THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF MISS JANE PITTMAN

Introduction
1. Who is writing this introduction? Why does he encourage Miss Pittman to tell the story of her life?

A history teacher is writing the introduction. He encourages Miss Pittman to tell her story because he does not believe the history textbooks adequately teach the students about black history.

2. Geoffrey Wolff of Newsweek describes this story in the following way: “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.” What do you think Wolff means when he says this story is in the “guise of tape-recorded recollections”? Why do you think he refers to this story of Miss Jane Pittman's life as a novel rather than an autobiography?

This story is a novel because it is fictional. Jane Pittman is not a real person. She is a character in the novel, who is telling her fictional life story to a fictional history teacher.

3. Why do you suppose Gaines chooses to write this novel in the form of an autobiography?

Answers will vary. Example: It is possible that Gaines, even though he is writing a fictional novel, wants his readers to accept what he is presenting about black history as being true.

BOOK I – THE WAR YEARS
Soldiers
1. Define Secesh. Why is the Confederate Army referred to as the “Secesh Army”?

Secesh – a secessionist; during the Civil War, slaves called the Confederate Army the “Secesh Army” because the Confederates wanted to secede from the Union. “Secesh” is a better word for indicating slave dialect.

2. Why is it ironic that the exhausted Confederate troops gripe, “ 'Just left to me I'll turn them niggers loose, just left to me' ”?

The young Southern men willingly join the army to preserve their way of life, which includes slavery. They think the South can quickly defeat the North, so they will be home in time for dinner. They believe that God himself put black people on Earth so that the white owners can have a good life. It is ironic that after experiencing the hardships of war, the same Southern men now would choose to free the slaves. It is also possible that the soldier is thinking about killing the slaves.

3. After the Yankee troops leave, why does Ticey insist that her name is Jane Brown?

Corporal Brown of the Union Army tells Ticey that he hates slavery. He is going to call her “Jane” after his daughter in Ohio, because “Ticey” is a slave name. After Corporal Brown leaves, Ticey insists her name is Jane Brown and refuses to answer to Ticey, even when her mistress beats her.

4. Why, at the young age of ten or eleven, is Jane sent to work in the fields?

Jane refuses to answer to her slave name. Her mistress wants to sell her, but with so many Yankee troops in the area, there is no market for slaves. Next, her mistress wants the slave
overseer to take Jane into the swamp and kill her, but he will not because he is worried that the troops may come back and ask for her. Finally, he decides to remove Jane from the house and sends her to work in the fields.

Freedom
1. What was the Emancipation Proclamation? What choices do the slaves have after the master reads them the papers?

The Emancipation Proclamation is a proclamation issued by Abraham Lincoln to free the slaves in the Confederate states. After the slaves are free, they can stay on the plantation and work for shares of the harvest, or they can leave.

2. Why do some of the freed slaves decide to remain on the plantation?

The former slaves do not have any food or money, so traveling is difficult. Some of them want to stay to see if the master treats them any better as free men and women. The world is not a safe place for a free black man or woman because many whites would beat or kill them. If they leave the plantation, they have no real protection against such actions. Some of the older men and women try to keep their families together by encouraging the young people to remain on the plantation. They argue that there has been enough separation in their lives.

3. What do you think the “blood” might represent in this passage?

“They got blood on this place, and I done stepped all in it. I done waded in it to my waist. You can mend a broken heart, you can’t wash blood off your body.”

Answers will vary. Example: The passage is referring to the beatings the young people have received from the master, and it represents the many slaves who have been killed by white slave owners. Blood is necessary for life. This passage is also saying that the young people do not want any more of their lives to be associated with or controlled by slavery.

Heading North
1. Briefly describe Big Laura.

Big Laura is a large, tough woman with two children. She is courageous and strong and takes the lead when the group comes to the swamps. Big Laura rescues Jane from the “slow-wit” who tries to carry her into the bushes.

2. What can you infer about the life of female slaves in the incident where Big Laura must prevent Jane from being taken into the bushes?

The “slow-wit” tries to carry Jane into the bushes to rape her. It is implied that big male slaves were commanded by the white masters to mate with the young girls to produce more and larger slave babies.

Massacre
1. Who are patrollers?

“Patrollers was poor white trash that used to find the runaway slaves for the masters.” They are men who torture and kill black people without any remorse.
2. Find a passage in this chapter which shows that Jane is a Christian who has some knowledge of the Bible. What is it an allusion to?

Answers will vary. Example: “Only one time, so they say, it [the sun] refused to shine: when they nailed the Master to the cross.” It alludes to Jesus’ crucifixion.

3. Find a simile in this chapter.

Jane finds the slow-witted slave dead with “his head busted there like a coconut.”

4. How do you think Jane feels when she discovers Big Laura’s body?

It is difficult to determine how Jane feels. She has witnessed a great deal of suffering and has heard about so much cruelty in her young life that she is unable to cry. Jane admired Big Laura and counted on her strength to help get them to Ohio. Jane must feel sad that Big Laura is dead, but she also must feel fear and loneliness. Jane does feel pride in Big Laura after she discovers the two patrollers’ caps, indicating that Big Laura “busted two of them in the head before they killed her and her baby.”

5. Why does Jane give Ned the two pieces of rock?

Jane remembers seeing Big Laura make a fire with two pieces of flint. She finds the flint and gives the rocks to Ned to keep until they reach Ohio. Jane knows that she needs the flint to make fires, and it is implied that she understands that Ned needs something of his mother’s to hold onto in the difficult journey ahead.

6. At the end of the chapter, Jane is reflecting on the terrible day. “I was thinking about them, too; thinking about all the people; ’specially the slow-wit I had seen them kill; but I looked at it this way, we had to keep going. We couldn’t let what happened yesterday stop us today.” State a possible theme for this novel based on the above passage.

Answers will vary. Examples: Past horrors cannot rob a person of his or her future. Life must go on despite the injustices of the past. While remembering the past, it is important to continue to strive for the future. A person’s determination to succeed might be all that person can rely on.

Heading South
1. At the beginning of this chapter, Jane remarks that “When we came round the bend I saw niggers strung out all over the place just eating and resting. I had never seen so many happy black faces in all my life before.” What does this passage imply about the way the white mistress in charge of the group treats her black workers?

The white mistress does not beat her workers. They are well fed and protected by her.

2. After listening to Jane’s story about how the patrollers killed Ned’s mother some of the “…niggers started looking a little scared.” Why do you suppose they are scared?

The black people in that group are happy because they are free and because they have a nice white mistress who looks after their welfare. However, after listening to Jane’s story, they realize that their sense of security is false. They know that freed slaves are still killed and beaten in the South.
3. What useful information does Jane get from the white mistress? What does she try to tell Jane that Jane refuses to believe?

_The white woman tells Jane about the ferry, but Jane refuses to listen when she tells Jane that the search for Corporal Brown is futile, that he could already be dead, and that Jane’s dreams about Ohio are just dreams._

4. Cite incidents from the story to prove or disprove the following statement: There is nothing wrong with freed slaves remaining with their former white masters, so long as they are well treated by the masters.

_Answers will vary. Example: The white mistress does not mistreat her workers, but she is leading them south. The South is a dangerous place for freed slaves because of the patrollers. Therefore, it is not in the best interests of these former slaves to remain with her. As long as the black people serve white masters, they are not free._

**Shelter for a Night**

1. Who is the Yankee that helps Jane and Ned cross the river?

_He is a government investigator working for the Freedom Bureau, which is a part of the Federal Government that sends Yankees to the South to help the freed slaves adjust to their new lives. They try to be sure the freed slaves have food, clothes, and an education. The man is an investigator who checks up on the Northerners working for the Freedom Bureau._

2. The man takes Jane and Ned to a home for displaced black children. They are given food, a bath, and a bed for the night. Why do you suppose that, at the end of the chapter, Jane tells Ned, “Tomorrow morning when nobody lookin’ we getting out of here”?

_Answers will vary. Example: Despite the food and shelter, Jane does not believe that she is going to find her freedom in the South. She has no reason to trust the Yankee or any of the people in the house. In her mind, the only person she wants help from is Corporal Brown._

3. What might Ned’s flint represent or symbolize in the story?

_Answers will vary. Example: The flint makes fire which is a source of warmth and comfort. The flint also represents the black family unit, which needs to be held together, even though parts of it are chipped off._

**All Kinds of People**

1. At first, Jane considers staying at the home for a few days. What happens to make her change her mind?

_Jane learns that the home has a schedule that she must follow. A bell rings, the older children go to work, and the younger ones go to school. After working all day, the older children are expected to learn their ABC’s and their numbers. On the plantation, bells are used to call the workers in from the fields. Jane thinks she has had enough of bells in her young life and does not want to attend school._
2. How does Colonel Brown treat Jane and Ned when they enter his office? Why do you suppose he fails to do anything to help them?

Colonel Brown gives Jane a chance to speak. Once he realizes that she is looking for a different Brown, he turns his back to her and begins studying his map. Answers will vary. Examples: Black children alone after the Civil War are a common sight for Colonel Brown, so he does not do anything to help Jane and Ned. He assumes they are living at the nearby home for displaced former slaves, and he does not think the children are worth his time.

3. How does the woman at the farmhouse feel about Jane and Ned? What is ironic about her reasons for giving the children a drink of water?

The woman at the farmhouse resents all black people and blames them for the hardships she has suffered because of the Civil War. It is ironic that the woman claims to hate all black people, yet gives Jane and Ned water because she thinks of herself as a good Christian woman; if she were not “a God-fearing Christian I’d kill y’all myself.”

The Hunter
1. What lesson does the hunter think the Secesh are trying to give to the freed slaves?

The hunter tells Jane about a man the Army hung and then gashed out his entrails, as a lesson to other black people. The Secesh want the freed slaves to understand that even though the government says slaves are free, the Southerners still consider them inferior.

2. Some critics describe Jane as a memorable female character who possesses both wit and wrath. If wit in this instance is defined as the ability to make clever or satirical remarks, find a passage in this story which demonstrates Jane's wit.

Answers will vary. Example: “He told me he had made it to shoot rabbits and birds. Sometimes he even got a fish or two. I told him I bet I could use it. He said I didn’t have the strength. He said it took a man to pull back on that bow. I asked him what he knowed about my strength.”

3. Give two possible reasons why this chapter is titled The Hunter.

Answers may vary. Example: The man hunts animals with his bow, and he is also hunting for his lost father.

4. What does the hunter’s story reveal to the reader about the impact of slavery on black families?

Black families are separated, both without any concerns for the family members and without any means to ever find or contact each other. The hunter is looking for his father but does not really know where to look for him.

An Old Man
1. What might the cap in the following passage represent in this story?

“We came in another thicket where they had had plenty fighting. You could see how cannon balls had knocked limbs and bark off the trees. It had a mound of dirt there about half the size of my gallery where they had buried many soldiers. They had put a cross at one end of the grave with a cap stuck on top of the cross. The weather had changed the color of the cap so much you couldn’t tell if it belong to a Yankee or Secesh.”
Answers will vary. Example: The color of the caps identifies whether or not the dead man is a Confederate or a Union soldier. In the passage, the cap is faded so Jane cannot tell if the grave is for Union or Confederate dead. The cap represents the destructive nature of war for both sides. Men from the North and the South are buried together in the grave. Both the mass grave and the faded cap seem to represent the futility of fighting the Civil War and the horror of it.

2. Why does Jane feel like crying after listening to the old man? Why do you think Jane decides to continue her journey?

Jane realizes that traveling to Ohio is almost impossible for two children on foot. Answers will vary. Example: Jane continues her journey because it is all she knows how to do and because it has been her plan for so long. They cannot stay with the old man, and they cannot go back. She knows it is probably impossible, but she goes on anyway.

3. Some critics believe that this novel is a metaphor for the experiences of black people in general after the Civil War. Assuming this is true, what is Gaines saying about the lives of freed slaves when he writes that Jane continues her journey even after being told it is impossible?

Answers will vary. Example: Jane continues her journey against seemingly impossible odds just as the freed slaves after the Civil War strive to make new better lives for themselves. Even though many whites, like the Secesh, try to make it impossible for freed slaves to make a good life for themselves, the black race continues on its journey for freedom and equality.

Rednecks and Scalawags
1. Define redneck and scalawag.
   • redneck – a derogatory term for a poor white rural resident of the South
   • scalawag – a white Southern Republican during Reconstruction

2. There are many Biblical references in this story. The man named Job in the Bible is a man who is tested by God. Everything is taken away from him, yet he maintains his belief in God and in the end is rewarded for his faith. What qualities does the character named Job in this story have in common with the Biblical Job?

The character in the book has many troubles, which might cause him not to be kind: a nagging wife, a house that is falling over, no children, and no crops. He remains, however, a good Christian and helps Jane and Ned. In the Bible, Job loses his home, children, possessions, and wealth. Job retains his nagging wife, though. Throughout these trials, he never curses God, and Job receives twice as much as he loses.

3. Where does Job take the children?

Job takes them to a plantation where they can find a home.

4. What incident from this chapter helps the reader understand that Jane is a strong, intelligent, and courageous young girl?

Answers may vary. Example: Jane talks Mr. Bone into giving her a chance to earn her keep in the fields. She negotiates with him so that if she proves that she is a strong worker, he must pay her the same wage the grown women receive.
5. What indication is given that lets you know that even though *The Autobiography of Jane Pittman* covers over 100 years, much of the time Jane’s life is similar to what she has known previously?

*Jane says simply, “That was the only furniture I had for the next ten, twelve years.”* (Pg. 64) *There is no suspense or wonder about what will happen. The reader knows that Jane stays on the farm working for numerous years.*

**BOOK II – RECONSTRUCTION**

**A Flicker of Light; and Again Darkness**

1. The Republican and Democratic parties during Reconstruction have different views concerning the best way to rebuild the South and what kind of South is in the best interests of the freed slaves. Briefly discuss the differing opinions, the way Jane sees them.

*The Republican Party wants each free man to have “forty acres and a mule.” It believes that the Yankees should stay in the South to help keep the peace. The Democrats want the Yankees to leave. Jane says, “The Democrat Party was for slavery.”*

2. The title of this chapter is *A Flicker of Light; and Again Darkness*. In what way does the debate between the Republicans and the Democrats relate to the title of this chapter?

*The Democrats say that the Republicans’ claim that everyone should have forty acres and a mule is untrue because Bone holds one of the largest plantations in the parish. The Republicans claim Bone has the land so he can provide work for those who cannot find it on their own. The Secesh begin to fight to get their land back. Eventually, Bone is forced out. The plantation, which had provided a safe haven for Jane and the other freed slaves, is returned to the Secessionists. The plantation under Bone is a flicker of light for the black people. There they find work, shelter, and an education for their children. After the plantation is returned, there is again darkness for the freed slaves.*

3. In what ways do the Secesh prevent freed slaves from striking out on their own to make new lives for themselves?

*The secret groups, like the Ku Klux Klan, beat or kill any black man who tries to make a life for himself or any white man who tries to help the former slaves stand on their own. Bone keeps troops on the plantation to protect his workers from these groups, but after he leaves, Jane and the others are vulnerable to these attacks.*

4. Why do the Yankees fail to provide troops to protect the slaves they fought a war to free? What is the “deal” the Yankees and the Secesh make?

*It is true the Yankees fought a war to set the slaves free, but now they want to unify the country. In order to accomplish this they need to return the land to the Southerners. Many of the Yankees are sorry there ever was a Civil War. “The South needed money to get on her feet, and the Yankees had the money to lend. And that was the deal: the Secesh get their land, but the Yankees lend the money.”*

5. After Bone leaves, why does Jane decide to stay on the plantation instead of continuing her journey North to Ohio?
After the Yankees return the land to the Secesh, Jane no longer believes the North is her road to freedom. She does not believe that her life in the North would be any better than her life in the South.

6. Jane states, “It was slavery again, all right.” What evidence is there to support Jane’s opinion? What, if anything, is different about her life on the plantation after the War?

Jane is doing the same work and living under the same conditions as before the War. She does not need a pass to leave the plantation, but she does need to give Colonel Dye’s name if a “secret” group stops her on the road. Black people are beaten and killed just like before the War. Yankee businesses come to the South, but no more Yankee troops come to help protect the freed slaves.

Exodus
1. Why is the Bayou called the “Dirty Bayou?”

Slaves who are trying to leave the plantation run into the Bayou to throw the dogs off the scent. Many slaves die trying to wade through the swamp or are killed by the patrollers. Jane refers to the Bayou as the “Dirty Bayou” because “That bayou got more people in it than a graveyard.”

2. Define oral tradition. In what sense is this novel an example of oral tradition?

Oral tradition – the transference of stories, songs, etc., from one generation to another or from one culture to another. Answers will vary. Example: This story is fictional, but it is based on true life accounts of the experiences of black people after the Civil War. Jane is an old woman, who is passing on the stories of her people. The significance of the Dirty Bayou might be lost without someone like Jane, who is able to retell the events.

Ned Leaves Home
1. What is Ned’s job with the committee of colored soldiers from the war? What name does he select for himself?

The committee of soldiers travels around the state to check on how the freed slaves are living. They conclude that the freed slaves are treated no better than when they were slaves. The committee recommends that the black people relocate to the North. Ned joins the committee, and his job is to tell people how to get to New Orleans. Ned selects Douglass as his last name, because Ned wants to be a great leader like Mr. Douglass, but he changes names frequently.

2. Why does Ned leave home? Where does he go?

The Klan is after Ned because of his work with the committee. He decides to leave for New Orleans, where he can get a boat to Kansas.

Two Letters from Kansas
1. What is the assumed cause for Jane being barren?

The doctor says that it was probably caused by something in her slave past.

2. Who is Joe Pittman?

Joe is a widowed man who asks Jane to marry him and help him raise his two girls.
3. What are some of the problems Ned faces in Kansas? In what ways is his life good?

At first, the white people in Kansas help the freed slaves, who are arriving by the boatload. However, there are too many people coming to Kansas, and there is not enough money or work to help them all. One of Ned’s jobs is to try and find new places for people to live. Ned is working on a farm. The white people who own the farm want Ned to go back to school to become a teacher.

Another Home

1. Why does Joe Pittman want to move to a place on the Louisiana-Texas border? What roadblocks does Colonel Dye put in his way to try and keep Joe on the plantation?

Joe is an expert at breaking horses. He thinks he can make a better living at the new place than he can working for Colonel Dye. Colonel Dye tries to keep him on the plantation by offering him a piece of land and a raise of five dollars a month, but Joe refuses the offer. Then, the Colonel claims Joe owes him one hundred and fifty dollars for getting Joe out of trouble with the KKK. Joe borrows the money from his new employers. Finally, the Colonel claims Joe owes him thirty dollars more. Joe sells everything he can to pay the Colonel the additional money so he, Jane, and the girls can leave the plantation.

2. How do Jane and Joe feel about their move?

Joe and Jane are proud and happy that they are able to leave the Colonel’s plantation; even though their new home is no better than the one they left, they “…had made a new start....”

Molly

1. Why is Molly mean to Jane?

Molly does not want Jane, or anyone else, working in the house because she is afraid Jane will take her place.

2. It is clear that Molly wants to remain in the house and that Miss Clare wants Molly there. Why then does Molly move out and refuse to return home?

Molly quits because she thinks Miss Clare and the others do not love her any more. She does not want Jane working in the house, so she gives Miss Clare an ultimatum, which is that either Jane goes or Molly goes. Miss Clare tells Molly that Jane is staying, so Molly leaves. She is a free woman who will not be told where or how she is to live.

3. What is surprising about her death?

The Clydes bury Molly in the family plot.

A Dollar for Two

1. In the following passage, Joe talks about why he continues to ride the hard horses:

“Maybe some little young buck'll come along and take over Chief from me and I won’t have to ride the terrible ones no more. But till that day get here I got to keep going. That’s what life’s about, doing it good as you can.”

State a lesson about life based on what Joe says.

Answers will vary. Example: A person must always strive to do his or her best, especially at something which he or she does well.
2. Why is Jane frightened by the stallion?

*Jane thinks the horse is from her dream in which Joe is thrown against a fence by the stallion.*

**Man's Way**
1. Who is the “hoo-doo”? Why does Jane go to see her? What would you assume the name “hoo-doo” comes from?

*The hoo-doo is a fortuneteller from New Orleans. Jane goes to see her to get a potion to keep Joe from riding the stallion. The name probably come from the word “voodoo,” a practice popular in certain areas of the South.*

2. In the following passage Madame Gautier explains to Jane why men insist on doing dangerous things like riding that stallion:

“I have told you the horse is just one. If not the horse, then the lion, if not the lion, then the woman, if not the woman, then the war, then the politic, then the whisky. Man must always search somewhere to prove himself. He don’t know everything is already inside him.”

What do you think Madame Gautier is saying when she tells Jane, “...he don’t know everything is already inside him”?

*Answers will vary. Example: Madame Gautier is saying that the true measure of a man is not what he does, but who he is.*

3. Some critics believe that Jane tells the story of her life in a detached way because time has softened the wounds. Find a passage in this chapter to illustrate her detached manner. Do you agree or disagree with the critics’ conclusion about why Jane seems to be unemotional and detached? Cite incidents and/or passages from the story to support your answer.

*Answers will vary. Example: “Early the next morning they came back with the stallion and with Joe tied to his own horse.” Jane seems to be unemotional, but that is because Joe’s death is too painful for her to talk about in any other way. She keeps his name all of her life and says, “When Joe Pittman was killed a part of me went with him to his grave.” Another reason for her unemotional tone would be that as a slave, Jane saw and endured enough pain to prevent much more from hurting her. The most likely answer is that the author probably felt the style he has given to Jane’s speaking suits the picture of her that he tries to convey.*

4. Where is Jane living at the end of this chapter?

*Jane travels with Felton Burkes to the St. Charles River.*

**Professor Douglass**
1. What is the difference between the teachings of Booker T. Washington and Frederick Douglass? Which of these philosophies does Ned embrace?

*Booker T. Washington teaches that black people ought to stay together to improve their lives before trying to mix with white people. Frederick Douglass teaches that everyone, black and white, ought to work together. Ned follows Douglass’ teachings.*

2. Find an example of foreshadowing in this chapter.

*At the end of the chapter, Jane says that the white people are following Ned.*
3. Approximately how old is Jane now?

Since she was ten or eleven at the beginning of the book, and it's now 1899, Jane is in her middle forties.

Albert Cluveau
1. Briefly describe Albert Cluveau. How does Jane feel about him?

Albert Cluveau is an old man with gray hair and blue eyes, who fishes with Jane. He also brags about killing both black and white people. Jane thinks he is a fool, who ought to be sitting in the sun instead of talking about killing.

2. Why do you suppose Cluveau warns Jane that the white people want Ned killed?

Cluveau respects Jane. He truly does not want to kill her son, but he is a twisted old man who will do it if he must. He hopes Jane will convince Ned to leave.

3. Why do Ned and his wife refuse to leave?

Answers will vary. Example: Ned knows that he might be killed, but he believes so strongly in his work that he is willing to risk his life. His wife understands and supports his convictions.

4. In what way are Ned and Joe Pittman alike?

Answers will vary. Example: Both men risk their lives striving to do their best work. Both are stubborn in the face of danger. Both are also willing to leave safety for the unknown.

The Sermon at the River
1. How does Gaines' style and the way he portrays Jane affect the beginning of this chapter?

Once again, Jane has a detached observational, unemotional way of telling that someone she loves has died.

2. List some of the important points Ned makes in his speech.

Answers may vary. Example:

- No one owns the land.
- Not all whites are evil.
- Ignorance is the cause of the problems black people have.
- Blacks must stand together for strength.
- Black people should stay in America.

3. What is the difference, according to Ned, between a nigger and a black American?

A nigger feels below everyone else. He talks, but his words have no meaning. He will never be a citizen of America or any other country. He thinks he knows everything until "someone with brains comes along." A black American cares and is willing to struggle. He does not keep his mind in a corner. Black Americans do not run; they fight.

4. Why does Ned believe that ignorance is to blame for their problems? What solution does Ned offer his people for their problems?
Ned thinks that ignorance put the black race in America in the first place. In the past, Africans sold their own people to the whites in exchange for beads and rum. They did not stand together as a people; instead, they made war on each other and sold their captives to the whites. Africans who sold their own people were unaware of how slaves were treated after being loaded onto ships. If the Africans had stood together against the whites, the whites would have needed to fight to obtain slaves. Ned thinks it is important for the black people to stand together.

5. Find a passage in Ned's sermon that helps to explain his decision to stay and fight.

*Answers will vary. Example: “But if you must die, let me ask you this: wouldn’t you rather die saying I’m a man than to die saying I’m a contented slave?”*

6. Find an allusion to a 1968 event at the end of the chapter.

*Answers may vary. Example: The last two lines in the chapter are said two weeks before Ned's death: “‘I'm go’n die Mama.’ But I knowed he had no fear of death.” This book was written in 1971, and it is entirely possible that the author wrote these words to echo Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech of April 3, 1968, the day before he was killed: “I may not get there [the Promised Land] with you.... I’m not worried about anything. I’m not fearing any man.”*

**Assassination**

1. Why does Ned jump down from the wagon and run toward Cluveau instead of trying to get away?

*Ned is protecting Bam and Alcee.*

2. What might the blood mentioned in the following excerpt from the chapter represent in this story? What literary term is used?

“A trail of blood all the way from where Ned was shot clear up to his house. Even the rain couldn’t wash the blood away. For years and years, even after they had graveled the road, you could still see little black spots where the blood had dripped.”

*Answers will vary. Example: The blood in this story represents life. Ned’s life is remembered long after his death, just as the blood spots are visible on the road long after he is shot. The literary term is hyperbole. It is an exaggeration to say his blood remained on the road for years, but it gets the point across that Ned was remembered.*

**The People**

1. How does Cluveau get away with murdering Ned?

*Bam and Alcee admit having a small amount of blackberry wine at Ned’s wake. The sheriff keeps questioning the boys and twisting their answers until he concludes that Bam and Alcee had been drinking, and they are not reliable witnesses to Ned’s death. The sheriff accepts Cluveau’s story that he was hunting frogs on Grosse Tete Bayou when Ned was killed. Obviously, the entire questioning was designed to cast doubts about a white man killing a black man. Somehow, for some reason, either fear or prejudice, the sheriff has made up his mind that Cluveau should not be charged with the murder.*

2. Discuss the significance of this title of this chapter. Who are the people? What has Ned become?
Answers may vary. Example: The people referred to in the title are the black people in the community. They do not have the courage to openly follow Ned’s teachings when he is alive, but they are all crying now that he is dead. He has been transformed into a type of martyr.

The Chariot of Hell
1. What does Jane want to say to Albert Cluveau?

*She wants to tell him that “…when the Chariot of Hell come rattling for you, the people will hear you screaming all over this parish.”*

2. Jane tells Adeline that she did not put a hoo-doo on her father, yet he suffers for ten years before he dies. Why do you suppose he keeps hearing the Chariot of Hell?

*Answers will vary. Example: Cluveau is a crazed old man, and after he kills Ned, the guilt he feels makes him even more unbalanced. When Jane tells him about the Chariot of Hell, the murderer starts to go slowly but completely insane.*

3. What do Jane’s feelings about and actions toward Cluveau near the end of his life reveal about her?

*Jane says, “…I couldn’t help but feel sorry for Cluveau…” She is not happy he is dead, which shows she has a forgiving heart.*

BOOK III – THE PLANTATION

Samson
1. How old would Jane be in this section?

*She would be in her early sixties.*

2. Briefly describe Black Harriet. In what way is she special?

*Black Harriet is very dark skinned, and does not “have all her faculties.” She is queen of the field because she is tall, straight, and tough. Black Harriet is special because she can pick more cotton than any other man or woman working in the field.*

3. Why does Harriet start leaving grass behind when she hoes, even though everyone knows Katie Nelson is incapable of beating Harriet?

*Katie talks to Harriet while they are working. She keeps telling Harriet that she is going to beat her. Katie does this to work on Harriet’s mind. Even though Harriet is stronger than Katie, Harriet begins to believe Katie and starts to hoe faster and faster, doing a poor job and leaving grass behind.*

4. Why is Bessie told to leave the Samson plantation?

*Bessie threatens to chop Tom Joe’s head off if he does not stop beating Harriet and Grace.*

5. Generally, most authors have a reason for including a specific incident or chapter in their novels. Why do you suppose Gaines includes Black Harriet’s story in this novel?
Answers will vary. Example: Gaines wants the reader to get a picture of Jane’s daily life on the plantation and wants to point out that one troublemaker or outsider can upset a community. He also wants the reader to understand that if people are told something often enough, they begin to believe it, even if it is untrue.

The Travels of Miss Jane Pittman

1. How does Jane feel when she finds religion?

Jane feels light, like she can fly.

2. What are Jane’s “travels”? What might the bricks, the white man, the river and the jetblack man represent in her story?

Jane’s travel is her journey, in dream or revelation, to find religion. In her travels, she is carrying a load of bricks. A “White Man,” probably Jesus, appears and tells her that if she wants to get rid of her load, her troubles, she must cross the river. Jane starts to cross the river when a jetblack man offers to take her sack, but Jane declines, and the man turns into Ned. Ned asks Jane for the sack, but Jane again says no because she does not believe he is really Ned. Joe Pittman comes to her and tries to take her sack, and again Jane refuses. As she approaches the bank, she sees Albert Cluveau with a gun threatening to shoot her. She continues on her journey and meets the Savior on the other side of the river. Answers will vary. Example: The white man is the savior; the black man is the devil or evil. The river is Jane’s life, and the bricks represent her burdens. When Jane successfully crosses the river with her sack, she symbolically makes it through life without succumbing to the temptations of evil, and is reborn through faith. Jane has done nothing evil in her life so far, so, according to the beliefs of her new religion, she has defeated the devil.

Two Brothers of the South

1. In what ways are Timmy and Tee Bob alike and in what ways are they different?

Timmy and Tee Bob are alike because they are both sons of Robert Samson, the master of the plantation. Timmy is Samson’s son by a black woman who works on the farm. Timmy likes to ride and hunt just like his father. He is tall, skinny, and strong like his father. Tee Bob is Robert Samson’s son with his wife Miss Amma Dean. Tee Bob is small and delicate. He is nothing like his father.

2. What aspect of Timmy’s personality results in him having to leave the plantation?

Timmy is considered by many whites to be “uppity” because he knows he is the master’s son. He talks back to Tom Joe, who beats him. Robert Samson sends Timmy away for his own safety. If Timmy remains and continues the same behavior, then he might be killed by a white man. Robert Samson cannot protect him because, in the eyes of the world, Timmy is just another black boy.

3. How does Tee Bob feel when he learns that Timmy is gone?

Tee Bob does not understand why Timmy has to leave home.

4. Find an example of foreshadowing in this chapter.

Answers will vary. Example: “They was part of life, like the sun and the rain was part of life, and Tee Bob would learn them for himself when he got older. But Tee Bob never did. He killed himself before he learned how he was supposed to live in this world.”
Of Men and Rivers
1. Why does Jane talk to trees and rivers?

*Jane thinks that talking to a tree or the river is a way of showing respect to them because they have been here longer than man, and she believes they know more than man.*

2. What is Jane’s opinion of the levee? State a life lesson based on her views about nature’s power in the world.

*A levee is an embankment built along side a river to prevent high water from flooding the land. Jane thinks it is wrong for men to try to control a river’s flooding by building a levee. Before the levee, the river might overflow and take a tree or a cow. Now, when it overflows, it breaks through the levee and floods an entire parish. Answers will vary. Example: Man needs to respect nature not try to control it because nature is too powerful for man to try to control.*

Huey P. Long
1. Huey Long was the actual governor of Louisiana, beginning in 1928. He is remembered for establishing social reforms that helped the poor. What is Jane’s opinion of Huey Long?

*Jane seems to approve of him. Even though Long refers to black people as “niggers,” he encourages them to get an education instead of stifling their opportunities and working to keep them in lower jobs.*

2. Long is elected to the U.S. Senate in 1931, and opposes the New Deal in favor of his own social and economic programs. He is assassinated in 1935. What reason does Jane give for Long’s assassination? How does her reasoning point to her being an unreliable narrator?

*She thinks that Long is killed because he wanted to help the poor black and white people in Louisiana. However, most people believe that Huey Long was a corrupt and inefficient governor.*

Miss Lilly
1. Why does Miss Lilly leave the plantation?

*Miss Lilly is the school teacher. She expects her students to come to class well dressed and with their teeth brushed. She tries to interfere when a parent punishes his children. When Robert Samson tells her to stick to teaching and let the parents raise the children, she leaves.*

2. Why does Joe Hardy leave the plantation?

*Joe Hardy is the teacher who replaces Miss Lilly. He is a terrible man, who swindles money and labor from the people and tries to romance the young women in the school. The father of one of the girls catches Hardy with his daughter and takes Hardy into a field and beats him. When Hardy goes to Sam Guidry, the sheriff, for help, Guidry tells him he has one minute to get out of the parish.*

3. What do the last two chapters teach the reader about the lives of black people in the 1930's?

*Answers may vary. Example: The black people are still doing manual labor, the white people who try to help the poor are eliminated, and the black families have very little opportunities to get an education.*
**The LeFabre Family**

1. Jane says that “...Mary Agnes was trying to make up for...what her own people had done her own people. Trying to make up for the past—and that you cannot do.” What past is Mary Agnes trying to make up for?

*Before the Civil War, the Creoles in New Orleans held balls, where white men went to select “colored women” to be their mistresses. Mary Agnes' grandmother was one of these women, who was chosen to be the mistress of a man named LeFabre. Mary Agnes, who is a mulatto, is trying to make up for the fact that her ancestors, who were slaves, were freed but inherited slaves and money after LeFabre died.*

2. What is a Creole? What is Creole Place?

*A Creole, according to Miss Jane, is a person with both white and black blood. Creole Place is a community for people of Creole background. It is a self-contained community that does its own farming and has its own Catholic church and school. Only Creoles are permitted to attend the dances. If a member of Creole Place leaves the community, that person may never return.*

**A Flower in Winter**

1. What in your opinion is the significance of the title of this chapter?

*Answers will vary. Example: Mary Agnes is very different from the other black people on the plantation. She stands out like a flower might stand out in the winter.*

2. Ethel is with Mary Agnes when Tee Bob comes into the school. Why does Ethel feel like laughing at Tee Bob?

*Tee Bob is not a man yet. He is too young and soft to be a threat to Ethel or Mary Agnes and too young to know that he should not be in the school.*

3. Why is Tee Bob interested in Mary Agnes?

*First of all, he is curious that a black woman could be as white as she is. It is also unusual that a black woman is teaching a class. The main reason, however, is that, in some way, Tee Bob is trying to imitate what his father did.*

**Confession**

1. Jane tries to talk to Mary Agnes about Tee Bob, and she assures Jane that Tee Bob is harmless. Why does Mary Agnes think she can control Tee Bob?

*Mary Agnes thinks Tee Bob is like a lonely child. She thinks he is decent and good. If he gets out of line, Mary Agnes thinks he will listen to her when she tells him to stop.*

2. Jane describes the way Tee Bob looks at Mary Agnes in the following passage. “He looked at her with love, and I mean the kind that’s way deep inside of you. I have not seen too many men, of any color, look at women that way.” Why does Tee Bob’s love for Mary Agnes scare Jane?

*Jane realizes that Tee Bob is ready to “...go against his family, this whole world, for Mary Agnes.” The idea of interracial love would have been not only anti-social and immoral, but also probably illegal in early 20th century Louisiana.*
3. What advice does Jimmy Caya give Tee Bob when Tee Bob confesses that he loves Mary Agnes? What does this situation between Tee Bob and Mary Agnes signify about race relations at this time in the story?

Jimmy tells Tee Bob to have sex with Mary Agnes because she is “...there for that and nothing else.” He makes it clear to Tee Bob that any other relationship with Mary Agnes is forbidden. The point to be understood is that the rape of Mary Agnes would be tolerated, even accepted, but honest, emotional love for her by a white man will not be allowed.

Robert and Mary
1. What do you think about the way Mary Agnes responds to Tee Bob's proposal? Could she have said or done anything else?

*Answers will vary. Example: Mary Agnes knows the problems she and Tee Bob might face if she accepts his proposal. She believes she can control him, so she tells him no. There is no evidence at this point in the story that she returns Tee Bob’s love, so there is nothing else she could have done.*

2. At the end of this chapter, what is implied about the nature of Mary Agnes’ injuries at the hands of Tee Bob?

*Answers may vary. Example: It is implied that he raped her.*

Samson House
1. What does Jimmy say about Mary Agnes that puts her life in danger?

Jimmy tries to blame Tee Bob’s suicide on Mary Agnes. He tells Robert Samson that Mary Agnes would not leave Tee Bob alone.

2. How does Jules Raynard prevent Samson from killing or imprisoning Mary Agnes?

Jules Raynard has Tee Bob’s suicide note. He threatens to reveal the contents of the letter if Samson tries to harm Mary Agnes.

3. Why does Jimmy Caya say, “I didn’t kill him by myself...We all killed him”?

Jules accuses Jimmy of contributing to Tee Bob’s death. Jimmy had told Tee Bob that Mary Agnes is not suitable because she is black. Jimmy’s bigotry, and the bigotry of the white community, kills Tee Bob.

4. In the chapter titled Of Men and Rivers, Jane explains why she talks to rivers and trees. She also discusses why man’s efforts to control the river results in larger floods than if man had left the river alone. Consider this idea when reading the following excerpt from this chapter. In what way(s) are the social rules mentioned in this quotation similar to the rules of nature Jane talks about in the chapter, Of Men and Rivers? State a theme for this story based on these passages.

“We all killed him. We tried to make him follow a set of rules our people gave us long ago. But these rules just ain’t old enough, Jane.”

“I don’t understand you, Mr. Raynard,” I said.

“Somewhere in the past, Jane,” he said, “Way back, men like Robert could love women like Mary Agnes. But somewhere along the way somebody wrote a new set of rules condemning all that....”
When man interferes with the natural flooding of the river, he makes the problem worse just as disaster results when man makes social rules that interfere with the natural love a man has for a woman. Answers will vary. Example: Man must not interfere with his own nature or his natural surroundings.

5. Tee Bob flings Mary Agnes against the wall and she falls to the floor:
“She was the past now. She was grandma now, and he was that Creole gentleman. She was Verda now, and he was Robert. It showed in her face. It showed in the way she laid down there on the floor. Helpless; waiting. She knewed how she looked to him, but she couldn’t do nothing about it. But when he saw it he ran away from there.”
What does Tee Bob see when he looks at Mary Agnes on that floor? Why does he flee to his house, lock himself in the library, and then kill himself?

Answers will vary. Example: Tee Bob realizes that he has the power to rape Mary Agnes and make her is mistress. He also realizes that on some hidden level, Mary Agnes is inviting him to take her. Tee Bob wants Mary Agnes, but he is a decent man, and cannot bring himself to have her as his mistress. He wants her for his wife, but that is impossible because she is black. He does not know what to do, so he kills himself to find some peace.

**BOOK IV – THE QUARTERS**

1. Why does Jane want to move away from the cook’s house to the “quarters”? How old is she by now?

Jane wants to leave the cook’s house after Tee Bob is killed but she stays five more years to look after Miss Amma Dean. Jane finally asks if she can move to the “quarters,” where she can have a garden and some chickens. She wants to move away from the white people to live in the black community, on her own. Since the Second World War is over, Jane Pittman must be more than ninety by now. On page 219, she says, “I done seen a hundred and ten or more years...”

2. Jane says that “Anytime a child is born, the old people look in his face and ask him if he’s the One.” Who is the One they are looking for? Why do they think Jimmy might be the One?

Jane and the others are looking for a leader, who will lead the black people in their community to make better lives for themselves. They think Jimmy might be the One because they feel in their hearts that he is special.

3. Joe Louis (the “Brown Bomber”) was the heavyweight boxing champion of the world. He defended his title 25 times, including winning his rematch against a German named Max Shmelling. The Nazis believed Shmelling would win, and they hoped to use his victory as proof of the superiority of the white race. In 1938, though, Joe Louis defeated Shmelling. For what reason(s) does Jane think the Lord sent the black people Joe Louis?

Jane believes that the Lord sends somebody to help when the times get very tough. The Depression was particularly difficult for the black community, so Jane believes the Lord sent them Joe Louis.

4. Who does Jane think the Lord sends the black people after World War II? How is Jane’s life interwoven with sports?

Jane thinks the Lord sends them Jackie Robinson, who was the first black professional baseball player. Her day is happier if Jackie Robinson and the Dodgers do well. “If they had lost or if Jackie hadn’t hit, I suffered till they played again.”
5. How does life on the plantation change for the black community after World War II?

Robert Samson decides to divide up his land to provide farms for the Cajuns and black families, but the Cajuns get the best pieces of land. Some black families are able to make a living on the land they are given, but most of them need to move away. The Cajun farms continue to grow as they absorb the land that was abandoned.

6. Find another instance of Jane not being a reliable narrator.

Jane claims what “made them integrate the Army...” was that the Japanese “just wanted to kill the white soldiers. If the colored soldiers was marching in front the japs would shoot over the colored soldiers heads just to get to the white boys.” This ridiculous statement might be related to Jane’s age, a misconception, or a reverse prejudice.

7. In the following passage, Jimmy describes a feeling he has, to Jane. What do you think is causing Jimmy’s “gnawing” feeling?

“Miss Jane, I got something like a tiger in my chest, just gnawing and gnawing and want come out. I want rip my chest open and let it free. I pray to God to take it out, but look like the Lord don’t hear me.”

Answers will vary. Example: The gnawing feeling is Jimmy’s need to do something to help his people.

8. What happens to Miss Yoko that makes Jimmy want to take action against discrimination in Louisiana, just like Reverend King and the Freedom Riders are doing in Alabama and Mississippi?

Yoko’s son Batlo gets mixed up in some demonstrations in Baton Rouge. Robert hears about his activities so he tells Yoko that she has twenty-four hours to leave the plantation. Jimmy thinks it is time for the black community in Louisiana to begin fighting this kind of prejudicial treatment.

9. Jimmy stands up in church and asks the congregation to help him fight the injustices heaped on the black community by the whites. How do Elder Banks and the deacons respond to Jimmy’s speech?

They are worried that if they demonstrate against injustices then they will lose their homes the same way Yoko lost hers.

10. Why does Jane say to Jimmy, “People and time bring forth leaders...Leaders don’t bring forth people”?

Jane is trying to help Jimmy understand that the people must want the change before they will accept his leadership. The people are afraid and until they “…realize that fear is worse than any death,” they are not ready for Jimmy’s help.

11. Identify some words which are mispronounced through dialect in this chapter.

Answers may vary. Examples:
- retrick = rhetoric
- hyphen = siphon
- ’luminum = aluminum
- ‘Termination = determination
12. Briefly describe Jimmy’s plan. Who is Rosa Parks?

A black girl is going to drink from the white drinking fountain. Someone is going to curse at the girl and push her. She is going to fight back and hopefully end up in jail. Then Jimmy and his friends are going to march on the courthouse to show the world what happens to a black girl just because she wants a drink of water. Rosa Parks is the woman who refused to give up her seat on a Montgomery, Alabama, bus to a white man. This incident in 1955 sparked the first city-wide boycott led by Dr. Martin Luther King and eventually caused many segregation laws to be declared unconstitutional.

13. What do the curtain, the quilt, the veil, and the buzzing represent in the following passage?

“And the worse pain, Jimmy, you can inflict is what you doing now—that’s trying to make them see they good as the other man. You see, Jimmy, they been told from the cradle they wasn’t—that they wasn’t much better than the mule. You keep telling them this over and over, for hundreds and hundreds of years, they start thinking that way. The curtain, Jimmy, the quilt, the veil, the buzzing, buzzing, buzzing—two days, a few hours, to clear all this away, Jimmy is not enough time. How long will it take? How could I know? He works in mysterious ways; wonders to perform.”

Answers will vary. Example: The curtain represents black people’s inability to see beyond the needs of their own homes. The black quilt keeps them from feeling the injustices that are in their lives. The black veil prevents them from seeing the truth about themselves: that they are as good any other men. The buzzing is their fear which keeps them from listening to leaders like Jimmy.

14. How is Jimmy killed? After his death, why do Jane and the others follow through with their plans to go to Bayonne?

Jimmy is shot at eight o’clock in the morning. It is not stated, but implied that he is shot because he plans to start demonstrations in Louisiana. Answers will vary. Example: Jane and the others go to Bayonne after his death so that Jimmy’s death is not in vain. After his death, Jane and the others know they must continue the fight he started.