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An Exploration of Slavery and Racial Justice through 'The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman'

Roger Williams University

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BRISTOL, R.I. – Roger Williams University will examine the legacy of slavery and racial justice in America through an exploration of *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, this year’s selection for the [21st Annual John Howard Birss, Jr. Memorial Program](#).

For this year’s program, RWU celebrates the 50th anniversary of the publication of Ernest J. Gaines’ impactful literary work with a digital library exhibition, a keynote panel focusing on race through storytelling and music, and Bristol community events co-sponsored by Rogers Free Library.

Published in 1971, Gaines’ *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* is a fictional autobiography that tells a story of race in America through the eyes of one woman whose life spans the end of slavery through the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement. The publication of the book (as well as the acclaimed 1974 TV-film adaptation starring Cicely Tyson) was an important cultural moment for further understanding the human side of the African-American experience in the United States.

“This book, which really takes on issues of race and a history of race in America through a very personal lens, felt like the natural pick given the moment we’re in culturally,” said Adam Braver, University Library

program director and associate professor of creative writing.

Gaines, whose best-known work is *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, wrote several acclaimed novels about the lives and struggles of Black people living in the South before the civil rights era. Born to sharecropper parents, he spent his early life on a Louisiana plantation and drew from his own experiences for his stories and characters. He was named a MacArthur Genius, and received the National Humanities Medal from President Bill Clinton and the National Medal of Arts from President Barack Obama. Gaines died in 2019.

Join the Celebration

Each year the Birss Memorial Program celebrates a great American writer, inviting the campus community and greater community to read and open a dialogue about an important work of literature or poetry. The events are free and open to the public, including:

Ongoing Digital Exhibition of Gaines and His Work

Prepared in collaboration with Ernest J. Gaines Center at the University of Louisiana, Lafayette, the digital project by RWU's University Library explores Gaines and *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* through an archival look at early manuscripts, images, interviews, reviews, and other related items.

VIEW THE EXHIBITION

A One-Evening Writing Workshop Presented by
Rogers Free Library:

Make it Come Alive! — Ernest Gaines, Miss Jane Pittman, and the Power of Storytelling

Tuesday, March 2

6:30 to 8:30 p.m.

Presented by Susan Tacent, Ph.D.

REGISTER FOR THE WORKSHOP

Keynote Presentation: Talking About Race Through
Storytelling & Music

Monday, March 15

7:00 p.m.

A keynote panel, based on Gaines' practice and philosophy, will focus on race through storytelling and music. Panelists include: writer Danzy Senna (author of *Caucasia*); New Orleans jazz legend Michael White; and Cheylon Woods, archivist and head of the Gaines Center at University of Louisiana, Lafayette. Visit the [Birss Memorial Program site](#) for more information on the speakers.

Cosponsored by the John Howard Birss Memorial Fund and the Mary Tefft White "Talking in the Library"

*Endowment at RWU; and The Gaines Center,
University of Louisiana, Lafayette*

REGISTER FOR THE EVENT

*A book discussion was held Feb. 24 with the Rogers
Free Library.*