In 2013, George Mason University instituted a Common Read program for all incoming first-year off-campus students. This program built community around a central text, incorporating the themes both in and out of the classroom. In 2014, this program, called Mason Reads, was expanded to all incoming first-year students in Living Learning Communities, residence halls, and off-campus.

This year, all incoming freshmen will receive a copy of A Lesson Before Dying at summer orientation. Students will engage in programming around the text and its themes at The Preamble, Welcome Week, and throughout the fall. Ernest Gaines will be speaking as part of Fall for the Book on late September 27. Additionally, students will have the opportunity to interact with this text in a variety of courses.

**REFLECTION & DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

- What issues of justice and civil rights are raised by Jefferson’s trial, imprisonment, and execution? How do these issues relate to the wider issue of capital punishment?

- Is Grant a hero, according to the definition he gives Jefferson in Chapter 24? Is Jefferson a hero? Do any of the other characters qualify as heroes according to Grant’s definition?

- How does Gaines establish the unchanging ways of the two communities, black and white? What details of individual lives and of communal life contribute to the lack of change?

- What are the deeper lessons Jefferson learns as evidenced by his diary despite the way it’s written?

- The jail guard said to Grant, “Be decent, treat him right, but that’s all. This can get messy before it’s over, and I will do my duty.” How do you balance doing what’s popular versus doing what’s right? How do you think this will show up in college?

- In Chapter 17, both Paul and Grant say that they will do their duty in respect to Jefferson. Is the importance of doing one’s duty a dominant theme of the novel? Does each of the other main characters have a clear notion of his or her duty?

- “It doesn’t matter anymore. Just do the best you can. But it won’t matter.” How does this quote show the perspective of education in Grant’s community?

- By the end of the novel, what skills/knowledge do you think Jefferson learned from his time spent with Grant? Likewise, what do you think Grant learned about himself and others during the events of the book?

- Throughout the book, Grant is trying to earn the respect of various characters being an educated black man. Whose respect do you think matters most to Grant?

- Grant is stuck in a constant cycle of thinking of leaving to start his own life or staying in his community to help others. If you were Grant, what would you do?

- The story’s cast includes characters that have some form of privilege as well as those who on the receiving end of oppressing in one or more ways. What are some ways in which the characters with privilege used this to benefit themselves and their own agendas? What are some ways in which characters with privilege have used this to actually help others without out it?

**PROGRAMS**

**Welcome Week Meet ‘n’ Munch:** August 31, 11:30am -1:30pm in the HUB Ballroom (lunch provided)

**Author Ernest Gaines speaks:** September 27, 7:30pm in Eagle Bank Arena

**A Lesson Before Dying Film Screening:** October 8