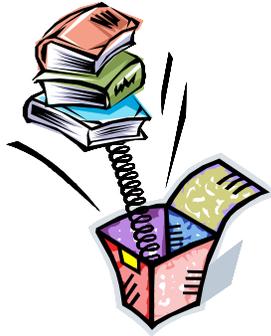




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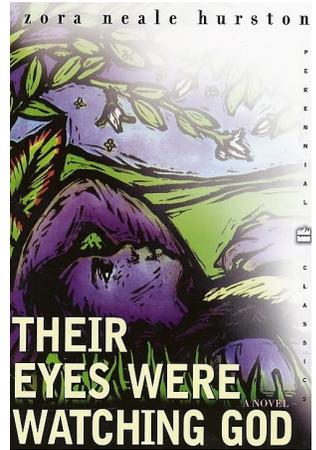


Book Club in a Box

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

About the Book

One of the most important works of twentieth-century American literature, Zora Neale Hurston's beloved 1937 classic, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is an enduring Southern love story sparkling with wit, beauty, and heartfelt wisdom. Told in the captivating voice of a woman who refuses to live in sorrow, bitterness, fear, or foolish romantic dreams, it is the story of fair-skinned, fiercely independent Janie Crawford, and her evolving selfhood through three marriages and a life marked by poverty, trials, and purpose. A true literary wonder, Hurston's masterwork remains as relevant and affecting today as when it was first published—perhaps the most widely read and highly regarded novel in the entire canon of African American literature.



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About the Author



Hurston was the most prolific black woman writer of her time and an important figure of the Harlem Renaissance. Both as a novelist and as an anthropologist, Hurston broke new ground with her descriptions of the richly complex black cultural heritage of the United States and Caribbean basin.

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama to Lucy Ann Potts, a former schoolteacher, and John Hurston, a carpenter and Baptist preacher. Hurston spent her early years in Eatonville, Florida. This small town was the first all-black community to be incorporated in the United States. Her father, the son of former slaves, served several terms as the town's mayor. Hurston grew up in an environment free from the racial tensions that dominated life in the South, which gave her a great deal of self-confidence. The richness of the southern black culture that surrounded her inspired much of her later work.

Hurston was an imaginative and curious child. The fifth of eight children and her mother's favorite, she was deeply affected by the death of her mother in 1904. Her relationship with her father, who attempted to curb her lively spirit, deteriorat-

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ed after he remarried as she clashed violently with her stepmother. Hurston left Eatonville at the age of fourteen and began to work as a maid, but as she refused to humble herself, she did not remain long in any position. She traveled around the South as a wardrobe girl with a Gilbert and Sullivan repertory company. After leaving the company, she continued her education and completed high school at Morgan Academy in Baltimore while supporting herself as a live-in maid.

After graduating in 1918, Hurston moved to Washington, D.C., where she enrolled part-time at Howard University. She was encouraged in her writing by her teachers, who included the poet Georgia Douglas Johnson and the philosopher Alain Locke. One of her stories was printed in the magazine of the literary club at the university. In January, 1925, with the encouragement of sociologist Charles S. Johnson, who published her stories in *Opportunity: A Journal of Negro Life*, Hurston moved to New York City. It was an exciting time because black writers and artists were flocking to the city to be part of the Harlem Renaissance, the black literary and cultural movement of the time. Hurston's intelligence, charm, and wit ensured her popularity. Her early stories, which prefigured her later work, featured the rural African American dialect of central Florida and its rich folklore. For Locke, Hurston's southern background provided the connection to the black folk heritage that he considered essential for the literature of the movement. Locke published one of her stories in *The New Negro* (1925) and Hurston also won second prize in a literary contest sponsored by *Opportunity*.

In September, 1925, Hurston began studying at Barnard College on a scholarship. She earned a bachelor's degree in 1928. While at the university, she came to the attention of the noted anthropologist Franz Boas and conducted fieldwork for him in Harlem. In 1927, Hurston married Herbert Sheen, a medical student with whom she had begun a relationship during her time at Howard. They parted company after four months, as he was not supportive of her work, and divorced in 1931.

Life's Work

Encouraged by Boas to record African American folktales and customs, Hurston traveled around Alabama and Florida gathering material. She sought sponsorship from a white patron, the wealthy socialite Charlotte Osgood Mason, who supported other Harlem Renaissance figures, including the writer Langston Hughes. In exchange for financial support, Hurston was obliged to sign a contract acknowledging her patron's ownership of her research and editorial control over its publication. The songs, customs, and folktales that she collected would later be published in

Mules and Men (1935).

By 1932, Hurston was working with the creative literature department of Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida. Some of the material she gathered in her fieldwork was featured in musical revues staged between 1931 and 1935. Plagued by financial and health problems, Hurston returned to New York but was advised by Locke, on behalf of Mason, to return to the South. Back in Eatonville, she felt restored and wrote a play, *Mule Bone*, with Hughes, but only its third act was published as they quarreled over authorship.

In 1934, her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, was published. Written in only seven weeks, the semiautobiographical work is set in Florida. The central character, John Buddy "Jonah" Pearson, was modeled on Hurston's father. In the same year, Hurston received a fellowship to study for a doctorate in anthropology at Columbia University. She found the terms of the fellowship restrictive and never completed the graduate degree, but she was later awarded two Guggenheim field research fellowships to study folk culture in Haiti and Jamaica.

Hurston's most acclaimed novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), also was written in a matter of weeks. In 1938, she released her second major anthropological work, *Tell My Horse*. *Horse* was a groundbreaking study of Haitian vodoun (better known as voodoo) that, by treating it as a serious religion, sought to dispel some of the negative views surrounding it.

In 1939, a third novel was published: *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, which places the Old Testament character in the American South. In the same year, Hurston married Albert Price III. This marriage was also short-lived because of his alcoholism and abuse, and the couple divorced in 1943.

Hurston wrote an autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, that was published in 1942. The most commercially successful of her books, it was less an accurate reflection of her life than the public image she wished to present. The book won an award and Hurston was deluged with requests for magazine articles. When these began to appear in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Negro Digest*, and *Reader's Digest*, her often controversial views antagonized sections of the black community.

Despite the promise of her career and her recognition as a scholar and as a writer, Hurston received little financial reward from her work. She moved around the country, taking a variety of jobs to support herself. In 1948, her life took a further downward turn when Hurston, then back in

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New York, was arrested on suspicion of molesting a ten-year-old boy, the son of a woman from whom she had rented a room. Hurston was able to prove that she had been out of the country at the time of the alleged crime and the charges were dropped. However, the story was leaked to the press and the negative publicity had a devastating effect on her career. Seeking to escape the aftermath of the arrest, Hurston went to British Honduras, where she conducted anthropological research. A new novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, was published on the same day as the court case. Her only novel to feature white characters, it sold well.

After her return to the United States, Hurston worked in a series of menial jobs and was plagued by health and money problems. The advent of the Civil Rights movement in the 1950's meant her celebration of African American folk culture and her refusal to condemn the racism that nurtured it placed her out of step with the prevailing mood. A letter published in *The Orlando Sentinel* in 1955 expressing her outrage at the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision on desegregation of schools did not improve her image. Hurston maintained that the ruling undervalued black teachers and institutions where black children could study separate from whites.

In early 1959, Hurston suffered a stroke. Too proud to ask her relatives for help, she entered the county welfare home at Fort Pierce, Florida. She died there of hypertensive heart disease in 1960 at age sixty-nine and was buried in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery.

Her works had gone out of print long before her death, but in the 1970's, Hurston was rediscovered by a new generation of African Americans. In 1973, the writer Alice Walker placed a granite tombstone in the cemetery, somewhere near Hurston's unmarked grave.

[Their Eyes Were Watching God](#)

A classic of African American literature, Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is the story of a young woman's journey of self-discovery. Janie Crawford grows up on a plantation in Florida with her grandmother, who works for a white family. At the age of sixteen, Janie is married off to Logan Killicks, an older farmer. He treats her harshly and she escapes her joyless marriage by running off with Joe Starks, an ambitious man who becomes mayor of the all-black town of Eatonville. An independent spirit like Hurston, Janie is in search of fulfillment and feels restricted by conventionality. Despite her comfortable existence, she longs for something more and feels constrained by Starks, who, conscious of his position, ob-

jects to her listening to the stories of townsfolk on the store porch. After Starks dies, Janie's dreams of genuine happiness seem to be realized when she meets Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods, who becomes her third husband. Although several years her junior, he treats her as an equal. Unlike her other husbands, who attempted to curb her spirit, Tea Cake encourages Janie to live life to the fullest. Their happy life together ends when Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog. He goes mad and attacks Janie, who is forced to kill him in self-defense. The language of the novel captures aspects of black southern culture and, like other works by Hurston, focuses on black male-female relationships rather than black-white tensions.

[Significance](#)

A strong, controversial and fiercely independent woman, in many respects Hurston was ahead of her time. She stands out from other writers of the Harlem Renaissance for her affirmation of positive aspects of the lives of ordinary black people who had little interaction with whites and therefore no sense of oppression. Hurston rose from obscurity to become the first African American to graduate from Barnard College. A notable scholar, she published two important anthropological studies of African American and Caribbean folklore and became a member of the American Folklore Society, the American Anthropological Society, the American Ethnological Society, the New York Academy of Sciences, and the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Ayorinde, Christine. "Zora Neale Hurston." *Great Lives From History: African Americans* (2010): 143. *Biography Reference Center*. Web. 2 Aug. 2014.

Further Reading

If you liked *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, you might like:

Brothers and Sisters by Bebe Moore Campbell

Mrs. Kimble by Jennifer Haigh

River, Cross My Heart by Breena Clarke

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee

We Are All Welcome Here by Elizabeth Berg

Discussion Questions

1. Are we meant to conclude that Tom's killing of the deputy is justified?
2. What makes Casy believe that "maybe all men got one big soul ever'body's a part of" (p. 24)?
3. Why does Steinbeck devote a chapter to the land turtle's progress on the highway?
4. Why does Pa yield his traditional position in the family to Ma?
5. What does Ma mean when she says, "Bearin' an' dyin' is two pieces of the same thing" (p. 210)?
6. As Tom leaves the family, he says, "I'll be ever'where—wherever you look" (p. 419). In what sense does he mean "everywhere"?
7. Why does Steinbeck interrupt the Joads' narrative with short chapters of commentary and description?
8. Why does Rose of Sharon smile as she feeds the starving man with milk intended for her baby?
9. What does Steinbeck mean when he writes, "In the souls of the people *The Grapes of Wrath* are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage" (p. 349)?
10. Why do different characters insist at different points in the book, "A fella got to eat" (p. 344, for example)?
11. Why does the book start with drought and end with floods?
12. Is the family intact at the end of the novel?
13. Why does Uncle John set the dead baby adrift rather than bury it?
14. What is the source of Ma's conviction that "we're the people—we go on" (p. 280)?
15. Does nature function as a force for either good or evil in this book?

For Further Reflection

16. As his land is destroyed, an anonymous tenant says, "We've got a bad thing made by men, and by God that's something we can change" (p. 38). Is Steinbeck suggesting that a just social order is possible?
17. When the narrator says "men ate what they had not raised, had no connection with the bread" (p. 36), the implication is that this break diminishes humanity. Can spirituality be maintained with increasing automation?
18. Casy tells Tom about a prisoner whose view of history is that "ever' time they's a little step fo'ward, she may slip back a little, but she never slips clear back.... They wasn't no waste" (p. 384). Do you agree with this view?