

# STUDY GUIDE

Ernest J. Gaines's book *A Lesson Before Dying* is about validation and self-worth. It is about the ways in which the imprisoned may find freedom even in the face of their death. It is about human beings striving for dignity in a world that often denies it. It is about the personal empowerment of faith. The discussion questions in this study guide are designed to enhance the group's reading and understanding of a universal problem. We hope that they will provide you with multiple ways of looking at and talking about this piece of history which chronicles the circumstances of black people living in the South during the 1940s. There is no right or wrong answer to the questions but responses should be deliberated through the lens of justice and Christian teachings.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Grant's task is to affirm that Jefferson is not a hog, but a man. The mission is difficult because Grant isn't sure he knows what a man is. What definition of manhood, or humanity, does *A Lesson Before Dying* provide?
2. Jefferson's attorney has compared him to a hog; Miss Emma wants Grant to prove that her godson is not a hog; and Jefferson at first eats the food she has sent him on his knees, because "that's how a old hog eat." How are words used both to humiliate and to redeem the characters in this novel?
3. Compare and discuss similarities and differences between society in 1940s and our society today?
4. How is status between whites and blacks and between older and younger adults demonstrated and enforced throughout the novel?
5. Grant believes that black men in Louisiana have only three choices: to die violently, to be "brought down to the level of beasts," or "to run and run." What choices and/or alternatives are to Louisiana in 1948 and to the United States in the 21<sup>st</sup> century?
6. Grant believes in God but he rejects the religious beliefs of his Aunt, Emma and Rev. Ambrose, because it is also the white man's religion and the white man's "justice." What part did faith have in the lives of people of the plantation? How has faith served African-Americans as a source of personal empowerment in the book and in current times.
7. Women play a significant role in the book. Examine the interaction between Grant and Tante Lou, Grant and Vivian, and Jefferson and Miss Emma. In what ways do these interactions reflect the roles of black women within their families and in African-American society?
8. From the manslaughter that begins this novel to the judicial murder at its close, death is a constant presence in *A Lesson Before Dying*. We are repeatedly reminded of all the untimely, violent deaths that have preceded Jefferson's and, in all likelihood, will follow it. Do we see this situation in our society today? If so, how?