

# Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* [1937]

## Summary

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the story of the founding of the all-black community of Eatonville, Florida, around the turn of the 20th century and presents one of the first depictions of a strong African-American heroine in American literature. The novel relates the founding of the town, with characters speaking in dialect. The story is related using a frame technique. Janie Crawford has just returned to town after many adventures, which she recounts to her best friend. Janie goes back in time, beginning with her childhood when she is being raised by her grandmother, Nanny. When Janie enters puberty, Nanny becomes alarmed at Janie's sexual precociousness and quickly marries her off to Logan Killocks, a small landholder. Logan forces Janie to work in the fields, which makes her feel "a mule of the world." When Janie meets a passing handsome man, Jody Starks, she is attracted by his bravado at creating a town and the chance to escape her field-cropper existence. Starks promises her that she will sit on the porch of her own home and live a prosperous life. Janie leaves Killocks and joins Starks in his new enterprise in Eatonville. She enjoys her new life for 20 years, until Starks becomes threatened by her beauty and popularity in the town. She finally fights back and insults him about his manhood. It's uncertain whether the insult is the direct cause of Starks's wasting away from kidney disease and dying. Janie, as the mayor's widow, lives apart from the community until she meets Tea Cake, a wandering field worker. She falls in love with him and follows him to the Muck, the area around the Everglades, where she joyfully works in the fields alongside him and learns how to tell her own tales. Their happy life ends when a hurricane uproots their existence. As they escape the flooding Lake Okeechobee, Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog and becomes ill with rabies. In a mad rage, he attacks Janie who shoots him dead in self defense. The story ends when she returns to Eatonville and resumes her life in the community, presumably as a teller of tales.

## Contemporary Reviews

The following selected reviews of Hurston's work aim to represent how her major works were received at the time of publication. Along with a list of reviews, we also provide selected excerpts from the reviews themselves. As the site develops, we will also provide reviews and review excerpts regarding Hurston's less well known works as well.

- *Saturday Review of Literature*, "Negroes By Themselves," September 18, 1937, George Stevens, v. 26, no. 21, p. 3. "The only weak spots in the novel are technical; it begins awkwardly with a confusing and unnecessary preview of the end; and the dramatic action, as in the story of the hurricane, is sometimes hurriedly and clumsily handled. Otherwise the narration is exactly right, because most of it is in dialogue, and the dialogue gives us a constant sense of character in action."

- *Time*, September 20, 1937, v. 30, no. 12, p. 71. Southerners would disregard "the equalitarian groupings implicit in the novel, while Northerners might well find in it some indigestible food for thought . . . ." "An upstanding coffee-colored quadroon out lasts all three of her men—the last only because she was quicker on the trigger than he was—goes back to her village to rest in peace and to make her friends' eyes bug out at the tales of what she and life have done together."
- *The New York Times Book Review*, "In the Florida Glades," Lucille Tompkins, September 26, 1937, p. 29. "This is Zora Hurston's third novel, again about her own people—and it is beautiful. It is about Negroes, and a good deal of it is written in dialect, but really it is about every one, or least every one who isn't as civilized that he has lost the capacity for glory . . . . Indeed, from first to last this is a well nigh perfect story—a little sententious at the start, but the rest is simple and beautiful and shining with humor. In case there are readers who have a chronic laziness about dialect, it should be added that the dialect here is very easy to follow, and the images it carries are irresistible."
- *The New York Herald Tribune Weekly Book Review* "Vibrant Book Full of Nature and Salt," September 26, 1937, Sheila Hibben, p. 2. "Here is an author who writes with her head as well as with her heart, and at a time when there seems to be some principle of physics set dead against the appearance of novelists who give out a cheerful warmth at the same time write with intelligence. You have to be as tired as I am of writers who offer to do so much for folks as Atlas . . . to be as pleased as I am with Zora Hurston's lovely book . . . . As a great many novelists—good and bad—ought to know by this time, it is awfully easy to write nonsense about negroes. That Miss Hurston can write of them with simple tenderness, so that her story is filled with the ache of her own people, is, I think, due to the fact that she is not too much preoccupied with the current fetish of the primitive . . . . There is also death . . . . Mostly, though, there is life—a swarming, passionate life, and in spite of the Tea Cake's tragic end and the crumbling of Janie's happiness, there is a sense of triumph and glory when the tale is done."
- *Books*, September 26, 1937, S.A. Brown, p.2. "Many incidents are unusual, and there are narrative gaps in need of building up. Miss Hurston's forte is the recording and creation of folk-speech. Her devotion to these people has rewarded her; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is chockfull of earthy and touching poetry."
- *New York Times*, September 26, 1937, George Stevens. p.29. "The only weak spots in the novel are technical; it begins awkwardly with a confusing and unnecessary preview of the end; and the dramatic action, as in the story of the hurricane, is sometimes hurriedly and clumsily handled. Otherwise the narration is exactly right, because most of it is in dialogue, and the dialogue gives us a constant sense of character in action."
- *New Masses*, October 5, 1937, Richard Wright, pp. 22, 25. "It is difficult to evaluate Waters Turpin's *These Low Grounds* and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This is not because there is an esoteric meaning hidden or implied in either of the two novels; but rather because neither of the two novels has a basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation. Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction . . . .

Miss Hurston can write; but her prose is cloaked in that facile sensuality that has dogged Negro expression since the days of Phillis Wheatley. Her dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk–mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes. Miss Hurston voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the 'white folks' laugh. Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally in that sage and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro love: between laughter and tears . . . . Turpin's faults as a writer are those of an honest man trying desperately to say something; but Zora Neale Hurston lacks even that excuse. The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits the phase of Negro life which is 'quaint,' the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the 'superior race.'"

- *The New Republic*, October 13, 1937, Otis Ferguson, v. 92, no. 1193, p. 276. "It isn't that this novel is bad, but that it deserves to be better. In execution it is too complex and wordily pretty, even dull–yet its conception of these simple Florida Negroes is unaffected and really beautiful. Through these chapters there has been some very shrewd picturing of Negro life in its naturally creative and unselfconscious grace; the book is absolutely free of Uncle Toms, absolutely unlimbered of the clumsy formality, defiance, and apology of a Minority cause . . . . If this isn't as grand as it should be, the breakdown comes in the conflict between the true vision and its overliterary expression. Crises of feeling are rushed over too quickly for them to catch hold and then presently we are in a tangle of lush exposition and overblown symbols... But although the spoken word is remembered, it is not passed on. Dialect is sloppy, in fact . . . . And so all this conflict between the real life we want to read about and the superwordy, flabby lyric discipline we are so sick of leaves a good story where it never should have been potentially: in the gray category of neuter gender, declension indefinite."
- *Booklist*, October 15, 1937, p. 71. "The life of a Negro village and of workers in the Everglades are a natural part of the warm, human story."
- *The Nation*, "Luck is a Fortune," October 16, 1937, Sterling Brown, v. 145, no. 16, pp. 409–10. "Miss Hurston's forte is the recording and the creation of folk–speech. Her devotion to these people has rewarded her; *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is chock–full of earthy and touching poetry . . . . Though inclined to violence and not strictly conventional, her people are not naïve primitives. About human needs and frailties they have the unabashed shrewdness of the Blues . . . . But this is not the story of Miss Hurston's own people, as the foreword states, for the Negro novel is as unachievable as the Great American Novel. Living in an all–colored town, these people escape the worst pressures of class and caste."
- *Journal of Negro History*, January 1938, Ethel A. Forrest, v. 23, no. 1, pp. 106–07. "Every phase of the life of the Negro in the South, like self–segregation of the Negroes themselves and the race hatred displayed by the Southern white man, has been interwoven . . . ."

- *Journal of Negro Education*, "The Adventures of the Brown Girl in Her Search for Life," January 1938, W. A. Hunton, v. 7, no. 1, pp 71–72. Hurston "has a healthy scorn for the Negro's endeavor to pattern his life according to white bourgeois standards."
- *Opportunity*, June 1, 1938, Alain Locke. "And now Zora Neale Hurston and her magical title: *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Janie's story should not be re-told; it must be read. But as always thus far with this talented writer, setting and surprising flashes of contemporary folk lore are the main point. Her gift for poetic phrase, for rare dialect, and folk humor keep her flashing on the surface of her community and her characters and from diving down deep either to the inner psychology of characterization or to sharp analysis of the social background. It is folklore fiction at its best, which we gratefully accept as an overdue replacement for so much faulty local color fiction about Negroes. But when will the Negro novelist of maturity, who knows how to tell a story convincingly—which is Miss Hurston's cradle gift, come to grips with motive fiction and social document fiction? Progressive southern fiction has already banished the legend of these entertaining pseudo-primitives whom the reading public still loves to laugh with, weep over and envy. Having gotten rid of condescension, let us now get over oversimplification!"
- *New Masses*, "Recent Negro Fiction," August 5, 1940, Ralph Ellison, v. 40, no. 6, pp. 22–26. "The fiction of [Countee Cullen, Rudolph Fisher, Wallace Thurman, Jessie Fauset, and Hurston] was chiefly lyrical and for the most part unaware of the technical experimentation and direction being taken by American writing as the result of the work . . . of such writers as Joyce, Stein, Anderson, and Hemingway" which "was not addressed to Negro readers, but to a white audience that had recently 'discovered' the Negro in its quest to make spiritual adjustments to a world in transition." *Their Eyes Were Watching God* "retains the blight of calculated burlesque that has marred" Hurston's writing. It is "the story of a Southern Negro woman's love-life against the background of an all-Negro town into which the casual brutalities of the South seldom intrude."