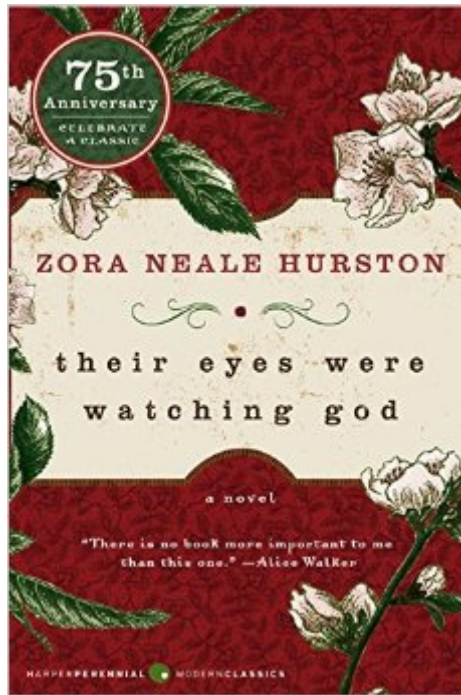


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# Their Eyes Were Watching God



## Synopsis

A deeply soulful novel that comprehends love and cruelty, and separates the big people from the small of heart, without ever losing sympathy for those unfortunates who don't know how to live properly. • "Zadie Smith One of the most important and enduring books of the twentieth century, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* brings to life a Southern love story with the wit and pathos found only in the writing of Zora Neale Hurston. Out of print for almost thirty years due largely to initial audiences' rejection of its strong black female protagonist "Hurston's classic has since its 1978 reissue become perhaps the most widely read and highly acclaimed novel in the canon of African-American literature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"*Their Eyes Were Watching God*," by Zora Neale Hurston, is widely acknowledged as a beloved classic of American literature. This novel is truly one of those great works that remains both entertaining and deeply moving; it is a book for classrooms, for reading groups of all types, and for individual readers. In "*Their Eyes*," Hurston tells the life story of Janie, an African-American woman. We accompany Janie as she experiences the very different men in her life. Hurston's great dialogue captures both the ongoing "war of the sexes," as well as the truces, joys, and tender moments of male-female relations. But equally important are Janie's relationships with other Black women. There are powerful themes of female bonding, identity, and empowerment which bring an added dimension to this book. But what really elevates "*Their Eyes*" to the level of a great classic is Hurston's use of language. This is truly one of the most poetic novels in the American canon.

Hurston blends the engaging vernacular speech of her African-American characters with the lovely "standard" English of her narrator, and in both modes creates lines that are just beautiful. "Their Eyes" captures the universal experiences of pain and happiness, love and loss. And the whole story is told with both humor and compassion. If you haven't read it yet, read it; if you've already read it, read it again.

At the end, I closed the book and I cried. Then I wanted to open it and start reading all over again from the beginning. Janie is a woman who has endured oppression, suppression, and tragedy. She found love and she found herself. She not only survived but discovered her own strength and accepted life without self-destructing. Janie, is every woman's hero, most certainly mine.

"Their Eyes were Watching God" has been variously described as feminist literature (though written in 1930), African-American literature (though the story is about people, first and foremost, and race is secondary to the novel) and as a lost masterpiece. It's a lost masterpiece. Thanks to Alice Walker and Oprah Winfrey, the book was brought back to the public's attention. One of the issues with reading Hurston's novel is that it's written in dialect--in Hurston's rendition of how Southern Florida black dialect could be spelled out to her. So reading the book is a bit slow; you have to sound out the words in your mind. If this is a problem, then I'd suggest you listen to the book on tape (ably performed by Ruby Dee) and then read the book afterwards. The story has barely a plot; Janey is a young woman whose grandmother was born in slavery. Her aspirations are no further than the front porch; to live in comfort means being simply able to sit, to sit on the porch and not be in constant motion, working every hour of every day for bare subsistence. She finds an older, established husband for Janey and insists she marry. Janey, then, has a life where, with reasonable work, she can fill her belly and sleep in shelter. Her life is not much better than that of a well-cared-for mule. One day, Janey runs off with Jody Starks, a man of means who charms her with his worldly ways. This is a man going places. And they do go places; to Eatonville, a town that was chartered as an African-American community. Starks sees opportunity in every corner of dusty Eatonville, buys land, builds a store and a house and installs the beautiful Janey as a symbol of his mastery. As Mayor, Starks has appearances to keep up. He has Janey stay in the house or work in the store, and when in the store, she is to keep her head covered. Janey has a wealth of long abundant hair, which Hurston uses as a symbol of life. Janey's hair is flowing and startling; men covet it. As the hair is covered, so is every enjoyment and thought Janey has. She chafes for 20 years under Stark's restrictive rules. The scene where the "town mule"--a mule freed by Starks from an abusive owner

and that became a sort of mascot, dies and is buried in the swamp is exceptional writing, worthy of Mark Twain. The mule is eulogized (by Stark, standing at one point on the mule as podium) and then abandoned to the waiting buzzards. The following scene where the buzzards arrive to do their undertaking is a flight of fancy that is hardly equalled in American literature. All along the book, Hurston takes smaller flights of language; her descriptions sometimes soar, or are humorous or completely imaginative. Janey runs off after Stark's death with "Tea Cake"--a younger man. While her first two marriages were for the sustenance of the body (food, shelter, comfort, a home) this marriage is for the sustenance of the soul. Tea Cake plays guitar, plays games, dances, gambles, sings and flirts. Hurston is too clever to make him perfect; he hurts Janey, as only someone who loves another person can hurt them, and he is a bit of a cad, yet he brings out something in Janey that no life of pure material wealth could do--freedom and sensuality and joy. The culmination of the story is rather contrived, but still, the completion of the three marriages tells almost a fable-like story of a quest for personal growth. Janey comes home to Eatonville, and tells her story to Phoeby, her friend. The rest of the tale is up to us to fill in. Sometimes the writing reminds me of Virginia Woolf--the interior dialog and mood of the character is the action as much or more than the action happening on the story's stage. Sometimes Hurston reminds me of Twain in her delving into the linguistic richness and uniqueness of Floridian life. Her education as a folklorist sharpened her ear, but her deep honesty into the interior life of women is what makes this story so great. It's definitely one of the top American novels and deserves to be read.

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