*Their Eyes Were Watching God*

Zora Neale Hurston, [*Their Eyes Were Watching God*](http://www.amazon.com/Their-Eyes-Were-Watching-God/dp/0060838671) (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1937)

Summary:

One of the preeminent writers of the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the first novel to ever feature a black female protagonist. Set in Florida in the early 1900s, this is a frame story where the main character, Janie, tells her life story. In the first pages, Janie appears barefoot in Eatonville, Florida, with her hair scandalously down. She relates to us her quest for true love that has taken her through three husbands, one of which she murders. Hurston’s novel, initially received with lackluster reviews—in part because of its colloquial black Southern dialect—essentially disappeared from scholarship for three decades until an [essay by the author Alice Walker](http://www.plainlocal.org/userfiles/448/Looking%20For%20Zora%20A_%20Walker.pdf) revived interest. Hurston herself later faded into obscurity, working as a maid in a hotel and ultimately dying in a welfare home. Her body was placed in an unmarked grave. Today, *Their Eyes* is seen as perhaps *the* seminal work of black fiction and one of the most respected and studied novels in America.

Themes, Symbols, & Motifs:

* Pear Tree. Janie witnesses a bee pollinating a pear tree. This acts as a spiritual revelation, sparking her journey for identity/independence/self-actualization. She sees love and marriage as mutuality, like that of the bee and the flower.
* Horizon. The horizon represents dreams for which one strives. Janie says, “Ah done been tuh de horizon and back.”
* The Hurricane. This is chaos and destruction, nature as an impersonal force, an opposing symbol to the pear tree’s harmony and the horizon’s hope.
* Hair. Janie’s braided hair, described in unquestionably phallic terms, threatens Jody. Her hair is power and independence, unique in its straightness. Jody forces her to wear head-rags, which she burns after his death.
* Title. “Real gods require blood,” Hurston writes, before she proposes that suffering leads to wisdom. The novel’s concept of God is more akin to a broad spirituality or pantheism than a Judeo-Christian concept of God.
* Speech. Janie is trying to find her voice. She connects talking with experience, saying that talking “don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans” without experience.

Discussion Questions:

1. “Ships at a distance have every man’s wish on board.” What does this mean? Relate this first sentence to the final ones of the novel.
2. What role does race play? Consider the character of Mrs. Turner as well as Janie’s trial.
3. Does Janie’s character work as an effective heroine?
4. How does violence function in this novel?
5. In the end, Janie is alone. Or is she?
6. Is Janie’s quest a selfish one?
7. Famed black author Richard Wright criticized this book for not being “serious fiction,” saying that it “carries no theme, no message, no thought.” Do you agree?
8. “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.” How does Janie do both?