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2026: THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US

FEBRUARY HIGHLIGHT

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD by Zora Neale Hurston



Fair-skinned Janie is caught kissing her shiftless neighbor at the age of 16, which prompts her Nanny to quickly marry her off into a life of security. It isn't the love match Janie envisioned, something completely out of the imagination of her Nanny, a former slave.

Janie experiences two more marriages and perseveres through poverty, domestic abuse, and societal pressures on her journey to find a greater love and purpose in her life.

Note: Hurston, a master of dialect, can be a bit tough to read with her phonetic spellings. If you have trouble getting into the novel, give the audiobook a try! It's available through Libby. (If you're worried about wasting a checkout, click "Play Sample" to listen to the first five minutes!)

CONTEXT & IMPACT

Zora Neale Hurston was a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance who felt that black rural life didn't need to be left behind for the "New Negroes" (a term popularized by her mentor Alain LeRoy Locke)- those black Americans who were migrating from the rural South to the urban North, often to escape the current or ancestral culture of violent white supremacy.

Though Hurston was highly respected by her contemporaries, her novels did end up being more of a niche seller, and she died in obscure poverty, buried in an unmarked grave. Her work ended up rediscovered and brought to a mainstream audience in the 1970s, spearheaded by efforts of Alice Walker, along with Toni Morrison and other black women authors, whose writing was so influenced by Hurston that they were determined to bring her back into the light.

Hurston also had a lasting influence on our American culture through her work as an anthropologist. She earned degrees from Howard and later Barnard College (as the only black woman enrolled). She was the leading expert on black folklore, especially rural America; unlike many anthropologists, she studied her own people. At one point, she worked for the Library of Congress as an assistant to Alan Lomax, collecting folk songs; due to this, the Library has extensive archives of her voice. Hurston also had a great ear for dialect and was able to phonetically represent dialogue, often using it to reflect the poetry of everyday vernacular. Her use of dialect is thick and immersive, which can create a barrier for some readers; most find it more challenging in the beginning of the novel before becoming immersed and feeling more proximal to the action.

Their Eyes Were Watching God was written in a seven-week period while the author, anthropologist and writer Zora Neale Hurston, was on a research trip to Haiti studying the religions of the African diaspora. Hurston's research and life experiences heavily influenced the novel. For example, Eatonville, Florida, the all-black town where Janie finds her home, (first with her husband Jody, then in her own right) is modeled on the first all-black incorporated town in the US, where Hurston was raised. The hurricane featured in the novel was based on the real-life 1928 Lake Okeechobee Hurricane, and many of the cultural norms and behaviors described in the novel reflect what Hurston herself experienced and studied.

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The way that black culture is represented in the novel, rooted in real experiences and behaviors, reflects a larger theme in Hurston's work. Hurston felt her works should serve as a mirror and celebration of Black culture, particularly that of the rural South. Notably, most of the novel is set in an all-black town, without any white residents, the novel was able to show that black communities were as differentiated and vibrant as any white community.

Hurston's style is contrasted with other heavy-hitting authors of her time, most notably Richard Wright, who used depictions of Black culture as a weapon against injustice and racism. Both stylistic approaches were grappling with the desire to move forward to a free black future while being weighted down by a cultural history of oppression and violence. In part, these different approaches during the Harlem Renaissance meant that Hurston's novel was highly controversial when it was published.

Their Eyes Were Watching God was especially denigrated by Wright, who felt that Hurston's writing was not serious enough and pandered to the white male gaze by centering black women and giving her main character full human sexuality. Other authors did not agree with Wright's assessment, notably W.E.B. Du Bois and Langston Hughes. (Many modern analysts argue that Wright's depictions of sexual violence pander more to the white male reader than any of Hurston's works.) Whichever side of the black sensuality debate one was on, it is unquestioned that *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was the first to describe a full expression of Black sexuality through a female protagonist, which resonated with generations of Black women and ended up leading to its enduring legacy. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* displayed a different, evolving view of romantic love; that it is possible for all black women, regardless of location, socioeconomic status, or age, to be worthy of a love they desire.

Their Eyes Were Watching God was adapted into a film in 2005, produced by Oprah Winfrey and starring Halle Berry.

"I DO NOT ATTEMPT TO SOLVE ANY PROBLEMS [IN MY NOVELS]. I KNOW I CANNOT STRAIGHTEN OUT WITH A FEW PEN-STROKES WHAT GOD AND MEN TOOK CENTURIES TO MESS UP. SO I TRIED TO DEAL WITH LIFE AS WE ACTUALLY LIVE IT—NOT AS THE SOCIOLOGISTS IMAGINE IT."

—ZORA NEALE HURSTON, FROM A LETTER TO FANNIE HURST



Zora Neale Hurston, circa 1940

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS



In her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* Zora Neal Hurston wrote: "Love, I find, is like singing. Everybody can do enough to satisfy themselves, though it may not impress the neighbors as being very much."

How was this perception reflected in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? Does this quote resonate for you in your own life?



Janie's audience for the entire story is Phoeby - "But I ain't puttin' it in de streets. Ah'm tellin' you." How did this choice of audience shape the novel? What may have changed if she were telling the story to someone different?

How do our audiences affect what we tell or omit in our own stories?



Janie experiences multiple deaths in the book, and we are given two detailed descriptions of her grief. Compare the two circumstances and what was shown in each, in both Janie and from the people surrounding her.

When Hurston writes of Janie: "She was too busy feeling grief to dress like grief", what do you think she was trying to express?



How does the tradition of oral storytelling (and the anthropologic work Hurston does) influence the story? What may change if this were written or retold in a different tradition?



Hurston uses a variety of rich similes in her writing. Which ones are your favorites? (My favorite: "Nanny's head and face looked like the standing roots of some old tree that had been torn away by storm. Foundation of ancient power that no longer mattered.")



Consider how differently Janie and her Nanny viewed marriage, especially in the contrast between the desire for stability and the desire for love.

Which viewpoint do you most strongly align with? Why do you feel that way? What influenced Nanny and Janie to have the feelings they did?

Can you think of a similar conflict between generational ethos in today's culture?



Did Janie find her voice when she met Tea Cake? Why do you feel that way?

Is there a difference between "finding your voice" and finally being able to use your voice? How was this demonstrated in each of Janie's relationships?



The title of the book comes from the scenes describing the prelude to the hurricane, where their community is described thus: "They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God."

Why do you think this was chosen as the title of the book? Would you have chosen a different phrase if you titled it?



In Chapter 16 Janie muses about the pious Mrs. Turner's idols and altars. The narrator says that "Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood."

What does this mean? What are the ways this plays out in the novel?

SOURCES & MORE

Articles

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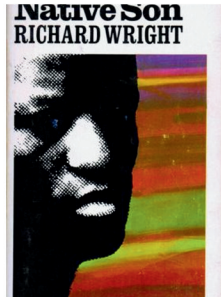
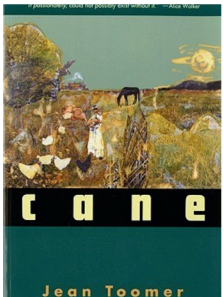
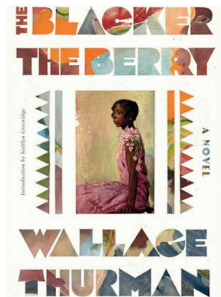
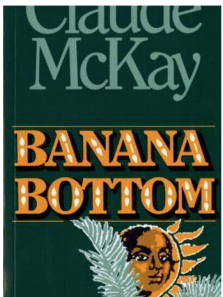
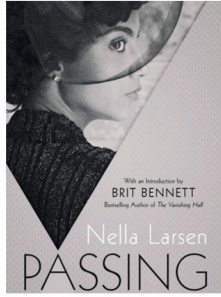
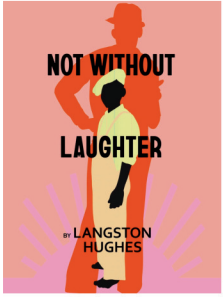
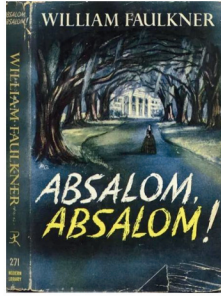
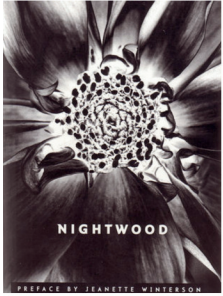
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Films

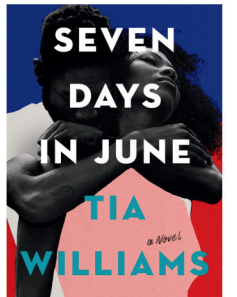
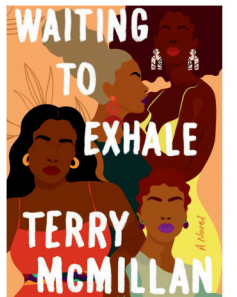
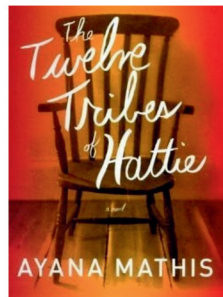
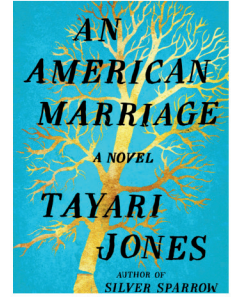
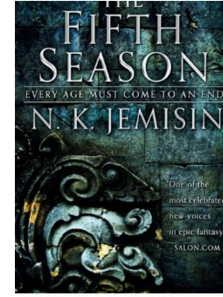
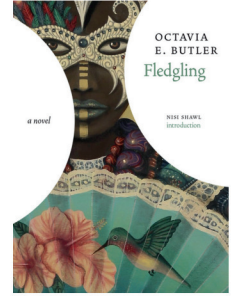
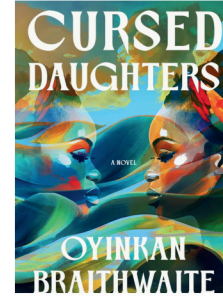
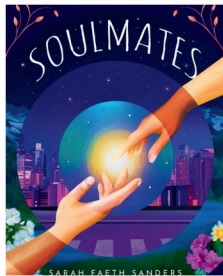
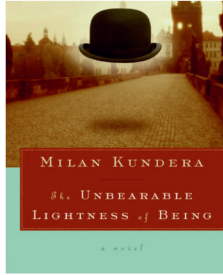
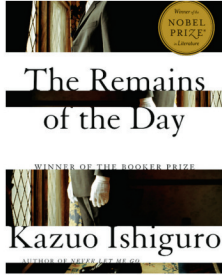
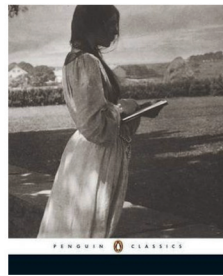
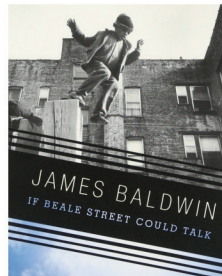
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- *Zora Neale Hurston: Jump at the Sun*. 2008. (available on Kanopy)

READ-ALIKES



If you liked exploring the nature of love:

- *If Beale Street Could Talk*, James Baldwin
- *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Bronte
- *Copper Sun*, Countee Cullen
- *Far from the Madding Crowd*, Thomas Hardy
- *The Remains of the Day*, Kazuo Ishiguro
- *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera
- *The Flatshare*, Beth O'Leary
- *Soulmates*, Sarah Faeth Sanders



If you liked the Era:

- *Nightwood*, Djuna Barnes
- *Absalom, Absalom!*, William Faulkner
- *Not without Laughter*, Langston Hughes
- *Passing*, Nella Larsen
- *Banana Bottom*, Claude McKay
- *The Blacker the Berry*, Wallace Thurman
- *Cane*, Jean Toomer
- *Native Son*, Richard Wright

Zora's Legacy: Black Authors:

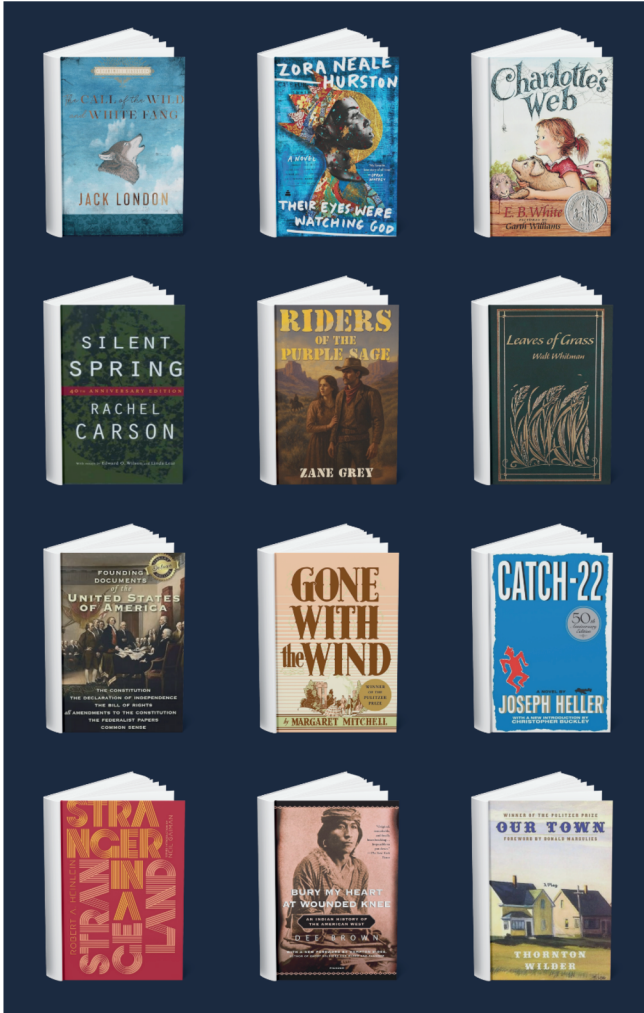
- *Cursed Daughters*, Oyinkan Braithwaite
- *Fledgling*, Octavia E. Butler
- *The Fifth Season*, N.K. Jemisin
- *An American Marriage*, Tayari Jones
- *The Twelve Tribes of Hattie*, Ayana Mathis
- *Waiting to Exhale*, Terry McMillan
- *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker
- *Seven Days in June*, Tia Williams

UPCOMING SELECTIONS

THE BOOKS THAT SHAPE US



- **January:** *The Call of the Wild* by Jack London
- **February:** *Their Eyes were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston
- **March:** *Charlotte's Web* by E.B. White
- **April:** *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson
- **May:** *Riders of the Purple Sage* by Zane Grey
- **June:** *Leaves of Grass* by Walt Whitman
- **July:** *The Federalist Papers* by Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, & James Madison
- **August:** *Gone with the Wind* by Margaret Mitchell
- **September:** *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller
- **October:** *Stranger in a Strange Land* by Robert Heinlein
- **November:** *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee* by Dee Brown
- **December:** *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder



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2026's Read with Your Librarian theme "The Books that Shape Us" honors America's 250th birthday by highlighting books influential in shaping America. Titles were chosen from the list featured in the Library of Congress' 2012 "Books that Shaped America" exhibit.

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