



ZORA NEALE HURSTON

•

their eyes were
watching god

a novel

"There is no book more important to me
than this one." —Alice Walker

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS



Zora Neale Hurston

Their
Eyes Were
Watching
God *a novel*

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**Their
Eyes Were
Watching God**

With a Foreword by Edwidge Danticat

 HarperCollins e-books

To Henry Allen Moe

Contents

[E-Book Extra](#)

Janie's Great Journey: A Reading Group Guide

[Acknowledgments](#)

[Foreword by Edwidge Danticat](#)

[Foreword by Mary Helen Washington](#)

- [1](#) Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board.**
- [2](#) Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf...**
- [3](#) There are years that ask questions and years that answer.**
- [4](#) Long before the year was up, Janie noticed that her...**
- [5](#) On the train the next day, Joe didn't make many...**
- [6](#) Every morning the world flung itself over and exposed the...**

7 The years took all the fight out of Janie's face.

8 After that night Jody moved his things and slept in...

9 Joe's funeral was the finest thing Orange County had ever...

10 One day Hezekiah asked off from work to go off...

11 Janie wanted to ask Hezekiah about Tea Cake, but she...

12 It was after the picnic that the town began to...

13 Jacksonville. Tea Cake's letter had said Jacksonville. He had worked...

14 To Janie's strange eyes, everything in the Everglades was big...

15 Janie learned what it felt like to be jealous. A...

16 The season closed and people went away like they had...

17 A great deal of the old crowd were back. But...

18 Since Tea Cake and Janie had friended with the Bahaman...

19 And then again Him-with-the-square-toes had gone...

20 Because they really loved Janie just a little less than...

[Afterword by Henry Louis Gates, Jr.](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Zora Neale Hurston](#)

[Credits](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

E-Book Extra

Janie's Great Journey: A Reading Group Guide

Their Eyes Were Watching God
by Zora Neale Hurston

Introduction

In her award-winning autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), Zora Neale Hurston claimed to have been born in Eatonville, Florida, in 1901. She was, in fact, born in Notasulga, Alabama, on January 7, 1891, the fifth child of John Hurston (farmer, carpenter, and Baptist preacher) and Lucy Ann Potts (school teacher). The author of numerous books, including *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, *Mules and Men*, and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston had achieved fame and sparked controversy as a novelist, anthropologist, outspoken essayist, lecturer, and theatrical producer during her sixty-nine years. Hurston's finest work of fiction appeared at a time when artistic and political statements—whether single sentences or book-length fictions—were peculiarly conflated. Many works of fiction were informed by purely political motives; political pronouncements frequently appeared in polished literary prose. And Hurston's own political statements, relating to racial issues or addressing national politics, did not ingratiate her with her black male contemporaries. The end result was that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* went out of print not

long after its first appearance and remained out of print for nearly thirty years. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has been one among many to ask: “How could the recipient of two Guggenheims and the author of four novels, a dozen short stories, two musicals, two books on black mythology, dozens of essays, and a prizewinning autobiography virtually ‘disappear’ from her readership for three full decades?”

That question remains unanswered. The fact remains that every one of Hurston’s books went quickly out of print; and it was only through the determined efforts, in the 1970s, of Alice Walker, Robert Hemenway (Hurston’s biographer), Toni Cade Bambara, and other writers and scholars that all of her books are now back in print and that she has taken her rightful place in the pantheon of American authors.

In 1973, Walker, distressed that Hurston’s writings had been all but forgotten, found Hurston’s grave in the Garden of Heavenly Rest and installed a gravemarker. “After loving and teaching her work for a number of years,” Walker later reported, “I could not bear that she did not have a known grave.” The gravemarker now bears the words that Walker had inscribed there:

ZORA NEALE HURSTON
GENIUS OF THE SOUTH
NOVELIST FOLKLORIST ANTHROPOLOGIST
(1891-1960)

Questions for Discussion

1. •What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston’s characters watching? What is the nature of that God and of their watching? Do any of them question God?

2. • What is the importance of the concept of horizon? How do Janie and each of her men widen her horizons? What is the significance of the novel's final sentences in this regard?
3. • How does Janie's journey—from West Florida, to Eatonville, to the Everglades—represent her, and the novel's increasing immersion in black culture and traditions? What elements of individual action and communal life characterize that immersion?
4. • To what extent does Janie acquire her own voice and the ability to shape her own life? How are the two related? Does Janie's telling her story to Pheoby in flashback undermine her ability to tell her story directly in her own voice?
5. • What are the differences between the language of the men and that of Janie and the other women? How do the differences in language reflect the two groups' approaches to life, power, relationships, and self-realization? How do the novel's first two paragraphs point to these differences?
6. • In what ways does Janie conform to or diverge from the assumptions that underlie the men's attitudes toward women? How would you explain Hurston's depiction of violence toward women? Does the novel substantiate Janie's statement that "Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business"?
7. • What is the importance in the novel of the "signifyin'" and "playin' de dozens" on the front porch of Joe's store and elsewhere? What purpose do these stories, traded insults, exaggerations, and boasts have in the lives of these people? How does Janie counter them with her conjuring?
8. • Why is adherence to received tradition so important to nearly all the people in Janie's world? How does the community deal with those who are "different"?