AQUIET KIND OF RAGE

Remember the powerful made-for-television movie, The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman, from the novel by Ernest J. Gaines? Or perhaps you saw The Sky is Gray. Now the author's latest novel, A Gathering of Old Men, marks the third major made-for-television movie based on his writings. It airs on CBS Sunday, May 10 at 8 p.m.

Gaines is considered one of the best American authors alive today without any qualifying necessary. He is also among the most renowned Southern authors of all time. In an article in Southern Magazine in March, Gaines was singled out as one of today's writers who'll still have an audience 100 years from now. “No one has a keener ear for black folk idiom than Ernest J. Gaines,” the article says.

But among Louisianians, Gaines is appreciated for his indigenous roots that bring him back to this state in his novels. Impassioned by his heritage and the land, Gaines creates Louisiana settings in all his published fiction. To get a regular dose of the culture, he commutes from his home base in San Francisco. Since 1982, for six months out of the year he has taught at USL as a writer-in-residence.

A Gathering of Men was filmed near Thibodaux last November and features actors Lou Gosset Jr., Richard Widmark and Will Patton. Gaines was on the set three of the four weeks of production and had this to say about the manner in which his novel was turned into a feature television production. “I saw good things and I saw changes I wouldn't have made.”

In particular, the author appeared disappointed with the film's ending, which was “changed tremendously.” And in one instance, he said, two characters with opposite personalities were combined into one character.

Gaines has a background in character prototypes from the South. Born a sharecropper's son in 1933 in Pointe Coupee Parish, the novelist spent the formative years of his life working in the sugar cane fields with his family on a plantation near False River. Up until the age of 15, when he moved to join his mother and stepfather in California, Gaines witnessed the hardships of black life in the South in times when racial tensions were high and the reality of equality for the black man was low.

As a result of Gaines' harsh childhood experiences, a theme that runs throughout his books is the need to confront obstacles we all eventually face in life and to overcome them as never have, when a friend is charged with murdering a white man's son. The movie explores relations between blacks and whites in the South—how and why they have changed and are still changing.

Gaines seems able to write about racial injustice in a way few other writers have mastered. Instead of lashing out, his furor is a quiet kind of rage spoken through the voices of characters that are neither violent nor bitter.

“When I left Louisiana at fifteen years of age, I had done a lot of living ... and knew what hard work was in the field and could understand the situation between blacks and whites,” recalls Gaines. “But I left here early enough not to become bitter by the situation of racial prejudice in a place like the South in the '40s. Had I stayed another five years, I might have.”