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Ernest Gaines: 02-27-1969

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Gregory Fitz Gerald

Peter Marchant

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GAINES: “Bonbon was a simple man and a brutal man, was the way Aunt Ca'line described him. He was brutal because he'd been brought up in brute-taught world and in brute-taught times. The big house had given him a horse and a whip-- he did have a whip, at first-- and they told him to ride behind the Blacks in the field and get as much work out of them as he could. He did this, but he did more. He feel in love with one of the Black women. He couldn't just take her like he was supposed to take her, like they'd given him permission to take her. No, he had to fall in love. When the children came, he loved them too. He couldn't tell them he loved them, he wasn't allowed to tell them that. He probably never told it to Pauline and maybe he never told it to himself. But, he could feel it. And when he did, he tried to show it by giving them toys and clothes. No, no, no, he never gave it to them, he gave it to Pauline to give to them. When they made five years old, he gave them a BB gun to play with together. Aunt Ca'line said the moment they learned how to shoot the gun, nobody and nothing was safe on the place. If they weren't shooting at another child, they were shooting at a dog or a chicken. They put a hole in the back of Jobbo's little girl's neck and Jobbo had to take the girl to the doctor and pay the doctor bill himself. They shot the mule that Charlie Jordan was riding and the mule threw Charlie in the ditch. While he was trying to get up, Billy and Willy kept on shooting at him. Charlie never did get back on the mule. He ran one way, the mule took off in the other direction.”

[Music]

FITZGERALD: “Welcome to the Writers Forum. A series of interviews with leading literary figures in America. I'm Gregory Fitzgerald, host of the Forum. And with me today, to interview our guest, is Peter Marchant of State University College at Brockport's English Department. And our guest today is the noted Black writer, Ernest Gaines, author of two novels, *Catherine Carmier* and *Of Love and Dust*, and a bestselling book of short stories entitled *Bloodline*. Welcome to the Writers Forum, Mr. Gaines.”

GAINES: “Thank you very much.”

MARCHANT: “May I ask you a question? You do something, which for me, is quite remarkable. You're dealing with material that's very hot political stuff. The brutal, White overseer. The Black man. But, you're writing about Black people and White people who are people who happen to be Black and White. They're people first. And then, one feels sorry for them, and at the same time, one laughs at them. Do you get this from the Russians?”

GAINES: “I think I do. Well, my first heroes, I suppose, were the Russian writers. I think the Russian writers have influenced other writers, as much as any writers have done.”

FITZGERALD: “What is it about the Russian writers? Is it their sense of the soil? Of being close to the earth? The people and that sort of thing?”

GAINES: “I think so. I think so, too. I think the thing I recognize in Russian writers, especially when they're writing about their peasants, I saw the same sort of thing that I've experienced in the Southern part of the United States. And I've gotten this from Tolstoy and Chekhov and Turgenev, much more than I've gotten it out of the White writers writing about the same sort of thing. They seem to-- when the White writers are writing about the Blacks of the fields, they seem to make them as caricatures rather

than real people. And the Black-- the Russian writers make their peasants real. I felt that they did, and I suppose this is why I've studied them and loved them so much.

MARCHANT: "Well, I'd like to know, how did you discover the Russians?"

GAINES: "I-- once I started reading, I used to read everything. And, I suppose I just stumbled on Turgenev and his Fathers and Children at the time. And this is in the library at in Vellejo, California when I first came to California. I was living in Vellejo. And, I read it and what I read I liked. And from then on, I went for the Russians."

FITZGERALD: "Well, you mentioned Vellejo, but you were, in fact, born in Louisiana, were you not?"

GAINES: "Yes."

FITZGERALD: "Could you tell us something about your early years? I understand that you worked in the fields as a young boy."

GAINES: "I went into the fields about-- when I was about the age of eight or maybe nine. And I think my first job was picking up potatoes, the white potatoes-- we called them Irish potatoes. And I was working for about 50 cents a day."

FITZGERALD: "My goodness."

GAINES: "And I must have been eight or nine years old. And I worked-- I stayed there until I was 15. I went to the one-room school houses."

FITZGERALD: "That's the background, isn't it, for much of your fiction? Is it not the same school house that we see in 'A Long Day in November'?"

GAINES: "Right. The same little school."

FITZGERALD: "Right. Right."

GAINES: "Yes."

FITZGERALD: "Well, tell me, how does a background like this prepare you to be a writer?"

GAINES: "Well, it-- well, when I went to California, I hadn't tried to write until I went to California. Then I was terribly lonely for the-- my friends and relatives. And, as I said, I went into the libraries, but-- to read. And I read and read but I did not see myself and my friends and family as relatives in the stuff that I did read. I didn't see it in the Southern writers. I didn't see it in the-- myself or the Russian writers, although the Russian writers had great stuff. So, I began to try to do it. And I, of course, I went back to the-- to my childhood to write about it. I suppose most writers do. When they first start out, they try to write about their childhood. And this is how I-- this is what I did. And I'm still sticking to it. That's been about 20 years, I suppose. On and off I've been trying to write for about 20 years now. Professionally, I think I've been writing since about '57. By professionally, I mean writing every day, four or five hours a day."

FITZGERALD: "I see."

GAINES: "Every day, since '57."

MARCHANT: “But you made the comment last night that you think yourself not a very good storyteller. Nobody laughs at your jokes. Your brother is the storyteller.”

GAINES: “Yes. Yes. Yes, I think I'm a listener more, really. And I listen and I like to listen to the way people talk and I like to listen to their stories. And then when I get into a little room, as I said last night, I try to write it down. Just like a man hearing a song someplace and he's afraid to sing out on the street or someplace else, but when he gets into the bathroom he starts singing and he thinks he's the greatest singer in the world. But, this is what I do, in writing, I go to a little-- go to my little desk and try to write something down, but I'm no storyteller. I'm only a listener.”

MARCHANT: “You don't feel alienated from your people in Louisiana, the people you grew up with, because you're now a San Francisco writer?”

GAINES: “Well, no I don't. I keep going back to Louisiana and I see the people all the time. I-- some I cannot communicate with, others I do. Over in a bar, over a drink, you can talk to almost anybody and we could talk about old times. Some people I cannot at all.”

FITZGERALD: “These are the people and, in your fiction, and it's-- what strikes me as being rather remarkable is that in an age where contemporary characters in fiction are so anti-heroic that your characters are so sympathetic or empathic. How do you account for this writing outside the vein of what seems to be so popular with many contemporary writers?”

GAINES: “Well, as I said before, I've never read about my people in fiction.”

FITZGERALD: “I see.”

GAINES: “I had never read. And before I can make them anti-heroes, I have to try to give them some good qualities, you know.”

FITZGERALD: “Mhmm.”

GAINES: “I just don't read too much contemporary fiction. I don't follow their ideas too much, I suppose.”

FITZGERALD: “And contemporary fiction has relatively little effect on your own work.”

GAINES: “Oh, yes, I suppose I stopped reading-- well, I haven't stopped reading contemporary fiction, but I don't read it daily or every week or anything like that. I still read Hemingway. I'll pick up a Hemingway book anytime; a Hemingway story or novel. I'll pick up Faulkner. So, something like this I read all the time.

MARCHANT: “Well, it's very difficult now for a Black writer to write about Whites and Blacks in a way that's funny and easy laughter, and you manage to do it.”

GAINES: “I don't think it is difficult. My brother tells jokes about White and Blacks all the time; and he can make it very funny. It can be very tragic and he can make it very funny. You see, where I came from, our competitors in farming-- my people were share-croppers-- when they left, when the land was turned over from the plantation system, it was turned into a share-cropping system. So, my uncles and father were share-croppers. And their competitors were the Cajuns, the White people there. And the people you make fun of more are the people who are closer to you. So, when they had to make fun of

something, when they had to laugh, they made fun of the, you know, the Whites or the-- they always make fun of your competitors, the people very close to you. So, and we had this relationship all the time. I saw these people every day, I saw the Cajuns every day. We went to the same store. We could not drink in the same room, drinking room; they didn't allow that. But, you bought your food at the same place. You talked to each other going to and from the fields. All this was going on. And the Cajuns had this distinct way of-- this French accent. It's not-- it's a broken French accent. And, of course, we could not speak English any better than they could speak French, but we thought they sounded funny. And even when my own people speak the Creole accent, also, used that Creole accent, French, I supposed we sound as foolish and as funny to the Cajuns that they did to us. But still, we laughed and I'm sure they laughed at us, also."

FITZGERALD: "Well, you certainly have a wonderful ear for dialogue. In reading those stories, I'm quite impressed with that. I'm wondering about another element of your background. You are-- it has been said, at any rate-- that you're interested in Jazz music. To what extent do you think that has been an influence in the development of your artistic life?"

GAINES: "Well, I think Jazz is basically Folk music. Well, originally it was. I don't know what they're doing with it now."

FITZGERALD: "Yes."

GAINES: "And a Folk music is a very simple thing. All Folk music is very, very simple. And, listening to Jazz, I find simple rhythms, simple repetitions. In order to communicate Jazz to the laymen, it has to be simple. And, of course, these people were playing to the people just like themselves, uneducated people. And I wished to reach the same sort of thing in my fiction, use the simplest terms in the world. You know, terms like 'Jesus wept', I think the most simplest statement you can make and it's probably the most beautiful two word sentence that has even been written. But, it has all the meanings in the world to it. Another thing about Jazz is that to be impressive, it has to be repetitive. You get hooked up on a phrase and you stay to that phrase until you've convinced the people that you really convinced of something. But-- .

FITZGERALD: "Well, now in some of your stories in *Bloodline*, and I noticed that particularly the first two, you're telling the story not only from the first-person point of view, but from the point of view of a child. And this poses, of course, a certain number of problems to the writer, especially mature writer. But, I wonder if you could tell us how you came to be-- to write so convincingly from the point of view of, in one case, 'A Long Day in November', from a five-year-old standpoint. And the second case, 'The Sky is Gray', from an eight-year-old point of view. That interests me very much."

GAINES: "Well, I suppose we have all been children once."

FITZGERALD: "Uh-huh. So, it's a long memory, is it?"

GAINES: "It's a long-- . It's something that was buried down in my subconscious since, at that time. In each story, I've gone through much of the same experiences as these kids have. Not all, but much of it. And this was in me all the time, but I had to find a way to bring it out. And the first part of Faulkner's *Sound and Fury*, the Benjy part—"

FITZGERALD: "Mhmm."

GAINES: “-- Benjy uses the simplest terms to express his feelings. You know, ‘gate is cold’, ‘fire is good’, ‘I stomp my shoes on’, all this sort of thing. And, this was such child-like that I really fell in love with it. I really did. And at the same time that I was reading Faulkner, I was also reading Joyce. And so, what I did, I got the-- I had the experience of the little school the child goes to, the house he lived in, the quarters he walked in, the heater in the little school, the benches and all that sort of thing, that he had to sit on. He had no desk. I had all this. So, I got Faulkner's rhythms and I got Joyce's-- that day thing, you know, *Ulysses*. You know?”

FITZGERALD: “Mhmm.”

GAINES: “Let's do it all in one day sort of thing.”

FITZGERALD: “Yeah, right.”

GAINES: “So, I get this kid and I said, okay, I'm going to take Mr. Faulkner's rhythm and Mr. Joyce's idea of day and go, kid. And I did that. This is how I did it.”

FITZGERALD: “Mhmm.”

GAINES: “But, I don't know if it's anything so different from any-- I suppose we all have done it. Twain did it late in life when he wrote about-- when he wrote the Huck Finn, Tom Sawyer books.”

FITZGERALD: “Mhmm.”

GAINES: “Hemingway did it. They all have done it. Steinbeck, Chekhov, they all have done it.”

FITZGERALD: “True.”

GAINES: “The child stuff. Yes. They were much older than I when they did it.”

MARCHANT: “Mhmm. You talked of watching a fight between two boys in the same parish which begat Rat Brown.”

GAINES: “Right. Yes.”

MARCHANT: “But, you managed to avoid being politically didactic. But, you work indirectly politically. You resist being a political writer, but you hope to do something with your writing?”

GAINES: “Oh, yes. Definitely so. Well, I think, to me, literature expresses man's feelings and relationship much better than politics ever can. And I think there are many Rat Browns who can tell you, in a political way, what's going on. But, as I said before, they aren't-- I had not read anything about other people. Well, what Rat Brown would say is look what the Whites are doing here. But what Ernie Gaines is trying to say is well, we also laugh and we laugh as much or more than any other American. And we dance as much or more and sometimes better. And we sing as much. And we have dishes like gumbo-- Creole dish-- and jambalaya and, you know, Southern-fried chicken and shrimps and that sort of thing. And we love these things, also. You know, they're so-- besides the conflict between White and Black, we also love and, you know, women have children, men gamble and shoot at people, and you know, they have fights.

FITZGERALD: “Well, one of the interesting things to me is that your book is really the first one I have ever read that really revealed the innate gentility and nobility of your people. And this, I think, struck me

as an outstanding quality of it. And I wondered if anyone else had ever mentioned that to you? If anyone said that before? Or, if you had anything to say on it?"

GAINES: "Oh, no. I just try to capture what I see of people and what I hear. And, but I have had that mentioned, I think, by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch."

FITZGERALD: "I see."

GAINES: "He'd mentioned the same thing about the people."

FITZGERALD: "I'm thinking specifically, Mr. Gaines, of the characters in 'The Sky is Gray'."

GAINES: "Mhmm."

FITZGERALD: "Here's a mother with such a really wonderful strength. A strength that comes from the earth. A strength that goes beyond the strength of Faulkner's Dilsey."

GAINES: "Ah, yeah."

FITZGERALD: "To a kind of independent, proud spirit and a son who she's rearing in the same tradition."

GAINES: "Yes. Yes. Yes, she's trying to."

FITZGERALD: "Yes, and succeeds, I think, very well indeed."

GAINES: "Yeah."

FITZGERALD: "That toothache that the little boy has, James, you said to me once, was a recounting of an own-- of one of your own personal experiences."

GAINES: "Yes, yes, yes. Yes, I had a toothache when I was a child at that age, and I had to ride the bus just as he rides. And at that time, on a bus in the South, you had a little sign hanging over the aisle and it said White on that little-- on that side and it said Color on the other side and you had to sit behind that little sign. I did that for three years. I went to a Catholic school in this little town which I called Beyond in the story. I also could not eat uptown, there was no place for me to eat, whether it was cold, sleet, or rain, there was no place to eat. There was no place to warm a child at eight years old. You had to go back uptown to do it, which was about a mile, three-fourth of a mile, something like that. And there were no transportation unless someone picked you up, you know, while they saw you walking back there. You have that. I also knew about the little waiting room, little cluttered little place where it might be full of people waiting to have dental help. Of course, they're all Black people in here and the Whites are sitting someplace else. So, I had gone through that and this is why I know how, I sort of knew what a child would experience. I didn't know that I'd know how a child really feels. I'm interpreting the feeling of this child, at the time I was 30 years old, but I knew the experiences that he would have gone through. I know the things that he would have gone through, yes."

FITZGERALD: "Well, Mr. Marchant was talking about political aspects of your writing. And I think the scene of the dentist's office, in that story, 'The Sky is Gray', is a marvelous presentation of on one hand, Black militancy, on the other hand, the representative of the old way, the preacher, and the group of people from all walks of life. It's, again, a kind of microcosm of, I would think -- do you agree? -- of the South. A little world."

GAINES: "I would hate to say, you know, I would hate to think that that scene represents the South any more than any other scene does. It's-- the South is so complicated that I doubt that any one scene or book can possibly represent it. No more than-- that scene-- no more than-- so, the story just like the tree, represents the Black, you know, older Black people and militancy of the South today. Things are so diversified, things are so different, people are so different that I never tried to really represent everything in one little scene or one little story. I just tried to touch on a few little things, and that's about all."

MARCHANT: "Are the Black and White social patterns changing in Louisiana?"

GAINES: "In lots of cases, they are changing. Especially in the cities, they are changing. In the countryside, no. The physical make-up of the country's changing. That is, you have more machinery destroying more trees to plot more land. And they're planting a different crop. The big crops in Louisiana-- my part of Louisiana now-- are soy beans and sugar cane. When I was a child, coming up the crops were cane, corn, cotton, potatoes, et cetera. Now, in the cities, you have many more Black people working in office work. You have many more Black women as clerks in department stores. You have-- I went to one of the banks, the biggest bank in Baton Rouge, and the newest building in Baton Rouge, and I saw two Black clerks, tellers, in the bank. And five years ago-- two or three years ago, they would not have been there. This is a beautiful building. It has a very nice chairs to sit in. Sort of like a little waiting room as you go into the place. And there's a girl who comes up, sort of like a receptionist. She comes up and she's not sitting behind a desk-- she's just sort of standing there-- and she comes up with this beautiful Southern accent and she says, "May I help you please?" You know, and if you can't be helped at the moment, she'll offer you, you know, a place to sit down and a cigarette. If there's coffee, you might have that. Real plush place. The people are doing-- they're eating together more now at lunch counters. I was in a drug store about a week or so ago, and-- to develop some films, to have some films developed-- and I noticed that how well the people are just sitting around communicating with each other. But, at the same time, just across the street from there, just across the street, there was a monument to the Confederate soldiers. Just across the street from this little drug store. And you have the United States flag, you have the rebel flag, the 13-star thing, and you have the state flag there. And on the court house, just a little farther back from this Confederate statue, you have the United States flag, the Confederate flag, the state flag, et cetera. So, you might find something changed right here and as you cross the street over here, there's the thing is just like it was, you know, 40, 50 years ago."

MARCHANT: "But in the cities, can Black date White? Or Black marry White, now?"

GAINES: "Well, I think there's a law passed through Congress, but I would hate to be the one to set an example in some parts of Louisiana, many parts of Louisiana. But, I've seen mixed dating in Baton Rouge and especially in New Orleans, during the Mardi Gras season while I was down there. I hung around in the French Quarters. And you find a lot of this because people are going into bars all the time together. They're always in the bars together. And you find a lot of mixture that way."

FITZGERALD: "Well, Eudora Welty has an essay called Place in Fiction, in which he claims that-- if I'm interpreting it correctly-- that place is of terribly great importance in the writing of fiction. And from what you've been saying to us now, I would assume that perhaps you share that view. Or do you not?"

GAINES: "Well, I'd rather feel that whatever I write can be felt and enjoyed by anyone. I suppose what you mean by that is that-- ."

FITZGERALD: "I mean setting."

GAINES: "Setting. Yes. Well, I think, for example, in 'The Sky is Gray', the lady takes a little boy to town and she shows him how to be a man. And I think that could have happened maybe in Germany, where a Jewish mother might have taken a child and she might have had to put up with the same sort of thing. Maybe in Ireland, an Irishman that might have had to deal with the English. Or India, this same sort of thing might have happened. So, I don't know if the setting is make any situation so unique that it can't happen in a different country or a different part of the country. Or for this country."

FITZGERALD: "Well, thank you very much, Mr. Gaines, for being our guest today on Writers Forum. And thank you, Mr. Marchant, for helping to interview our guest."

[Music]