

Discussion questions

1. Were Janie's expectations of marriage impossibly romantic? Although in many ways she was less well-off with Tea Cake, why did Janie find that relationship so pleasing?

2. Does Janie need a man in order to find permission to be who she is? What events and characters stifle Janie's growth? Why, at her trial, were Tea Cake's friends against her?

Additional readings

Zora Neale Hurston. *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942 (autobiography).

Zora Neale Hurston. *Mules and Men*, 1935.

Robert Hemenway. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, 1977.

Alice Walker, ed. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, 1979.

Soul of a People: Writing America's Story is a major documentary television program about the Works Progress Administration (WPA) Federal Writers' Project produced by Spark Media, a Washington, D.C.-based production and outreach company specializing in issues of social change. *Soul of a People* is being broadcast on the Smithsonian Channel HD (<http://www.smithsonianchannel.com>).

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SOUL OF A PEOPLE

Writing America's Story

Their Eyes Were Watching God

by Zora Neale Hurston

Discussion guide by Lowell Jaeger

Zora Neale Hurston and the Federal Writers' Project

Zora Neale Hurston worked on the Federal Writers' Project for over a year, contributing to the WPA guide to Florida and recording songs and stories along Florida's Gulf Coast. Hurston joined the Florida staff in April 1938, when her income from books and fellowships had dried up; she regarded the WPA job as a necessary evil for weathering hard times. Despite having published more than most staff members and having expertise in folklore research, Hurston received only a junior position and salary. Her research enriched the WPA guide to Florida; her assignments included revising *The Florida Negro*, one in a national series on black life. She mapped a recording tour through Florida with insight into what folklore material could be found at each stop. Hurston saw the recognition of African American culture—especially in music and language—as a “revolution in national expression,” one as dramatic as Geoffrey Chaucer's shift from writing in Latin to vernacular English in the 14th century.

—David A. Taylor, co-writer and co-producer, *Soul of a People: Writing America's Story*



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Zora Neale Hurston was a leading figure of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s and 30s, an unprecedented era of achievement and fame for African-American writers, among them Langston Hughes, Richard Wright, Countee Cullen, and Jean Toomer. Between the Harlem Renaissance and the end of the Korean War, Hurston—author of four novels, two collections of folklore, an autobiography, plays, and numerous essays and short stories—was the dominant black woman writer in America. In spite of her success, Hurston died in poverty and obscurity in the St. Lucie County Welfare Home in Fort Pierce, Florida. She was buried in an unmarked grave in 1960, her books out of print, her passing almost unnoticed, until in 1975 another black woman writer, Alice Walker, published an article (“In Search of Zora Neale Hurston”) in *Ms.* magazine that launched a Hurston revival. Walker wrote:

Condemned to a desert island for life, with an allotment of ten books to see me through, I would choose, unhesitatingly, two of Zora’s: Mules and Men, because I would need to be able to pass on to younger generations the life of American blacks as legend and myth; and Their Eyes Were Watching God, because I would want to enjoy myself while identifying with the black heroine, Janie Crawford, as she acted out many roles in a variety of settings, and functioned (with spectacular results!) in romantic and sensual love. There is no book more important to me than this one....

Thanks to Walker and others, Zora Neale Hurston is more widely read today than during her lifetime; her status as a great writer is firmly established. How could the works of such an important writer go almost unread for nearly 30 years? This is a difficult question, but some scholars think that Hurston is appreciated today because the social and political climate in America has evolved to a point where she is more understandable and less threatening, even among African Americans.

Unlike other members of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston had no overt political objectives; she did not write protests or campaign for reform. Her works focused on black characters almost exclusively, and she paid less attention to racial conflicts than she did to an unshakeable sense of racial pride. Walker has written that Hurston’s easy self-acceptance of her blackness was an uncommon attitude in earlier decades, and that in this regard she was “... more like an uncolonized African than she was like her contemporary American blacks, most of whom believed, at least during their formative years, that their blackness was something wrong with them.”

Hurston was raised in Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated all-black township in America (the setting of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*), a community, says Walker, “of black people who had enormous respect for themselves and for their ability to govern themselves.” Walker refutes critics of Hurston’s political detachment, claiming that her self-acceptance and her celebration of black culture were political statements in themselves, ahead of their time. “During the early and middle years of her career,” writes Walker, “Zora was a cultural revolutionary simply because she was always herself.”

Their Eyes Were Watching God opens with the ladies of Eatonville gossiping about Janie Crawford, the book’s heroine. Now 40 years old, Janie has returned alone to Eatonville; the ladies suspect that her husband has done her wrong, a fate she perhaps deserves for marrying and running off with a spirited gambler 15 years her junior. But she is far from ruined; she has endured hardships and returned older, wiser, triumphant in love. The ladies appoint Phoebe, Janie’s old friend, to investigate her return, and the novel unfolds as Janie tells her tale.

This is a story about love, and a story of Janie’s blossoming spirit. One day while lying under a pear tree, Janie, in her teens, feels the “panting breath of the breeze” and hears an “inaudible voice” while watching a bee pollinate a blossom. As a witness to this simple act of nature Janie feels deep longings in her soul:

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation.

Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. ... Oh to be a pear tree—any tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing of the beginning of the world! She was sixteen. She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her.

Her grandmother, intending to protect Janie from harm, arranges a marriage to a middle-aged farmer, Logan Killicks. (Grandmother had borne her master’s child, Janie’s mother, who was raped by a white school teacher.) Janie acquiesces, believing she will learn to love Mr. Killicks, but soon finds the marriage stifling. Killicks wants to buy another mule so he can put Janie behind a plow. She confides to Grandmother, “Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think, Ah ...”

Symbolically tossing her apron in the bushes, Janie runs off one morning with Joe Starks, a smooth-talking man from Georgia who comes to Eatonville because he’s heard “all about ‘em makin’ a town all outa colored folks.” Eventually Janie and Joe are married and Joe becomes the self-appointed mayor and most prosperous businessman of Eatonville. Janie had vowed “from now until death to have flower dust sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom.” Joe, more interested in business than in love, allows Janie to work in his store, but forbids her to join in camaraderie with the patrons. He regards Janie as his personal adornment, a mark of his wealth and importance. Nevertheless, the marriage lasts 20 years, until Joe’s death. Janie burns the head rags Joe had insisted she wear in the store and sets out once again on a quest for romantic love.

Her third marriage, to Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods, a handsome and charismatic younger man, ends tragically, but in the few years they are together, Janie finds what she has long desired, a relationship filled with passion and intensity—and she finds herself. In various adventures with Tea Cake, Janie learns to live as her husband’s equal, to trust and love and expect the same in exchange. Upon her return to Eatonville, wearing overalls, Janie explains the hard-won lessons she has learned in love:

... love ain’t somethin’ lak uh grindstone dat’s de same thing tuh everything it touch. Love is lak de sea. It’s a movin’ thing, but still and all, it takes shape from de shore it meets, and it’s different with every shore.

About the author

While studying at Columbia University under famed anthropologist Franz Boaz, Zora Neale Hurston researched African-American folklore; later she published a collection of folk tales, *Mules and Men*. In 1973, Alice Walker marked Hurston’s grave with a tombstone inscribed, “A Genius of the South. Novelist. Folklorist. Anthropologist.”