
Miss Jane and I

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MISS JANE AND I*

by Ernest J. Gaines

For the next few minutes I shall try to say a little about myself, about my writing, and about Miss Jane Pittman and how she and I came to meet. Since the publication of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* last April, I've read several reviews in which critics have called Miss Jane a real person. A representative of *Newsweek* asked me to send the editors of the magazine a picture of Miss Jane Pittman to be used with a review of the novel. I had to inform her that I could not, since Miss Jane is a creation of my imagination. The lady who called me was both shocked and embarrassed—"Oh, my God! Oh, my God! Oh, my God!" she said. The actress Ruby Dee, when reviewing the novel for *Freedomways*, also mistook Miss Jane for a real person. Several newspapers have made the same mistake. One lady accused me of using a tape recorder, then calling the interview a novel after I had cut out all the inconsequential material. A good friend of mine who writes for one of the leading newspapers in San Francisco feels that *Miss Jane* is definitely a novel, but he also feels that I must have, at some time in the past, interviewed my grandmother or my aunt who raised me when I lived in the South. Bob Cromie on Bookbeat out of Chicago also thought I had interviewed my grandmother.

But *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is absolute fiction. By that I mean I created Miss Jane, and if I did not create all the events she mentions in her narrative, I definitely created all the situations that she is personally involved in.

It is written somewhere that when Gertrude Stein was dying, Alice B. Toklas leaned over her and asked: "Gertrude, Gertrude, what is the answer?" Gertrude Stein raised up on her dying bed and said, "Dear Alice, but what is the question?"

*Gaines presented "Miss Jane and I," which appears in print for the first time, as a talk at Southern University (Baton Rouge, Louisiana) in 1971. Ed.

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Who is Miss Jane Pittman? But, first, who is Ernest J. Gaines? Because to get part of the answer to the former question we must go back, back, back—not to 1968, when I started writing the novel, but to 1948, when I had to leave the South.

Until I was fifteen years old, I had been raised by an aunt, a lady who had never walked a day in her life, but who crawled over the floor as a six month old child might. Some people have said that she had been dropped on the floor by another child when she was small; others have said that she was born with that affliction. To this day I do not know which story is true—but I've never met anyone who ever saw her walk.

When I say that my aunt raised me, I mean she did more than just look after me, my brothers and my sisters. I can remember us children bringing the potatoes, rice, meat, flour, and water to her sitting on her bench by the stove so that she could cook for us. I can remember the loaves of bread, cookies, and cakes she used to bake for us in the oven of the wood stove. I can remember seeing her sitting on her bench and leaning over a washboard, washing our clothes in a tin tub. Once this was done, and after she had taken her afternoon nap, she wanted to do more. She wanted to go into her garden then and chop grass from between the rows of beans, cabbages, and tomatoes. She had a small hoe, about half the size of the regular hoe. After sharpening it well with her file, she would let it down on the ground, and then, in some way, but with true dignity, she would slide from step to step until she had reached the ground—then she would go into her garden. Other times she would go into the backyard with her little rice sack and gather pecans under the trees. No pecan, not even the smallest one, could hide itself in the bull grass from her eyes for ever. They would try hard, the little pecans, but eventually they would give up the ghost just like all the rest. These are just a few of the things I can remember about my aunt, but there is much, much more.

Then there were the people who used to come to our house, because she was crippled and could not go to theirs. In summer they would sit out on the porch, the gallery—"the garry," we called it—and they would talk for hours. There was no television then, and only a few people had radios, so people would talk. Sometimes there would be only one other person besides my aunt; other times, maybe a half dozen. Sometimes they would sew on quilts and mattresses while they talked; other times they would shell peas and beans while they talked. Sometimes they would just sit there smoking pipes, chewing pompee, or drinking coffee while they talked. I, being the oldest child, was made to stay

close by and serve them coffee or water or whatever else they needed. In winter, they moved from the porch and sat beside the fireplace and drank coffee—and sometimes a little homemade brew—while they talked. But regardless of what time of year it was, under whatever conditions, they would find something to talk about. I did not know then that twenty or twenty-five years later I would try to put some of their talk in a book which I would title *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*.

This all took place before 1948. In 1948, I had to leave my aunt and the South to go West to my mother and stepfather to finish my education. I probably—I definitely—would have stayed in the South if I could have received the education that they thought I rightly deserved. But since there was no junior high or senior high school near me, and since I would have to go away to school anyhow, my mother and stepfather thought I should come to California where they were. I remember the day I left. It was Sunday. It took me all day to pack, unpack, and repack the old brown leather suitcase. I didn't have many clothes, I can assure you, but for some reason I could not get it done. Maybe it was the bag of oranges, or the shoebox of fried chicken and bread, or the tea cakes and pralines wrapped in brown paper, or the bag of unshelled pecans—maybe it was one of these or all of these that kept me opening and shutting the suitcase. But, finally, I got it done and came out onto the porch. Everybody was there: the old people on the porch talking to my aunt and the children in the yard waiting for me to come down the steps so they could follow me to the road. I went to each one of the old people, shook their hands, and listened to their advice on how to live "up North." Then I went to my aunt. She sat on the floor—just inside the door. "I'm going, Aunty," I said. I did not lean over to kiss her—though I loved her more than I have loved anyone else in my life. I did not take her hand, as I had taken the other people's hands, because that would have been the most inappropriate thing in the world to do. I simply said, "I'm going, Aunty." She looked up at me from the floor. I saw the tears in her eyes. She nodded her head, and looked down again. When I came out into the road, I looked back at her. I waved and smiled; she waved back. The old people were silent all this time—but I'm sure that before I reached the highway to catch the bus they were talking again.

I went to Vallejo, California, a seaport town, because my stepfather was in the merchant marines. I had gone there in summer, and I had nothing much to do during the day but play with other children. We lived in the government projects at the time, and my friends were a complete mixture of races: Chinese, Japanese, Fili-

pinos, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, whites and Indians. I made friends quite easily, and most of the time, especially during the day, I was very happy. But at night, when my new friends had gone, I sat alone in a room and thought about home. Many times I wished that my aunt would write my mother and tell her to send me back—or that some wise man would come up and tell me how futile an education was when I had to sacrifice so much for it.

A few months after I had gone to Vallejo, my parents moved out of the projects into another part of town. I did not have nearly as many friends here, and my stepfather warned me against those young people I did meet. They were a rough bunch, and he felt that they would all end up in jail before they graduated from high school. I took his advice about staying away from them, and that's how I found myself in the public library.

I soon found out that all I needed was a library card and then I could take out as many books as I could carry in my arms. At first I took books indiscriminately—I would choose one simply because I liked its dust jacket. But soon, because of the school work, or maybe because of the weight of the books, I began to select only those that I would definitely read. Number one, they had to be about the South; and, two, they had to be fiction.

So I read many novels, many short stories, plays—all written by white writers—because there was such a limited number of works at the time by black writers in a place like Vallejo. I found most of the work that I read untrue and unreal to my own experience; yet, because I hungered for some kind of connection between myself and the South, I read them anyhow. But I did not care for the language of this writing—I found it too oratorical, and the dialects, especially that of blacks, quite untrue. (Twain and Faulkner can be put into or left out of this category, depending on your taste.) I did not care for the way black characters were drawn. (Twain and Faulkner can be accepted or not accepted here—again, depending on your taste.) Whenever a black person was mentioned in these novels, either she was a mammy, or he was a Tom; and if he was young, he was a potential Tom, a good nigger; or he was not a potential Tom, a bad nigger. When a black woman character was young, she was either a potential mammy or a nigger wench. For most of these writers, choosing something between was unheard of.

Despite their descriptions of blacks, I often found something in their writing that I could appreciate. Sometimes they accurately captured sounds that I knew well: a dog barking in the heat of hunting, a train moving in the distance, a worker calling to another across the road or field. Pasternak once said that Southern

writers wrote well about the earth and the sun. These writers, who so poorly described blacks, did well with the odor of grass and trees after a summer rain; they were especially adept at describing the sweat-odor in the clothes of men coming in from the fields; you could see, better than if you were actually there, the red dust in Georgia or the black mud of Mississippi.

I read all the Southern writers I could find in the Vallejo library; then I began to read any writer who wrote about nature or about people who worked the land. So I discovered John Steinbeck and the Salinas Valley; and Willa Cather and her Nebraska—anyone who would say something about dirt and trees, clear streams, and open sky.

Eventually, I would discover the great European writers. My favorite at this time was the Frenchman Guy de Maupassant—de Maupassant because he wrote so beautifully about the young, and besides that he told good stories, used the simplest language, and most times made the stories quite short. So for a long time it was de Maupassant. Then I must have read somewhere that the Russian Anton Chekhov was as good or better than de Maupassant, so I went to Chekhov. From Chekhov to Tolstoy, then to the rest of the Russians—among them Pushkin, Gogol, and Turgenev, especially Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches* and his *Fathers and Sons*. The nineteenth century Russian writers became my favorite, and, to this day as a group of writers of any one country, they still are. I felt that they wrote truly about peasantry or, put another way, truer than any other group of writers of any other country. Their peasants were not caricatures or clowns. They did not make fun of them. They were people—they were good, they were bad. They could be as brutal as any man, they could be as kind. The American writers in general, the Southern writer in particular, never saw peasantry, especially black peasantry, in this way; blacks were either caricatures of human beings or they were problems. They needed to be saved, or they were saviors. They were either children, or they were seers. But they were very seldom what the average being was. There were exceptions, of course, but I'm talking about a total body of writers, the conscience of a people.

Though I found the nineteenth century Russian writers superior for their interest in the peasants, they, too, could not give me the satisfaction that I was looking for. Their four and five syllable names were foreign to me. Their greetings were not the same as greetings were at home. Our religious worship was not the same; icons were foreign to me. I had eaten steamed cabbage, boiled cabbage, but not cabbage soup. I had drunk clabber, but

never kvass. I had never slept on a stove, and I still don't know how anyone can. I knew the distance of a mile—never have I learned the distance of a verst. The Russian steppes sounded interesting, but they were not the swamps of Louisiana; Siberia could be as cruel, but it was not Angola State Prison. So even those who I thought were nearest to the way I felt still were not close enough.

I wanted to smell that Louisiana earth, feel that Louisiana sun, sit under the shade of one of those Louisiana oaks, search for pecans in that Louisiana grass in one of those Louisiana yards next to one of those Louisiana bayous, not far from a Louisiana river. I wanted to see on paper those Louisiana black children walking to school on cold days while yellow Louisiana busses passed them by. I wanted to see on paper those black parents going to work before the sun came up and coming back home to look after their children after the sun went down. I wanted to see on paper the true reason why those black fathers left home—not because they were trifling or shiftless—but because they were tired of putting up with certain conditions. I wanted to see on paper the small country churches (schools during the week), and I wanted to hear those simple religious songs, those simple prayers—that true devotion. (It was Faulkner, I think, who said that if God were to stay alive in the country, the blacks would have to keep Him so.) And I wanted to hear that Louisiana dialect—that combination of English, Creole, Cajun, Black. For me there's no more beautiful sound anywhere—unless, of course, you take exceptional pride in “proper” French or “proper” English. I wanted to read about the true relationship between whites and blacks—about the people that I had known.

When I first started writing—it was about when I was sixteen or seventeen—my intentions were not to write polemics or anything controversial. At that time I had not read much writing by black writers, so I did not know what one, especially a black youth trying to write his first novel, was supposed to write about. (I still don't know what a black writer is supposed to write about unless it is the same thing that a Frenchman writes about—and that is what he feels deeply enough inside of him to write about.) No, when I first started writing, I wanted to write a simple little novel about people at home. I think the first title I gave it was “A Little Stream,” because it dealt with two families, one very fair, one dark—separated from each other by a stream of water. But I gave the novel at least a dozen different titles before I was finished with it. Whenever the plot took a sudden change—a direc-

tion beyond my control—I erased the original title and gave the manuscript one that was more fitting.

The book I started in 1949 or 1950 was finally published in a completely different version in 1964 under the title of *Catherine Carmier*. I had changed the title many times in those fifteen years. When it came time for publication the book was simply called “Catherine.” My editor wrote me a letter saying, “Listen, you ought to give it another title.” I said, “‘Catherine’ sounds all right to me.” Once I had been in love with a girl named Catherine, and, too, I had just finished reading Hemingway’s novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, whose heroine’s name is Catherine. I figured what was good enough for Hemingway was good enough for Ernie Gaines. So I said, “What’s wrong with Catherine?” My editor said he thought something else ought to go with it. I said, “All right, her last name is Carmier; call her that. Call her anything—as long as I don’t have to think up another title. Because then I’d have to write a new book—and I’m tired.” So in 1964, it was called *Catherine Carmier*. It was published in Germany last year, and they called it *It Was the Nightingale*. And that came after they had even left out one of the main chapters in the book.

But let’s go back to ‘49 (‘49 or ‘50), when I first started writing. I wrote the manuscript out on sheets of paper about half the size of regular notebook paper. Where I got paper that size I’ve forgotten. Whether I typed the manuscript in single or double space I can’t recall either. I do know that it was not typed well, because I had rented a typewriter for that single project without knowing where the letters *A* and *B* were located. I worked twelve hours a day at times, typing with two fingers until I got tired. Then I would lean on one hand and type with the index finger of the other. Finally, it was done—it had taken me all summer to do it. (I should mention here that before trying to type the novel, I had written the novel out in longhand. So it took me that entire summer to type it up and send it out.) After sending the manuscript to New York, I expected any day to receive a telegram telling me that I had written a masterpiece, and I thought a check of several thousand dollars would soon follow. But nothing of the sort happened. I supposed after the editors had shaken the little package, which was about half the size of what a manuscript ought to be, and found that it was not a bomb, and after they had smelled it and found that it was not a fruit cake, they quite possibly played football with it a few weeks when they had nothing else to do. Then they sent it back to me in the original brown paper, tied with its original broken and knotted strings. Only by now the paper and strings were a little dirtier than they were when I sent the

manuscript out. I broke the strings and paper loose, found the blue or pink or yellow rejection slip, and took rejection slip and manuscript out to the incinerator. Of course I felt a great let-down; all beginning writers do. I had envisioned thousands of dollars, a nice place to live, a car, clothes of all kinds; and money to send back to my younger brothers, my sister, and my aunt. Of course I was let down when it did not go that way. But between the time that I sent the manuscript out and the time it came back—a couple of months, at least—I had decided no matter what happened I would continue to write. So when the manuscript came back in its original wrapper, tied with its original string, yes, I felt let down, but I was determined to go on. I had only lost the first battle; I had not lost the war—yet.

From then on, school and working in summers kept me from writing another book, so I did not try again until I went into the Army. I tried to write one on my off duty hours, but I found that I liked shooting pool, playing pinochle, and playing softball too much to stick to the pencil. All I got accomplished was a short story that was good enough to take second place on the Island of Guam where I was stationed. The story was sent to our command headquarters in Japan to compete with all the other short stories by GI's in the Far East. There it got honorable mention. So I made fifteen dollars for second prize on Guam and ten dollars for honorable mention in Japan. I cashed the ten dollar check as soon as I received it, but the fifteen dollar check is at the house in a little glass bank that belonged to my aunt, who died in 1952. After her death, the bank was given to me to remember her by.

I was discharged from the Army in 1955, and I enrolled at San Francisco State College. When I told my advisor that I wanted to be a writer, he asked me what else I wanted to be. I told him nothing else. He broke down the percentage of those who made their living writing. It was frightening. Then he told me the percentage of blacks who make their living writing. This was ten times as frightening. I told him I didn't care how hard it would be, I could not think of anything else I wanted to do. He saw that I was not going to change my mind, and he said: "You can't study writing here because you cannot get a degree in writing." (I should note here that you could take writing classes at San Francisco State at the time, but you could not major in writing. You can do either now.) He said, "You can't study writing here because you can't get a degree in writing. And in order to stay in college you must study toward a degree. So, there." "All right," I said. "What is the closest thing to writing that I can study here?" "I would say English," he said. "When you fail at your writing, you can always

teach English.” “All right, I’ll take that,” I said.

For the next two years at San Francisco State and a year at Stanford, I tried to write about Louisiana. I wrote every free moment I had, and many times I disregarded my textbooks in order to write. There was something deep in me that I wanted to say—something that had been boiling in me ever since I left the South—and maybe even before then. My instructors at San Francisco State and Stanford thought I would say it all one day—but it would take time. “It will take time and work, time and work,” they said. “Now you ought to read this,” they said. “And read it carefully. Do you see how Turgenev handles this same kind of situation? Bazarov’s relationship to his old people in *Fathers and Sons* is the same as what you’re trying to do to Jackson and Aunt Charlotte. Now, take Joyce—see how he handles Stephen and his discussion with the priest. Sherwood Anderson—how he handles his people of Winesburg, Ohio. Faulkner—and his Yoknapatawpha country. Read, read, read it carefully. You’ll get it. But it will take time—time and work. Much work.”

During the late fifties and early sixties many of the young men and women whom I knew were leaving America for Europe, Africa, South America—especially Mexico. It was the time to get away from home to discover oneself. It was impossible to do it here in a country so insanely involved with materialism. A friend of mine and his wife left during the summer of 1962 for Mexico. I was supposed to join them at the end of the year—and there, in Mexico, I would write my novel about Louisiana that I could not get done in San Francisco. But something happened at the University of Mississippi in September of 1962 that changed my mind. I kept thinking and thinking about this brave, very brave man—and told myself that if James Meredith can go through all this—not only for himself, but for his race (and that included me as well)—then I, too, should go back to the source that I was trying to write about. It was then that I decided to come to Baton Rouge to stay a while and to work. I stayed six months, beginning in January, 1963. I’d work five or six hours during the day, then take a nip or two at night—and I had much fun. I met some of the most wonderful people in the world. I talked to many people, but most of the time I tried listening—not only to what they had to say, but to the way they said it. I visited the plantation that I had tried to write about, while I was in San Francisco. Many of the people whom I had left nearly fifteen years before were still on the plantation. Some were dead, but the ones living could talk about them and did talk about them as though they had simply walked into another room only a few minutes before. I

stayed in Baton Rouge six months, and six months after I went back to San Francisco I finished the novel that I had been so long trying to write. The novel was *Catherine Carmier*.

In the beginning the novel was twice as long as it was when it was finally published. I had put everything into those seven hundred pages that I could think of. I wanted everything that I had experienced, that I knew or had heard of about Louisiana. There were house fairs, with gumbos and fried fish, soft drinks and beer; there was much lovemaking, and, of course, there had to be illegitimate children; there were deaths, wakes, funerals, baptisms, even threats of race violence . . . But my editor thought I had a little too much; the book ought to be cut in half. Stick to the simple love story between the boy from the North and the girl in the South—and leave everything else out. After we had exchanged a few bitter words through letters and over the telephone, and after I had called him a few choice names that I think all writers call all editors, I finally took his advice. The book was then published, but just as soon forgotten.

Now, where would I go from here?

Most of what was published in *Catherine Carmier* had taken place in the late fifties or early sixties. But what about my life before then? What about the people I really loved and knew? And what about the language—that language that is like no other?

It seemed that I could not think of another novel about Louisiana no matter how hard I tried, so I tried to write about San Francisco—the bohemian life in San Francisco which I knew a little about. I wrote one novel in six months, another in about the same amount of time—and another novel about six months later. Within a year and a half or two years, I had written three of the worst novels that have ever been written by a published writer. I realized from those efforts that I was not a San Francisco writer—or at least not yet. And if I were not, then what—what then? Since I could not think of another Louisiana novel, what could I do? I got a job working with a printer. And when anyone asked me what I was doing I told them I was learning the printing business. “What about your writing?” they asked me. “I don’t know. Maybe I’ll put it down,” I said. But even when I was saying this, my mind was only on writing—writing something else about Louisiana. I knew that I had more to say—and eventually it would come; but when and how—I didn’t know.

Then one day I was playing some of my records, and a particular verse caught my attention. (I should note here that I’m an avid record collector. I have over five hundred LP’s of all kinds of music—jazz, blues, spirituals, European classic, African folk

music, American Indian music, etc., etc. I think I have learned as much about writing about my people by listening to blues and jazz and spirituals as I have learned by reading novels. The understatement in the tenor saxophone of Lester Young, the crying, haunting, forever searching sounds of John Coltrane, and the softness and violence of Count Basie's big band—all have fired my imagination as much as anything in literature. But the rural blues, maybe because of my background, is my choice in music . . .) One day I was sitting around listening to a record by Lightnin' Hopkins, and these words stuck in my mind: "The worse thing this black man ever done—when he moved his wife and family to Mr. Tim Moore's farm. Mr. Tim Moore's man don't stand and grin; say 'If you stay out the graveyard nigger, I'll keep you out the pen.' " These words haunted me for weeks, for months—without my knowing why, or what I would ever do with them.

Then I came back here in 1965, and a friend of mine and I were talking, and during our conversation he told me that another friend of ours had been killed by another black man in Baton Rouge, and that the person who had killed him was sent to prison for only a short time and then released. When I heard this, I had no idea that this incident could have any connection with the Lightnin' Hopkins blues verse. But the two things—the murder and the song—stayed in my mind, stayed in my mind so much that I began to wonder what I could do with them. Then I recalled hearing about two other incidents in which blacks had murdered blacks. In Case One, when a white lawyer offered his services for a small fee, the prisoner told him that he would rather go to the pen and pay for his crime. But in Case Two the prisoner left with his white employer. Remembering the first incident, I wrote the long story, "Three Men," which was published in my *Bloodline* collection of stories. But the second incident would require much more time and thinking. What would I do with my young killer once I got him out of prison. It took about a year, I suppose, before it all jelled in my mind, and then I started writing, in the summer of 1968, the novel *Of Love and Dust*. The novel takes place the summer I left the South. The action takes place on a plantation along False River. I used that particular place and that time because I knew more about them than I did about Baton Rouge. And I think I also used that time and place because, again, I was trying to say something about my past, something of what I had left out in *Catherine Carmier*. I wanted to talk about the fields a little bit more, about the plantation store, the river, the church, the house fairs, etc., etc., etc. And, yet, when

that novel, *Of Love and Dust*, was finished, I realized that I had done only a small part of what I had intended to write. I still had not gone far enough back. Jim, my narrator—who was a man thirty-three years old—though good, kind to the old, and trying desperately to understand the young, still could not say all that I wanted him to say. Even when I brought in Aunt Margaret, someone twice his age, to help him out, they, both together, could not say it all.

Before I wrote *Of Love and Dust*—sometime around 1963 or 1964—I wrote a short story titled “Just Like a Tree.” The story was about an old woman who had to move from the South during the Civil Rights demonstrations. The story was told from multiple points of view—that is, several people telling a single story from different angles. Most of the people were her age, and while they were telling you the reason she had to leave, they were also telling you something about themselves. But they were only touching on their lives; they were not going into any great detail. In the case of Aunt Fee, the protagonist in the story, you only hear snatches of conversation about her life. You know that she must leave the South because they are bombing near her home and she could be killed. But you don’t know her life—where she comes from, her children, her husband—her life, in general, before that particular day.

Now, I did not know when I wrote the short story “Just Like a Tree” in 1963 or 1964 that four years later I would start out from that idea and write a novel, *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. As I’ve said before, at this time I still had not published *Catherine Carmier*; nor did I have any idea that I would write another novel titled *Of Love and Dust*. But after these two books had been published, as well as the collection of stories *Bloodline*, I realized that I was writing in a definite pattern. One, I was writing about a definite area; and, two, I was going farther and farther back into the past. I was trying to go back, back, back into our experiences in this country to find some kind of meaning to our present lives. No, Miss Jane is not the end of my travelling into the past—she is only another step back so that I can see some meaning in the present.

I knew at least two years before I started writing on the novel that eventually I would write *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*. Maybe I had known it all my life, because it seems that I started writing it many, many years before when I used to sit on the porch or the steps and write letters for the old people. But it took me at least two years after I first conceived the idea to start working on the book. I held back as long as I could because I

knew I did not know enough. I had an idea of what I wanted to say—I wanted to continue from “Just Like a Tree”—where a group of people tell the life story of a single woman. But this woman in “Just Like a Tree” would live to be a hundred years old—a hundred and ten to be exact—with her life extending over the last half of the nineteenth century through the first half of the twentieth. But did I know enough to try such a project? The narrative technique would be easy—I had done it already in “Just Like a Tree”—but what in the world would these people talk about that could possibly fill five hundred pages.

Alvin Aubert, who used to teach at Southern University—Al and I were talking one day, and I asked him to name ten or twelve very significant things to have happened in Louisiana since the middle of the nineteenth century. Al began with the Civil War—which I wrote down in my little brown note book. Then he went to the Reconstruction Period. He also said he thought the floods of 1912 and 1927 were very significant. He mentioned the construction of the spillways to control floods, he mentioned Huey Long, he talked about the Civil Rights Movement, and he also mentioned athletes like Jack Johnson, Joe Louis, and Jackie Robinson.

Al Aubert was not the only person of whom I asked these questions. I went to several other people, older than Al, and uneducated, and asked them the same thing. I talked to an old man on the plantation where I had lived. I talked to several other people here in Baton Rouge. I not only asked them what they thought was significant; I asked them to explain why. In one of the local bars on East Boulevard, I asked an old gentleman why he thought Huey Long was significant. This man became so agitated with my stupidity that he could hardly speak. He looked at my uncle who was standing there with me and said, “Them young people these days don’t know nothing, do they, do they, do they?” I found other men—and women too—who became quite moved when I asked them about Huey Long. All of them had something good to say about him, but interpretations varied, especially when they talked about the cause of his death, and who did it, and why. I noticed that when I asked other questions, I would get pretty much the same kind of answers, but personal opinions came in—depending on the person who was talking. So of course when you get so many variations, you must go somewhere to find a straight line. It was then that I started visiting the library here in Baton Rouge. Miss Edith Atkinson of the State Library uptown was very helpful to me when I asked for material on the floods of 1912 and 1927. Not only did she find

books and magazine articles for me while I was in the Library, but she also xeroxed more materials and sent them to me in San Francisco. Another lady who was kind and helpful was Miss Lynch at the Louisiana State University Library. I had read several books on Huey Long, I had talked to several people about him, and now I wanted to find out exactly how the weather was on his burial day. Miss Lynch could not point to any one particular paper, but she did bring out about a dozen large manila folders, crammed with articles from every paper in the country. When I saw all the reading I probably would have to do, I began to question myself whether that chapter was really necessary in Miss Jane's autobiography. But I took the folders and began to read, and about two hours later I found in a little article out of Little Rock, Arkansas, exactly what I wanted to know.

Much of my research work, before I started writing on the book, was two-fold: I talked to people, and I used libraries here and in San Francisco. I don't know how many books, or parts of books, magazine articles, and newspaper clippings I read before I started writing. And even after I had started writing on the Civil War period, I was still reading about the Reconstruction era. When I was writing on the Reconstruction era, I was probably reading about Long and the great floods of 1912 and 1927. When I was writing about Huey Long, I was reading about the Civil Rights Movement—Martin Luther King, Miss Autherine Lucy, Miss Rosa Parks, Miss Daisy Bates, and many, many more.

The things I found common, both while talking to people and reading books, were that to a point I would get the same answer, and then personal opinions would come in. When I talked to an educated black man and an uneducated black man about Huey Long, I got different interpretations. The same results when reading the papers of the North and the papers of the South, or reading history books by black historians and by white historians. Yes, Huey Long was governor, was senator, and was killed—but why, and who did it, could be differently interpreted.

I started writing on *Miss Jane Pittman* with this idea of narration in mind: that different characters would tell the story of her life in their own way. The story was to begin on the day that she was buried—the old people who had followed her body to the cemetery would later gather on the porch of a lady who had never walked in her life, and there they would start talking. In the beginning there would be only three or four of them, but around midnight, when they were still talking, there would be a dozen or more. But by now they would be talking about almost anything—

Miss Jane would be only part of their conversation.

I followed this multiple point of view technique for a year—then I discarded it. (I should mention here—I should have mentioned earlier—that the original title was “A Short Biography of Miss Jane Pittman,” and that it was changed to “The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman” when I decided to tell the story from a single voice—Miss Jane’s own . . .) I decided to change the way of telling the story because I had fallen in love with my little character, and I thought she could tell the story of her life much better than anyone else. The others were making her life too complicated in that they had too many opinions, bringing in too many anecdotes. I thought a single voice, Miss Jane’s, would keep the story in a straight line. (Though, even here, I had trouble with her when she got wound up. Once the story really got moving, Miss Jane did and said pretty much whatever she wanted, and all I could do was act as her editor. Never her advisor.)

Who is Miss Jane—what does she represent? I’ve heard all kinds of interpretations. More than one reviewer has said that she is a capsule history of black people of the rural South during the last hundred years. I must disagree, and I’m sure Miss Jane would, too. Miss Jane is Miss Jane. She is not my aunt, she is not any one person—she is Miss Jane. Maybe I had my aunt in mind when I was writing about her, but I had other old people in mind as well—those who sat on our gallery in the 1940’s, and those whom I’ve met on the road since then. You have seen Miss Jane, too. She is that old lady who lives up the block, who comes out every Sunday to go to church when the rheumatism does not keep her in. She is the old lady who calls a child to her door and asks him to go to the store for a can of coffee. She sits on a screened-in porch fanning herself in the summer, and in the winter she sits by the heater or the stove and thinks about the dead. Even without turning her head, she speaks to the child lying on the floor watching television, or to the young woman lying across a bed in another room. She knows much—she has lived long. Sometimes she’s impatient, but most times she’s just the opposite. If you take time to ask her a question you will find her to be quite dogmatic. You will say, “But that’s not it, that’s not it, that’s not it.” And she will stick to her beliefs. If you go to the history books, you will find that most of them would not agree with what she has told you. But if you read more closely you will also notice that these great minds don’t even agree with each other.

Truth to Miss Jane is what she remembers. Truth to me is what people like Miss Jane remember. Of course, I go to the other sources, the newspapers, magazines, the books in libraries—but I

also go back and listen to what Miss Jane and folks like her have to say.

This I try to do in all my writing.

I begin with an idea, this point, this fact: some time in the past we were brought from Africa in chains, put in Louisiana to work the rice, cane, and cotton fields. Some kind of way we survived. God? Luck? Soul Food? Threats of Death? Superstition? I suppose all of these have played their part. If I asked a white historian what happened, he would not tell it the same way a black historian would. If I asked a black historian, he would not tell it the same way a black field worker would. So I ask them all. And I try in some way to get the answer. But I'm afraid I have not gotten it yet. Maybe in the next book, or the one after, or the one after. Maybe.