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**THEIR  
EYES WERE  
WATCHING GOD**

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# THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

WITH A FOREWORD BY  
MARY HELEN WASHINGTON  
AND AN AFTERWORD BY  
HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

P E R E N N I A L  C L A S S I C S

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**THEIR  
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GOD**

BOOKS BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON

*Jonah's Gourd Vine*

*Mules and Men*

*Tell My Horse*

*Moses, Man of the Mountain*

*Dust Tracks on a Road*

*Seraph on the Suwanee*

*To Henry Allen Moe*

## Foreword



*In 1987, the fiftieth anniversary of the first publication of Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the University of Illinois Press inserted a banner in the lower right-hand corner of the cover of their anniversary reprint edition: "1987/50th Anniversary—STILL A BESTSELLER!" The back cover, using a quote from the *Saturday Review* by Doris Grumbach, proclaimed *Their Eyes*, "the finest black novel of its time" and "one of the finest of all time." Zora Neale Hurston would have been shocked and pleased, I believe, at this stunning reversal in the reception of her second novel, which for nearly thirty years after its first publication was out of print, largely unknown and unread, and dismissed by the male literary establishment in subtle and not so subtle ways. One white reviewer in 1937 praised the novel in the *Saturday Review* as a "rich and racy love story, if somewhat awkward," but had difficulty believing that such a town as Eatonville, "inhabited and governed entirely by Negroes," could be real.

Black male critics were much harsher in their assessments of the novel. From the beginning of her career, Hurston was severely criticized for not writing fiction in the protest tradition. Sterling Brown said in 1936 of her earlier book *Mules and Men* that it was not bitter enough, that it did not depict the harsher side of black life in the South, that Hurston made black southern

life appear easygoing and carefree. Alain Locke, dean of black scholars and critics during the Harlem Renaissance, wrote in his yearly review of the literature for *Opportunity* magazine that Hurston's *Their Eyes* was simply out of step with the more serious trends of the times. When, he asks, will Hurston stop creating "these pseudo-primitives whom the reading public still loves to laugh with, weep over, and envy," and "come to grips with the motive fiction and social document fiction?" The most damaging critique of all came from the most well-known and influential black writer of the day, Richard Wright. Writing for the leftist magazine *New Masses*, Wright excoriated *Their Eyes* as a novel that did for literature what the minstrel shows did for theater, that is, make white folks laugh. The novel, he said, "carries no theme, no message, no thought," but exploited those "quaint" aspects of Negro life that satisfied the tastes of a white audience. By the end of the forties, a decade dominated by Wright and by the stormy fiction of social realism, the quieter voice of a woman searching for self-realization could not, or would not, be heard.

Like most of my friends and colleagues who were teaching in the newly formed Black Studies departments in the late sixties, I can still recall quite vividly my own discovery of *Their Eyes*. Somewhere around 1968, in one of the many thriving black bookstores in the country—this one, Vaughn's Book Store, was in Detroit—I came across the slender little paperback (bought for 75¢) with a stylized portrait of Janie Crawford and Jody Starks on the cover—she pumping water at the well, her long hair cascading down her back, her head turned just slightly in his direction with a look of longing and expectancy; he, standing at a distance in his fancy silk shirt and purple suspenders, his coat over one arm, his head cocked to one side, with the look that speaks to Janie of far horizons.

What I loved immediately about this novel besides its high

poetry and its female hero was its investment in black folk traditions. Here, finally, was a woman on a quest for her own identity and, unlike so many other questing figures in black literature, her journey would take her, not away from, but deeper and deeper into blackness, the descent into the Everglades with its rich black soil, wild cane, and communal life representing immersion into black traditions. But for most black women readers discovering *Their Eyes* for the first time, what was most compelling was the figure of Janie Crawford—powerful, articulate, self-reliant, and radically different from any woman character they had ever before encountered in literature. Andrea Rushing, then an instructor in the Afro-American Studies Department at Harvard, remembers reading *Their Eyes* in a women's study group with Nellie McKay, Barbara Smith, and Gail Pemberton. "I loved the language of this book," Rushing says, "but mostly I loved it because it was about a woman who wasn't pathetic, wasn't a tragic mulatto, who defied everything that was expected of her, who went off with a man without bothering to divorce the one she left and wasn't broken, crushed, and run down."

The reaction of women all across the country who found themselves so powerfully represented in a literary text was often direct and personal. Janie and Tea Cake were talked about as though they were people the readers knew intimately. Sherley Anne Williams remembers going down to a conference in Los Angeles in 1969 where the main speaker, Toni Cade Bambara, asked the women in the audience, "Are the sisters here ready for Tea Cake?" And Williams, remembering that even Tea Cake had his flaws, responded, "Are the Tea Cakes of the world ready for us?" Williams taught *Their Eyes* for the first time at Cal State Fresno, in a migrant farming area where the students, like the characters in *Their Eyes*, were used to making their living from the land. "For the first time," Williams says, "they saw themselves in these

characters and they saw their lives portrayed with joy.” Rushing’s comment on the female as hero and Williams’s story about the joyful portrayal of a culture together epitomize what critics would later see as the novel’s unique contribution to black literature: it affirms black cultural traditions while revising them to empower black women.

By 1971, *Their Eyes* was an underground phenomenon, surfacing here and there, wherever there was a growing interest in African-American studies—and a black woman literature teacher. Alice Walker was teaching the novel at Wellesley in the 1971–72 school year when she discovered that Hurston was only a footnote in the scholarship. Reading in an essay by a white folklorist that Hurston was buried in an unmarked grave, Walker decided that such a fate was an insult to Hurston and began her search for the grave to put a marker on it. In a personal essay, “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” written for *Ms.* magazine, Walker describes going to Florida and searching through waist-high weeds to find what she thought was Hurston’s grave and laying on it a marker inscribed “Zora Neale Hurston/‘A Genius of the South’/Novelist/Folklorist/Anthropologist/1901–1960.” With that inscription and that essay, Walker ushered in a new era in the scholarship on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

By 1975, *Their Eyes*, again out of print, was in such demand that a petition was circulated at the December 1975 convention of the Modern Language Association (MLA) to get the novel back into print. In that same year at a conference on minority literature held at Yale and directed by Michael Cooke, the few copies of *Their Eyes* that were available were circulated for two hours at a time to conference participants, many of whom were reading the novel for the first time. In March of 1977, when the MLA Commission on Minority Groups and the Study of Language and Literature published its first list of out of print books most in demand at a national

level, the program coordinator, Dexter Fisher, wrote: "*Their Eyes Were Watching God* is unanimously at the top of the list."

Between 1977 and 1979 the Zora Neale Hurston renaissance was in full bloom. Robert Hemenway's biography, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, published in 1977, was a runaway bestseller at the December 1977 MLA convention. The new University of Illinois Press edition of *Their Eyes*, published a year after the Hemenway biography in March of 1978, made the novel available on a steady and dependable basis for the next ten years. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing . . . And Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*, edited by Alice Walker, was published by the Feminist Press in 1979. Probably more than anything else, these three literary events made it possible for serious Hurston scholarship to emerge.

But the event that for me truly marked the beginning of the third wave of critical attention to *Their Eyes* took place in December 1979 at the MLA convention in San Francisco in a session aptly titled "Traditions and Their Transformations in Afro-American Letters," chaired by Robert Stepto of Yale with John Callahan of Lewis and Clark College and myself (then at the University of Detroit) as the two panelists. Despite the fact that the session was scheduled on Sunday morning, the last session of the entire convention, the room was packed and the audience unusually attentive. In his comments at the end of the session, Stepto raised the issue that has become one of the most highly controversial and hotly contested aspects of the novel: whether or not Janie is able to achieve her voice in *Their Eyes*. What concerned Stepto was the courtroom scene in which Janie is called on not only to preserve her own life and liberty but also to make the jury, as well as all of us who hear her tale, understand the meaning of her life with Tea Cake. Stepto found Janie curiously silent in this scene, with Hurston telling the

story in omniscient third person so that we do not hear Janie speak—at least not in her own first-person voice. Stepto was quite convinced (and convincing) that the frame story in which Janie speaks to Pheoby creates only the illusion that Janie has found her voice, that Hurston's insistence on telling Janie's story in the third person undercuts her power as speaker. While the rest of us in the room struggled to find our voices, Alice Walker rose and claimed hers, insisting passionately that women did not have to speak when men thought they should, that they would choose when and where they wish to speak because while many women *had* found their own voices, they also knew when it was better not to use it. What was most remarkable about the energetic and at times heated discussion that followed Stepto's and Walker's remarks was the assumption of everyone in that room that *Their Eyes* was a shared text, that a novel that just ten years earlier was unknown and unavailable had entered into critical acceptance as perhaps the most widely known and the most privileged text in the African-American literary canon.

That MLA session was important for another reason. Walker's defense of Janie's choice (actually Hurston's choice) to be silent in the crucial places in the novel turned out to be the earliest feminist reading of voice in *Their Eyes*, a reading that was later supported by many other Hurston scholars. In a recent essay on *Their Eyes*, and the question of voice, Michael Awkward argues that Janie's voice at the end of the novel is a communal one, that when she tells Pheoby to tell her story ("You can tell 'em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat's just de same as me 'cause mah tongue is in mah friend's mout") she is choosing a collective rather than an individual voice, demonstrating her closeness to the collective spirit of the African-American oral tradition. Thad Davis agrees with this reading of voice, adding that while Janie is the teller of the tale, Pheoby is the bearer of the tale. Davis says that Janie's experimental life may not allow her to effect changes beyond what she causes in Pheoby's life; but Pheoby,

standing within the traditional role of women, is the one most suited to take the message back to the community.

Although, like Stepto, I too am uncomfortable with the absence of Janie's voice in the courtroom scene, I think that silence reflects Hurston's discomfort with the model of the male hero who asserts himself through his powerful voice. When Hurston chose a female hero for the story she faced an interesting dilemma: the female presence was inherently a critique of the male-dominated folk culture and therefore could not be its heroic representative. When Janie says at the end of her story that "talkin' don't amount to much" if it's divorced from experience, she is testifying to the limitations of voice and critiquing the culture that celebrates orality to the exclusion of inner growth. Her final speech to Pheoby at the end of *Their Eyes* actually casts doubt on the relevance of oral speech and supports Alice Walker's claim that women's silence can be intentional and useful:

'Course, talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else . . . Pheoby, you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there. Yo papa and yo mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuh theyselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuh theyselves.

The language of the men in *Their Eyes* is almost always divorced from any kind of interiority, and the men are rarely shown in the process of growth. Their talking is either a game or a method of exerting power. Janie's life is about the experience of relationships, and while Jody and Tea Cake and all the other talking men are essentially static characters, Janie and Pheoby pay closer attention to their own inner life—to experience—because it is the site for growth.

If there is anything the outpouring of scholarship on *Their Eyes* teaches us, it is that this is a rich and complicated text and that each generation of readers will bring something new to our understanding of it. If we were protective of this text and unwilling to subject it to literary analysis during the first years of its rebirth, that was because it was a beloved text for those of us who discovered in it something of our own experiences, our own language, our own history. In 1989, I find myself asking new questions about *Their Eyes*—questions about Hurston's ambivalence toward her female protagonist, about its uncritical depiction of violence toward women, about the ways in which Janie's voice is dominated by men even in passages that are about her own inner growth. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston has not given us an unambiguously heroic female character. She puts Janie on the track of autonomy, self-realization, and independence, but she also places Janie in the position of romantic heroine as the object of Tea Cake's quest, at times so subordinate to the magnificent presence of Tea Cake that even her interior life reveals more about him than about her. What *Their Eyes* shows us is a woman writer struggling with the problem of the questing hero as woman and the difficulties in 1937 of giving a woman character such power and such daring.

Because *Their Eyes* has been in print continuously since 1978, it has become available each year to thousands of new readers. It is taught in colleges all over the country, and its availability and popularity have generated two decades of the highest level of scholarship. But I want to remember the history that nurtured this text into rebirth, especially the collective spirit of the sixties and seventies that galvanized us into political action to retrieve the lost works of black women writers. There is a lovely symmetry between text and context in the case of *Their Eyes*: as *Their Eyes* affirms and celebrates black culture it reflects that same affirmation of black culture that rekindled interest in the text; Janie telling her story to a

listening woman friend, Pheoby, suggests to me all those women readers who discovered their own tale in Janie's story and passed it on from one to another; and certainly, as the novel represents a woman redefining and revising a male-dominated canon, these readers have, like Janie, made their voices heard in the world of letters, revising the canon while asserting their proper place in it.

MARY HELEN WASHINGTON

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*Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board. For some they come in with the tide. For others they sail forever on the horizon, never out of sight, never landing until the Watcher turns his eyes away in resignation, his dreams mocked to death by Time. That is the life of men.*

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead. Not the dead of sick and ailing with friends at the pillow and the feet. She had come back from the sodden and the bloated; the sudden dead, their eyes flung wide open in judgment.

The people all saw her come because it was sundown. The sun was gone, but he had left his footprints in the sky. It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things. They passed nations through their mouths. They sat in judgment.