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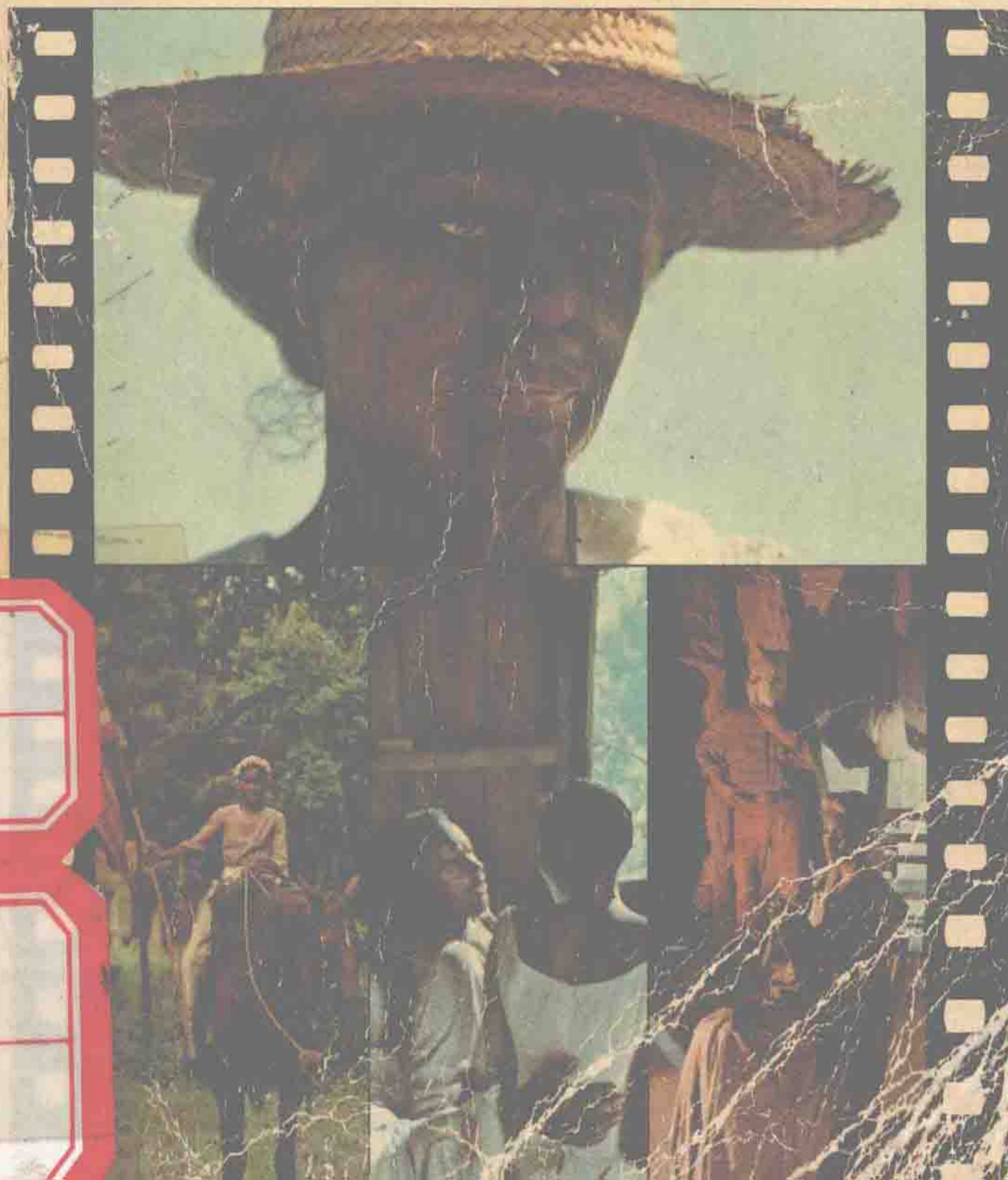
Starring Cicely Tyson

—\*—+—\*

The autobiography of  
**Miss Jane Pittman**

—\*—+—\*

by Ernest J. Gaines





The  
Autobiography  
of  
**MISS  
JANE  
PITTMAN**

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by Ernest J. Gaines



*This book is dedicated  
to the memory of*

*My grandmother, Mrs. Julia McVay  
My stepfather, Mr. Raphael Norbert Colar, Sr.*

*and*

*to the memory of*

*My beloved aunt, Miss Augusteen Jefferson,  
who did not walk a day in her life  
but who taught me the importance of standing*

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## THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN

"Ernest Gaines may just be the best black writer in America. He is so good, in fact, that he makes the category seem meaningless."

—Melvin Maddocks, *Time*

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"This is a novel in the guise of the tape-recorded recollections of a black woman who has lived 110 years, who has been both a slave and a witness to the black militancy of the 1960's. In this woman Ernest Gaines has created a legendary figure, a woman equipped to stand beside William Faulkner's Dilsey in 'The Sound and the Fury'. Miss Jane Pittman, like Dilsey, has 'endured,' has seen almost everything and foretold the rest.

"Gaines's novel brings to mind other great works. 'The Odyssey' for the way his heroine's travels manage to summarize the American history of her race, and 'Huckleberry Finn' for the clarity of her voice, for her rare capacity to sort through the mess of years and things to find the one true story in it all."

—Geoffrey Wolff, *Newsweek*

"Stunning. I know of no black novel about the South that exudes quite the same refreshing mix of wit and wrath, imagination and indignation, misery and poetry. And I can recall no more memorable female character in Southern fiction since Lena of Faulkner's 'Light in August' than Miss Jane Pittman herself."

—Josh Greenfeld, *Life*

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY  
OF MISS JANE PITTMAN

Starring Cicely Tyson as  
Miss Jane Pittman

Produced by  
Robert W. Christiansen  
and  
Rick Rosenberg

Directed by  
John Korty

Written for television by  
Tracy Keenan Wynn

A Tomorrow Entertainment production  
for the CBS Television Network

## Introduction

I had been trying to get Miss Jane Pittman to tell me the story of her life for several years now, but each time I asked her she told me there was no story to tell. I told her she was over a hundred years old, she had been a slave in this country, so there had to be a story. When school closed for the summer in 1962 I went back to the plantation where she lived. I told her I wanted her story before school opened in September, and I would not take no for an answer.

"You won't?" she said.

"No, ma'am."

"Then I reckon I better say something," she said.

"You don't have to say a thing," Mary said.

Mary Hodges was a big brown-skin woman in her early sixties who lived in the same house that Miss Jane did and looked after Miss Jane.

"If I don't he go'n just worry me to death," Miss Jane said.

"What you want know about Miss Jane for?" Mary said.

"I teach history," I said. "I'm sure her life's story can help me explain things to my students."

"What's wrong with them books you already got?" Mary said.

"Miss Jane is not in them," I said.

"It's all right, Mary," Miss Jane said.

"You don't have to say nothing less you want," Mary said.

"He'll just keep on bothering me."

"Not if you tell him stay 'way from here," Mary said.

"And I can always borrow Etienne's shotgun."

"When you want start?" Miss Jane said.

"You mean it's all right?" I said.

Now, they just looked at me. I couldn't read Miss Jane's mind. When a person is over a hundred years old it's hard to tell what she is thinking. But Mary was only in her sixties, and I could read her mind well. She still wanted to borrow Etienne's shotgun.

"Is Monday all right?" I asked.

"Monday's good," Miss Jane said.

I had planned to record Miss Jane's story on tape that summer before school opened again. After the first two weeks I was sure I could do it. But during that third week everything slowed up to an almost complete halt. Miss Jane began to forget everything. I don't know whether she was doing this purposely or not, but suddenly she could not remember anything any more. The only thing that saved me was that there were other people at the house every day that I interviewed her, and they were glad to help in every way that they could. Miss Jane was constantly turning to one of them for the answer. An old man called Pap was her main source. Pap was in his mid-eighties, he had lived on that plantation all his life, and he could remember everything that had happened in the parish since the turn of the century. But even Pap's knowledge could not keep the interview within the schedule that I had planned. And after school opened for the new semester all plans were changed, because now I could only interview Miss Jane on weekends. I would talk to her and the other people at the house for several hours, then I would leave until the following Saturday or Sunday. (I should mention here that even though I have used only

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Miss Jane's voice throughout the narrative, there were times when others carried the story for her. When she was tired, or when she just did not feel like talking any more, or when she had forgotten certain things, someone else would always pick up the narration. Miss Jane would sit there listening until she got ready to talk again. If she agreed with what the other person was saying she might let him go on for quite a while. But if she did not agree, she would shake her head and say: "No, no, no, no, no." The other person would not contradict her, because, after all, this was her story.)

There were times when I thought the narrative was taking ridiculous directions. Miss Jane would talk about one thing one day and the next day she would talk about something else totally different. If I were bold enough to ask: "But what about such and such a thing?" she would look at me incredulously and say: "Well, what about it?" And Mary would back her up with: "What's wrong with that? You don't like that part?" I would say, "Yes, but—" Mary would say, "But what?" I would say, "I just want to tie up all the loose ends." Mary would say, "Well, you don't tie up all the loose ends all the time. And if you got to change her way of telling it, you tell it yourself. Or maybe you done heard enough already?" Then both of them would look at me as if I had come into the room without knocking. "Take what she say and be satisfied," Mary would say.

I could not possibly put down on paper everything that Miss Jane and the others said on the tape during those eight or nine months. Much of it was too repetitious and did not follow a single direction. What I have tried to do here was not to write everything, but in essence everything that was said. I have tried my best to retain Miss Jane's language. Her selection of words; the rhythm of her speech. When she spoke she used as few words as possible to make her point. Yet, there were times when she would repeat a word or phrase over and over when she thought it might add humor or drama to the situation.

Miss Jane died about eight months after the last

interview. At her funeral I met many of the people whom she had talked about. I told them about the tape and I asked could I talk to them sometime. Almost everyone, both black and white, said I could. Some of them wanted to hear the tape, or part of it, before they made any comments. After hearing the tape they refused to say anything. Others laughed and said not everything on the tape was absolutely correct. Still, others were glad to give information without listening to the tape at all, and in most cases much of what they said was pretty close to what Miss Jane had said before.

In closing I wish to thank all the wonderful people who were at Miss Jane's house through those long months of interviewing her, because this is not only Miss Jane's autobiography, it is theirs as well. This is what both Mary and Miss Jane meant when they said you could not tie all the ends together in one neat direction. Miss Jane's story is all of their stories, and their stories are Miss Jane's.

*the editor*

Book I

# THE WAR YEARS







## Soldiers

It was a day something like right now, dry, hot, and dusty dusty. It might 'a' been July, I'm not too sure, but it was July or August. Burning up, I won't ever forget. The Secesh Army, they came by first. The Officers on their horses, the Troops walking, some of them dragging the guns in the dust they was so tired. The Officers rode up in the yard, and my mistress told them to get down and come in. The colonel said he couldn't come in, he was going somewhere in a hurry, but he would be glad to get down and stretch his legs if the good lady of the house would be so gracious to let him. My mistress said she most graciously did, and after the colonel had got down he told the others to get down too. The colonel was a little man with a gun and a sable. The sable was so long it almost dragged on the ground. Looked like the colonel was a little boy who had got somebody else's sable to play with. My mistress told me stop standing there gaping, go out there in the road and give the Troops some water. I had the water in a barrel under one of the chinaball trees. We knowed the soldiers was coming that way—we had heard the gun fire the day before, and somebody had already passed the house and told us if the soldiers came by be

prepared to help in every way we could; so they had put me to hauling water. All morning long I hauled water to that barrel. Now I had to haul the water out the barrel to the Troops out in the road. Buckets after buckets after buckets. I can't remember how many buckets I hauled. The Troops was so tired and ragged they didn't even see me. They took the gourd from me when I handed it to them, and that was all. After they had drunk, they just let it hang there in their hands, and I had to reach and get it so I could serve another one. But they didn't even see little old black me. They couldn't tell if I was white or black, a boy or a girl. They didn't even care what I was. One was just griping. He didn't look too much older than me—face just as dirty as it could be. Just griping: "Just left to me I'll turn them niggers loose, just left to me." When I handed him the water he held the gourd a long time before he drank, then after he had drunk he let the gourd hang in his hand while he just sat there gazing down at the ground.

But these was the same ones, mind you, who had told their people they wouldn't be late for supper. That was before—when the war was just getting started—when they thought fighting a war was nothing but another day's work. "Don't put my food up," they said, "Don't put it up and don't give it away. I'm go'n kill me up a few Yankees and I'm coming right on back home. Who they think they is trying to destruck us way of living? We the nobles, not them. God put us here to live the way we want live, that's in the Bible." (I have asked people to find that in the Bible for me, but no one's found it yet.) "And He put niggers here to see us live that way—that's in the Bible, too. John, chapter so and so. Verse, right now I forget. Now, here them Yankees want come and destruck what the Good Lord done said we can have. Keep my supper warm, Mama, I'll be back before breakfast." These was the same ones griping out in the road right now.

Before all them had a chance to get some water, I looked up and saw another one coming down the road on a horse. He was hitting and kicking that horse fast as

his arms and feet could move. Hollering far as you could hear him: "Colonel, Colonel, they coming. Colonel, Colonel, they coming." He went right by us, but the Troops was so tired some of them didn't even raise their head. Some of them even laid down on the ground when he went by. "How far?" the colonel asked him. "I don't know for sure," he said. "Maybe three, four miles back there. All I can see is that dust way up in the air." My mistress handed him two biscuits and a cup of water. He looked at that bread and water like he hadn't seen food or water in a long time and he kept bowing and saying, "Thank you, ma'am; thank you, ma'am; thank you, ma'am." The colonel hit his boots together and kissed my mistress on the hand, then he told the others to get on their horses. He hollered for them in the road to get to their feet, too. Some of them did like he said, but many of them just sat there gazing down at the ground. One of the Officers had to come out in the road and call them to attention. Even then they wasn't in any kind of hurry to get on their feet. They started down the road, and I could hear that same one that had been griping before: "Just left to me I'll turn them niggers loose, just left to me." One of the other Troops told him shut up before he got both of them shot. Him for complaining, and him for being his cousin. He told him shut up or cousin or no cousin he liable to shoot him himself. But till they got out hearing distance all I could hear was that little fellow griping: "Yankees want them, let the Yankees have them—just left to me."

After they had made the bend, I went back in the yard with the bucket and the gourd. My mistress was standing on the gallery watching the dust rising over the field, and just crying. "Sweet, precious blood of the South; sweet precious blood of the South." Just watching that dust, wringing her hands and crying. Then she saw me standing there looking up at her. "What you standing there for?" she said. "Go fill that barrel."

"What for, Mistress?" I said. "They gone now."

"Don't you think Yankees drink?" she said. "Go get that water."

"I got to haul water for old Yankees, too?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "You don't want them boiling you in oil and eating you, do you?"

"No, Mistress," I said.

"You better get that water then," she said. "A Yankee like nothing better than cooking a little nigger gal and chewing her up. Where the rest of them no 'count niggers at, I wonder?"

"They went hiding with Master in the swamps," I said, pointing toward the back.

"Stop that pointing," my mistress said. "You can't tell where a Yankee might be. And you watch your tongue when they get here, too. You say anything about your master and the silver, I'll have you skinned."

"Yes, Mistress," I said.

While I was standing there, one of the other slaves bust round the house and said: "Master say come ask that's all?"

"Where your master at?" my mistress asked him.

"Edge of the swamps there," he said. "Peeping round a tree."

"Go back and tell your master that ain't half of them yet," my mistress said.

The slave bust back round the house, running faster than he did coming there. My mistress told me stop standing there and go get that water.

The Yankees didn't show up till late that evening, so that little fellow who had spotted that dust in the air had a keen eye sight or a bad judge of distance. The Yankee Officers rode up in the yard just like the Secesh Officers did; the Yankee troops plopped down side the road just like the other Troops did. I got the bucket and the gourd and went out there to give them water.

"How many Rebs went by here?" one of the Troops asked me.

"I didn't see no Rebs, Master," I said.

"Come now," he said. "Who made all them tracks out there?"

"Just us niggers," I said.



"Wearing shoes?" he said. "Where your shoes?"

"I took mine off," I said. "They hurt my foot."

"Little girl, don't you know you not suppose to lie?" he said.

"I ain't lying, Master," I said.

"What's your name?" he asked me.

"Ticey, Master," I said.

"They ever beat you, Ticey?" he asked.

"No, Master," I said.

The Troop said, "I ain't a master, Ticey. You can be frank with me. They ever beat you?"

I looked back toward the house and I could see my mistress talking with the Officers on the gallery. I knowed she was too far to hear me and the Troop talking. I looked at him again. I waited for him to ask me the same question.

"They do beat you, don't they, Ticey?" he said.

I nodded.

"What they beat you with, Ticey?" he said.

"Cat-o'-nine-tails, Master," I said.

"We'll get them," the Troop said. "Ten'll die for every whipping you ever got."

"Ten houses will burn," another Troop said.

"Ten fields, too," another one said.

"One of y'all sitting there, take that bucket and go haul that water," the first Troop said.

"I better do it, Master," I said. "They whip me if I don't do my work."

"You rest," he said. "Troop Lewis, on your feet."

Troop Lewis got up real slow; he was tired just like all the rest. He was a little fellow and I felt sorry for him because he looked like the kind everybody was always picking on. He took the bucket from me and went in the yard talking to himself. The other Troop had to holler on him to get moving.

"What they whip you for, Ticey?" he asked me.

"I go to sleep when I look after Young Mistress children," I said.

"You nothing but a child yourself," he said. "How old is you right now?"

"I don't know, Master," I said.