



A Lesson Before Teaching

M. Alayne Sullivan

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This book tells a story of literary engagement; it documents the emotions and struggles that students of diverse identities had when reading Ernest Gaines great classic novel, *A Lesson Before Dying*. The book is written for teachers and researchers who are interested in how and why our struggling adolescents read literature. It speaks particularly to why students of diverse identities need more opportunities to read and respond to literature. Readers can engage the book on two levels. They can live through the Gaines text as they listen to readers discuss the novel. And they can read a different layer of the text in each chapter as the author walks readers through theoretical commentary. Ultimately this book reminds us that when we teach literature with struggling students, we are awakening in them a sense of their own humanity. It is a lesson for all who despair that struggling adolescents cannot be redeemed as students and human beings. Jefferson was condemned to die for a crime he did not commit. Redeeming in him a sense of his own dignity was a job that schoolteacher Grant Wiggins did not want. Adolescent students read this story, and their own human impulses are aroused. When teachers and researchers read this book, they will be reminded that teaching struggling students of diverse identities entails a mission toward redemption. They teach us that with guidance and love, they can be reached.

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