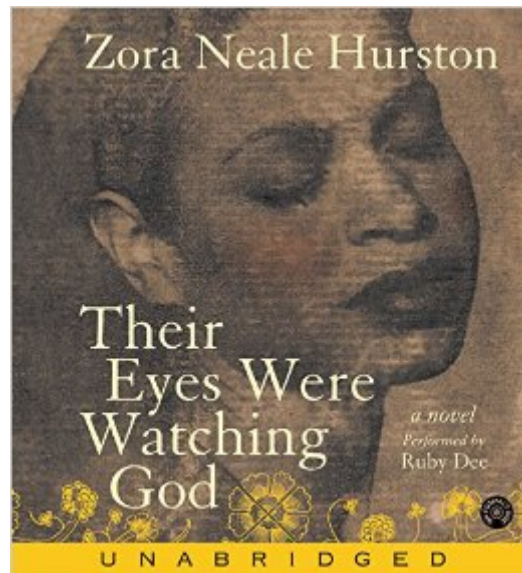


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# Their Eyes Were Watching God CD



## 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*" 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.

Hurston spend much of her life collecting and transcribing the traditions and stories of African Americans and Caribbean cultures. In addition to her volumes on folklore and ethnology, she wrote four novels and several stories and coauthored a play with Langston Hughes, all of which drew heavily on the material she collected for her studies and on events from her own life. Of her works of fiction, "Their Eyes Were Watching God" is undoubtedly her best and, after reading it a second time, I have even more admiration for her accomplishment. One of the reasons the book resonates today with so many readers is the story's major theme: the difficulty of reconciling the struggle between social approval and well-being, on the one hand, and passion and self-respect, on the other. The heroine, Janie, must often do what is expected of her (by her grandmother, her husbands, or the community) at the expense of her own pleasure. Yet Hurston intends to do more than tell a simple story of a Southern black woman looking for Mr. Right. The author introduces characters and sketches that have less to do with the advancement of the plot and more to do with creating an environment: what life was like for black communities in Florida during the early twentieth century--the humor and the resentment, the misery and the fortitude, the camaraderie and the backstabbing. Characteristic of this leisurely documentary method is the manner in which the town's older inhabitants razz one another or the tale of Matt and his yellow mule, which manages to be at once funny, appalling, touching, and inspiring. All in all, the use of dialect and the meandering style make this novel not an "easy read" but a rewarding one.

I am very glad to have finally read this masterpiece. I admit to having avoided Zora Neale Hurston for years, for all the wrong reasons. I react badly to appeals to political correctness, diversity, and white male guilt. But these prejudices were completely blown out of the water by actually reading this radiant book. For Hurston simply writes about PEOPLE -- people of a particular race, gender, time, and place, yes -- but people whose human identity flourishes from these circumstances

without being in any way confined by them. I don't think I have read any work of African-American literature that is so little concerned with race tensions, poverty, or the legacy of slavery. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. quotes in his fine afterword to the Harper Perennial edition, Hurston wanted to write about "racial health -- a sense of black people as complete, complex, UNDIMINISHED human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature" [emphasis hers]. For all that, *THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD* is a difficult book to begin. At first, Hurston seems to be writing in two languages, likely to be equally foreign to many readers. One is the phonetically rendered dialect of her characters, which her contemporaries criticized as making them sound ignorant, but is in fact part and parcel of their vigorous life. The other is the free-form poetry of her descriptions, ordinary words strung together in unexpected ways so that they become quite new. But soon the two voices become as one: the voice of thought unfettered by academic rules. And the power of unfettered thought, the possibility of being oneself without regard to rules or roles, is the enduring theme of the book. The story is a simple one.

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