Famous African-American author and former University of Louisiana at Lafayette writer-in-residence Ernest J. Gaines, Ph.D., passed away last week on Tuesday, Nov. 5.

Gaines was responsible for many critically acclaimed novels about racism and slavery in Louisiana such as, "The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman" and "A Gathering of Old Men," both of which were made into films.

According to the Ernest J. Gaines Center website, he received 27 separate awards for his writing and was made a Chevalier (Knight) of the French Order of Arts and Letters in 2000.

Cheylon Woods, the head of the Ernest J. Gaines Center, said Gaines' work was the first time many people were exposed to Southern African-American culture.

"So many people internationally have gained a deeper understanding of what it means to be Southern. Prior to Gaines' writing, the South could easily be identified as stereotypically antebellum because of who was being portrayed. It was overwhelmingly white," Woods said. "If you weren't a landowner, you really weren't that important."

James McDonald, Ph.D., an English professor and interim head of the English department at UL Lafayette, worked at UL Lafayette while Gaines was a writer-in-residence. He said Gaines frequently pushed his students to produce their best work and develop their style, even if their style wasn't his.

"My understanding of what people would say is that he was patient, but demanding, and that his comments were incisive and encouraging," McDonald said. "Although, as a novelist, he was much more traditional than, say, experimental in his own writing, he was able to work with writers of all kinds of approaches to writing fiction."

McDonald also said Gaines often did readings that were open to the whole community and encouraged anyone interested to attend, regardless of whether or not they were a UL Lafayette student. "He represented UL and the English department very well because he often did readings in the community and often spoke with people in the community about writing. So a lot of people got to know him," he said. Woods knew Gaines personally and spoke highly of his character.

"He was a wonderful person. He was one of the kindest most supportive people I've met since coming to Lafayette," she said.

David Squires, Ph.D., is another English professor at UL Lafayette and teaches Gaines' work to his students. Squires said Gaines' death was a tremendous loss.

"What a loss for his family, most immediately, and his community, but also a loss for UL and American letters," he said.

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According to a post on the Ernest J. Gaines Center made on their Facebook page, Gaines' funeral will be at Hall Davis and Sons Funeral Services on Saturday, Nov. 16. Visitation will be from 4-6 p.m. on Friday, Nov. 15 and 12-1 p.m. on Saturday, Nov. 16.

Woods said the Ernest J. Gaines Center, which is located on the third floor of the Edith Garland Dupré Library, held a memorial service on Monday, Nov. 11 at 6 p.m. Those attending the service listened to a recording of him reading excerpts from "A Gathering of Old Men" and got an opportunity to sign a scrapbook for Gaines' family, as well as share their feelings or memories of Gaines' life. The scrapbook is available to sign from Monday, Nov. 11 to Thursday, Nov. 14.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, Gaines was born on Jan. 15, 1933 in Oscar, Louisiana. He graduated from San Francisco State College, which is now San Francisco State University, and went to graduate school at Stanford University.

The Ernest J. Gaines Center website said he also served in the army.