Ernest Gaines draws crowd at book reading

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With doors propped open and people waiting outside the auditorium on Thursday evening, Ernest J. Gaines, Ph.D., read from his newest novel "The Tragedy of Brady Sims" and held a Q&A at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Oliver Hall.

"The Tragedy of Brady Sims" is Gaines' first published novel in over 23 years, according to Cheylon Woods, head of the Ernest J. Gaines center located on the third floor of Edith Garland Dupré Library.

"This was huge," Woods said. "We had a fantastic turnout. So I couldn't be happier."

The auditorium, which typically seats about 100, was filled well over capacity with roughly 150 people, with listeners lining the back walls, as well as people sitting in any open floor space.

Gaines started the evening by signing a few books and taking pictures before he began reading the first few chapters of his novella. His voice weak and worn with age, the words were sometimes muffled, but that did not interfere with the mood of the evening.

Holding true to his infamous slave narratives and novels written in the point of view of people of color in 1940-1960, "The Tragedy of Brady Sims" follows a young reporter through southern Louisiana in the '40s. Despite the story opening with the murder of a young boy, the novella is riddled with humor and at several points during the reading, the crowd erupted in fits of giggles.

After reading for about 30 minutes, the floor was opened for questions, and a few attendees stood up and chatted with the acclaimed author.

Kayla Bauerle, a senior English literature major, said she felt Gaines seemed real and thoughtful while answering questions.

"He is very humble," she said. "He knows what he's accomplished, but he doesn't feel above doing this."

Asked who his favorite authors were, Gaines said he had no favorites, but he was mostly inspired by Hemingway and Steinbeck.

"My favorite book is the one I'm gonna write next," he said, leaving the room in a bout of laughter and applause.

His family's history, once slaves on a plantation in Oscar, has inspired and influenced his writings over the years. After leaving the South to go to school in California, Gaines began reading and writing more than ever, but every time he tried to produce a piece of literature, it fell flat. It wasn't until he came back to Louisiana, that he accomplished a novel.

"My soul remained here," Gaines said.

His aunt was a crippled woman who never walked a day in her life, but Gaines said she never allowed her disabilities to hold her back. He said her strength and love gave him the push he needed.

During the 45-minute Q&A, there were a few standout questions. One in particular was about whether or not any of Gaines' characters intermingled with each other, despite being in different books; many of his works take place within the same 20-30 year time frame, all in south Louisiana.

"Maybe I should have!" Gaines exclaimed with a laugh, after admitting he never wrote with the intentions of his characters coming to know each other.

"They're all my children," he proclaimed, unable to choose a favorite.

His words of advice to any aspiring writers out there were, "Read, read, read. Write, write, write."

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