how he teaches writing.

A Video Conversation with Ernest J. Gaines If you've not heard him, you'll be enchanted by him as I was when I had the chance to speak with him.

SOUNDTRACK!

Ernest Gaines loves music. He has a collection of over five hundred albums, yes, albums, before vinyl became cool again. He enjoys classical, jazz, big band; but *his* music as he describes it is the Blues. Here's a selection from some of his favorite blues singers.

Bessie Smith, "Backwater Blues" about the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927.

Huddie William Ledbetter, *Leadbelly* "The Angola Blues

For more information on Ernest Gaines and music, see *Mozart and Leadbelly* by Ernest J. Gaines, Alfred A. Knopf, NY, NY, 2005.

Also recommended: *This Louisiana Thing That Drives Me: The Legacy of Ernest J. Gaines* by Reggie Scott Young and Wiley Cash. This is a collection of photographs and quotations of Ernest J. Gaines, capturing the essence of the man, his works, and his life. Highly recommended.

Connie says

Reverend Philip Martin is an upstanding black Civil Rights leader and minister living in a small Louisiana town in the 1970s. He grew up in poverty, but found God and his calling in working for the black community. Now he's a respected husband and father. A young man from his past comes into town carrying a gun, full of anger and seeking revenge against Philip Martin. Philip finds that all his current good works cannot make up for his past mistakes when he selfishly avoided his responsibility for other people.

The book also shows the frustration of many black males who found themselves unemployed, or in menial low-paying jobs, often after risking their lives for their country in the Vietnam War. Some employers were paying their black employees lower wages for doing the same job as a white person. One angry veteran was planning to burn down the country with a guerrilla group, and let civilization start all over again. Gaines shows the frustration and violence that comes from lack of power.

In My Father's House is beautifully written with outstanding dialogue. However, I wished that the book delved more into the reasons Philip abandoned the important people of his past. The story explores the important themes of manhood, responsibility, and the relationship between fathers and sons. The book asks which is more important--working for the good of the community or spending quality time with your family. There was some hope in the ending that Reverend Martin might find the balance with the aid of his wife.

Laura says

Powerful! Gaines makes this book so enticing and easy to read that it was hard to put this book down. The characters will torture your soul. The dialogue between the characters feel as though I was actually in the room with them, experiencing every detail. This book was a group read for On the Southern Literary Trail. This was a phenomenal read. I recommend it, highly!!!!

Jessica says

This is my most recent Ernest J. Gaines book. Again, beautifully written, attention grabbing right from the beginning through to the end. The characters were well thought out and the story true to life. A fantastic read, highly recommended. :)

Rachel says

In My Father's House is both simple and dense, which is a rare combination. The plot, prose, and characters at first seem extremely straightforward, almost to the point of cliche - the mysterious and threatening figure in the book shows up on a dark and rainy night. But once the book taught me how to read it, I saw that the simplicity of the text was emblematic of one of the themes of the book, that the simplicity of our outward lives echo a more distorted and complicated self. I loved the echoes in this book, the way that facts and phrases and even people would repeat themselves in ways small and large and predictable and unexpected.

The subject matter of this book is HEAVY. It's about living with racism and family secrets and confronting our worst selves. Deep, deep stuff. But Gaines is sort of wonderfully brief, creating something spare and meaningful. It's also, somehow, funny at times. Highly recommended.

Diane Barnes says

This is the first Ernest Gaines book I've read, and I concur with his fans that he is a powerful and important writer. His language is simple and spare, very descriptive and emotional. I loved this book and read it quickly. Even though it was a mere 215 pages, there was a lot of action, and a lot of inner turmoil in the characters. It took place in 1970, just 2 years after the death of Martin Luther King, and the main character was also a minister who had made a name for himself as a civil rights activist in his small town just outside of Baton Rouge, Louisiana.

Reverend Phillip Martin is a married man with 3 children, a fine home and car, expensive clothes and jewelry, and a lot of respect and support in his community. What we find out very quickly is that he is also a man with a past, other women, other children {none of whom he can remember the name of} and all were abandoned by him with no thought of guilt or responsibility. Then, of course, he found the Lord. The Lord showed him the way, allowed him to become a man of means, and gave him a younger wife, and 3 fine, smart children.

Apparently, the Lord didn't expect him to do anything about the other women and children he had abandoned. Until one day, his oldest son comes to find him. This sets off a series of events that enables Phillip Martin to atone for his actions.

Except, not really. All Phillip Martin really cares about is making himself feel better about things, but how his actions affect anyone else is not his problem. He treats his wife and children as objects around the house, coming to his wife for sex, but not much more. In fact, all women are treated with disdain by the Reverend, with the exception of his Godmother still living at the plantation where he was raised, but she thinks he can do no wrong. So, naturally.

As this story progressed, I found myself liking Phillip Martin less and less. The end of the story finds him lamenting why God has abandoned him, because he had done what he thought was right, how could God let these things happen to him, when he had tried so hard? I hear that from people all the time, Why Me? Why Me? To which my response is {not usually spoken}, Why Not You? Why everybody, else, and not you? What makes you so special? Sorry for letting my anger out here, but this type of hypocrite, the Phillip Martins of the world, who present a public persona one way, but inside are completely different, really make me mad. With the end of this book, even with all the things that had happened to him, and to others because of him, Reverend Martin was still thinking it was all about him.

Now that I have all that off my chest, let me explain some of the things I loved about this story. That two women, Beverly and his wife, Alma, give him some things to think about when he is at his lowest. Beverly is a schoolteacher who tells him why he needs to continue his work in civil rights with some very stirring words that made me sit up and take notice. And Alma gets the last words in the book, choosing to stand behind him and help him start again. I found it interesting that the women in this book were very strong characters, black and downtrodden, yes, but doing what they thought was right. There was also a chapter where Phillip gives a ride to a young, black Vietnam veteran, who wants literally to set fire to the world to set things right. His plan involved a million black men with nothing but a match, burn it all down and start fresh. He didn't want to wait for slow change in attitudes. The exchange between them in the car was mind altering.

The best literature makes us think and feel, and changes our minds in one way or another. This book did that for me, so yes, Mr. Gaines is a great writer, and I will surely read more of his work. I subtracted a star because I despised Phillip Martin so, but maybe I should give it back for making me so mad.

January 16 - REVISED MY STAR RATING TO 5. Ernest Gaines created a character that disturbed me and got under my skin. I've been furious at Phillip Martin for 2 days.

Tanisa Bernard says

Classy author writing classic books!

Katherine Bennett-wilson says

It wasn't a bad read but I thought the author left something out at the end . In discussing that with a few of my book club members , a few felt that way too. The question is this his writing style? In a Lesson Before Dying ,it also felt unfinished.. It is a good choice for a book club read.

J says

(FROM JACKET)IN MY FATHER'S HOUSE is the compelling novel of a man brought to reckon with his buried past. In St. Adrienne, a small rural black community in Louisiana, Reverend Phillip Martin-a respected minister and civil rights leader, devoted husband and father, a man of strength and rectitude-comes face to face with the sins of his youth in the person of Robert X, a young, unkempt, vaguely sinister stranger who arrives in town for a mysterious "meeting" with the Reverend. In the confrontation between the two, the young man's secret burden explodes into the open, and Phillip Martin begins a long-neglected journey into his youth to discover how destructive his former life was, for himself and for those around him.

Camie says

Another Gaines book with a walloping punch. Written in his usual understated quiet style this book also goes straight to the heart. Reverend Phillip Martin has put his previous life behind him and become a highly respected man in St. Adrienne, Louisiana, not only as a minister, but as a strong civil rights leader, husband , and father. Things change quickly when a mysterious young stranger comes to town seeking him out, and he's abruptly brought face to face with his past. 5 stars - catching up on The Southern Literary Trail

Carolyn says

This could have been an all-night read, but I forced myself to pace myself and put it down. Gripping from the mysterious start following the tormented loner - the son - to his encounter with the upright community leader - the father - and then the aftermath as the father faces his own failings. Beautifully constructed narrative.

Diane S ? says

Review to follow.

Kimberly says

This was a good read. This story took you through times when people of color were still fighting for their rights. It also, told of a man who was wild as a young man that became a leader in his community. While he was living life his pass was looking for revenge, because of the troubles in there lives.

Emily says

Despite the rave reviews from most people, the beginning of this book is so slow and dry that it was hard to make it very far. I wanted, really wanted, to get into this one. The writing is bland and the characters are flat and the plot just takes too long to progress.

Sandy says

Ernest J. Gaines's novel *In My Father's House* is set in Louisiana around 1970. The Rev. Philip Martin is a civil rights leader in the declining years of a movement whose strongest, most visible members have been killed. The gains the movement has made, however significant, mean little in the daily lives of black Americans in the deep South.

What, after all, is the point of being able to sit at lunch counters, share water fountains, ride on buses with white people if you can't confront the truth of your own past with integrity and courage? Facing the truth individually and collectively with grace as well as integrity is a truer measure of freedom than any statute.

So the Rev. Martin learns after Robert X. pays him a surprise visit and upsets the illusion he has created of himself as a symbol of rising prosperity, competent leadership, and hope in the black community he leads. As he faces his past, his world crumbles around him, and the cadre of black men who share leadership with him abandon him.

Significantly after the men scatter, Martin's wife Alma remains. She is the steady, reliable source of strength whose abiding presence leads Martin to the question: What has the Civil Rights Movement really accomplished if the gulf remains between fathers and sons? Whose house is my father's house, and where is it? In the post-Civil Rights Movement South, it is an empty place, but it is one that can be filled and will--with Alma's help.
