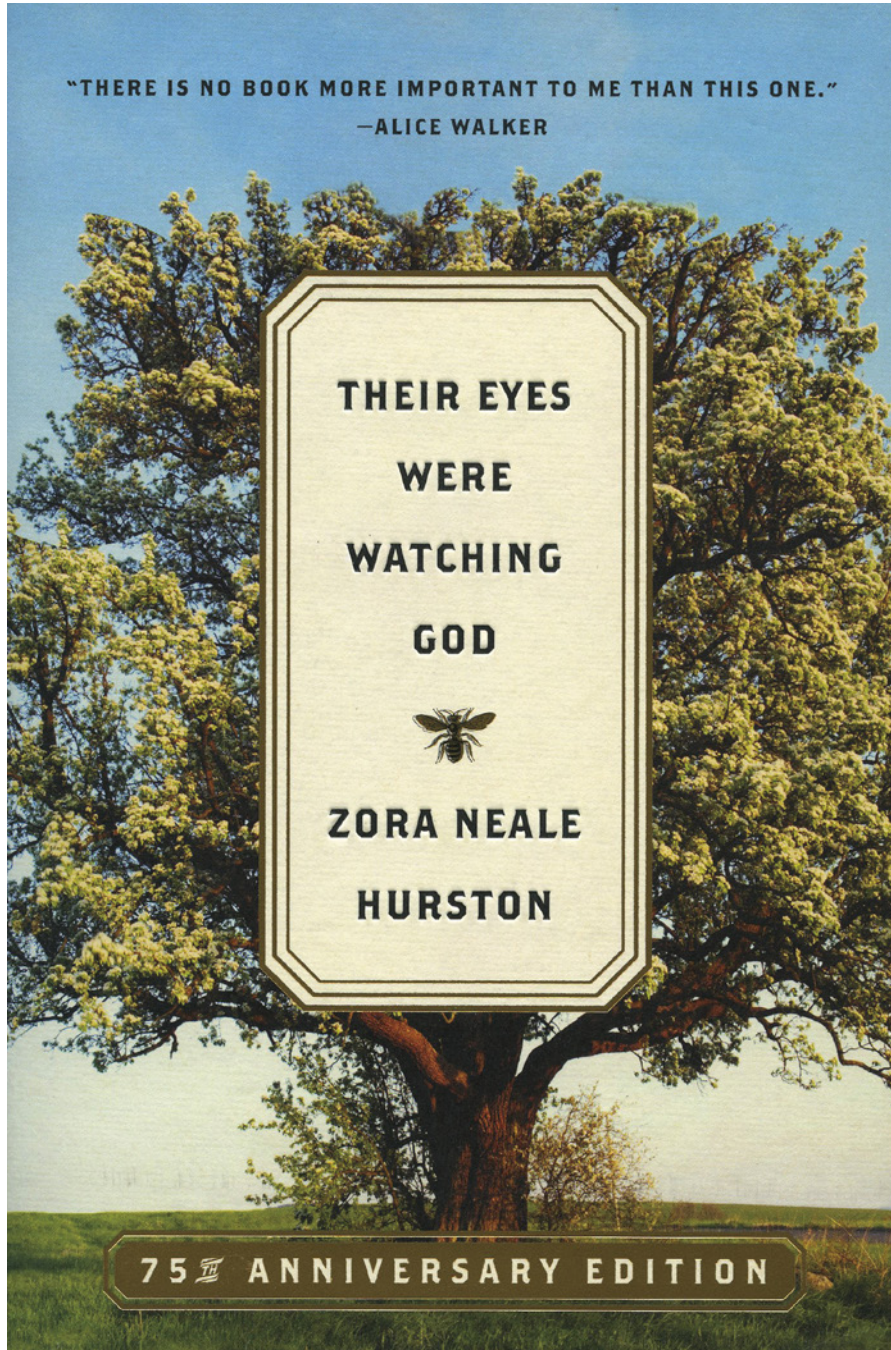
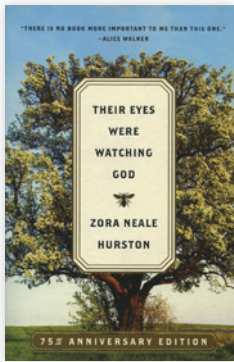


We the People Book Club

THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD
Reading Guide





For this installment of the We the People book club, we dive into **ZORA NEALE HURSTON's** novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This novel indicts the myriad forms of discrimination that get in the way of a black woman's self-expression and freedom. Janie struggles and prevails and leaves the reader feeling that, even through tragedy, life is a triumph as long as it is *lived!*

Their Eyes Were Watching God has made its way to the canon of high school and college curricula across the United States, an institutionalization Hurston would not have predicted. Partly due to the work's dismissal by the male critics of the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was largely forgotten and living on state aid at the time of her death; friends took a collection to bury her in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida. Understanding Hurston's art, however, means understanding that the circumstances of her death did not make her an unhappy woman. In fact, projecting her own death, Hurston once wrote, "...I have made phenomenal growth as a creative artist. I am not materialistic.... If I happen to die without money, somebody will bury me, though I do not wish it to be that way."

Though it was that way in 1960, Hurston's spirit was destined for resurrection. Thanks to some help from womanist writer Alice Walker, Hurston was "rediscovered" and reevaluated, and *Their Eyes* was reprinted, selling 200,000 copies between 1978-1988. When she traveled to Florida in 1973, Walker placed a gravestone for Hurston that read: "Zora Neale Hurston: A Genius of the South." We think you will find this epitaph accurate!

Hurston was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship for Creative Arts in 1936; she then won an Anisfield-Wolf Book Award (recognizing works that contribute to an understanding of racism and diversity) in 1943 for her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road*. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* has inspired theatrical, film, and radio adaptations.

About This Book Club Reading Guide

Researched and written by Julia Davis (a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project), this guide includes background on Zora Neale Hurston, an overview of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and observations on the author's literary style. For your personal exploration and/or discussion with others in your book club, we include commentary on three themes: discrimination, love, and experience. Questions within each will facilitate three approaches to the work: (1) your interpretation of the text, (2) your personal reflections inspired by your reading, and (3) practices for you to try that animate the novel's democratic values. The guide also includes ideas for further exploration; you might decide to engage these resources before or after your discussion.

Background

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Alabama on January 7, 1891, and died in Florida on January 28, 1960. When Hurston was still a toddler, the family moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first incorporated black town in the United States. Hurston grew up surrounded by role models who embodied black excellence and black storytelling --

and by books left her by Northern school teachers. Unfortunately, when Hurston was 16, her mother died. Among other effects, losing the woman who encouraged her to “jump at de sun” interrupted her education, as her father remarried a woman who didn’t want to mother the children. Zora was sent to boarding school, but had to drop out and work menial jobs, including working as a maid to a singer in the Gilbert and Sullivan musical troupe.

Hurston eventually had a very successful academic career, earning her Bachelor of Arts at Barnard and doing graduate work at Columbia under anthropologist Franz Boas. Hurston earned financial support to study folklore all over the American South and the Caribbean, a pursuit that greatly influenced her novels and short stories.

In total, Hurston wrote four novels, two nonfiction books, two plays, one book of African-American folklore, and sundry short stories and essays, including the often anthologized “How It Feels to be Colored Me.”

Hurston’s writing career seems to have both benefited and suffered from the luminaries of the Harlem Renaissance. She was close to W.E.B. du Bois and collaborated with Langston Hughes; on the other hand, Richard Wright and others lambasted *Their Eyes* for perpetuating African American stereotypes and using stock characters. This criticism surely affected her career, even though *Their Eyes* was well received by white critics.

Since Hurston was woefully underpaid for her work, she also taught, founding the school of dramatic arts at Bethune-Cookman College and later taking a position teaching drama at the North Carolina College for Negroes at Durham.

Hurston died of heart disease at the age of 69.

Overview

Their Eyes Were Watching God follows the life of Janie Woods, a woman with a voracious appetite for experience, a free spirit in a world of fear, status, and materialism. The story takes place in Florida, mostly in the all-black town of Eatonville and in the Florida Everglades, or “the muck,” as it is referred to by the characters. Janie’s search for love and engagement takes her through two trying marriages in which she is bound by materialism and discrimination. Finally, she finds Tea Cake, a man who wants a true partner, and they live their lives to the fullest until a disastrous hurricane changes everything.

Genre, Language, and Structure

When *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937, the most unusual thing about it was its protagonist: Hurston had chosen to focus on the story of a black woman. Hurston came on the literary scene towards the end of the Harlem Renaissance, which was dominated by black male writers, particularly Richard Wright, whose work focuses on the black male experience. *Their Eyes* offered a very different perspective.

Hurston begins the novel at the end of Janie’s life, but from there adopts a fairly traditional, linear structure. In the first scene, Janie returns to Eatonville from the Everglades and settles in to tell her good friend Pheoby Watson what occasioned

her return. In the telling, though, Janie reaches all the way back to her childhood, narrating the significant events in her life up to the moments before she and Pheoby reunited. Interestingly, the structure of the novel relies not just on chronology but on geography. Each of Janie's experiments with living takes place in different towns. Her arranged marriage to Logan Killicks is lived out in her hometown, her escape marriage to Joe Starks is lived out in Eatonville, and her love marriage to Tea Cake is lived out on the muck.

But the signal characteristic of the novel is its use of dialect. Hurston grew up in Eatonville herself, and her training as an anthropologist led her to the decision to represent her characters' speech as it actually sounded. This phonetically rendered dialect not only brings the story to life but highlights the uniqueness of the community. This difference, of course, creates some distance between her readers and her characters; it can be difficult at first to adjust to the accent of her writing. However, the use of dialect is also a test: Can we overcome the difference between our dialect and hers in order to recognize both the particularity and the universality of this Eatonville culture? Are we willing to do the work it takes to adapt to Hurston's dialect as we have done before to adapt to Shakespeare's dialect?

Themes

Discrimination

Under the pear tree, surrounded by bees and blooms, Janie is initiated into life and creation. She understands what it is to love and what it is that *keeps life going*. This "embrace" is to her, as to all adolescents, a "revelation," and she is left feeling utterly changed.

Confided with the sweet secret of life, Janie looks for a way to live out, to express, what she now knows. Nothing on her grandmother's property answers to her feelings, so she leans over the gate and kisses Johnny Taylor. Seeing this, her grandmother calls to her like the angry God of the Garden, and Janie walks out of the pollinated air and back into her grandmother's stale house. She awakes from the intoxication of what could be, what should be for her — and then the Word of her grandmother lays out the law of what is and, therefore, what will be:

"Yo' Nanny wouldn't harm a hair uh yo' head. She don't want nobody else to do it neither if she kin help it. Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd!"

Having witnessed Janie's initiation into love, Nanny is terrified. She feels it is her responsibility to protect Janie by educating her from love into fear. She must tell Janie that she is not, in fact, free. Though she may feel free, she bears a double burden: the burden of race and the burden of gender; the white man is the antagonist of her

race, which makes the black man the antagonist of her gender. This is the insidiously long and strong arm of slavery, reaching out to define Janie's generation through the trauma of her grandmother. Raised in slavery, Nanny wants to protect Janie from the terror of not having status, the helplessness of being property. Nanny's thinking is simple: if Janie has property, she can't be property; if she has property, she will have status, and slavery will not touch her.

Though they mark a certain "progress," for Janie the privileges of materialism and status are just slavery by another name. Janie wants to live life on her terms, the terms she learned under the pear tree. But that sweet moment of natural desire is overcome by the social pressure to conform.

Nanny reminds us how often good intentions, even those aimed towards liberation, go astray. More importantly, she reminds us *why* they do: that they do so when, despite our love, we fail to recognize the full humanity of the other and fail to value their difference. Nanny intends to be the author of Janie's liberation:

"You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even hated de way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me. Freedom found me wid a baby daughter in mah arms, so Ah said Ah'd take a broom and a cook-pot and throw up a highway through de wilderness for her. She would expound what Ah felt. But somehow she got lost offa de highway and next thing Ah knowed here you was in de world. So whilst Ah was tendin' you of nights Ah said Ah'd save de text for you. Ah been waitin' a long time, Janie, but nothin' Ah been through ain't too much if you just take a stand on high ground lak Ah dreamed."

There is much to admire in Nanny's determination and strong will. Having been raped and enslaved, treated like a non-being, she wants to preach a sermon about the worth of black women. Because she loves her children, she wants them to live the life that she was not afforded. She has a vision that her child, and then her grandchild, will "expound what Ah felt" and sit "on high." In this vision, however, she fails to *see* Janie. What she does is try to define Janie.

So Nanny forces her into a loveless marriage to Logan Killicks, which Janie escapes through another loveless marriage to Joe Starks. Joe treats her like the "high-sittin'" lady her grandmother wanted her to be, but both the "privileges" and the limitations he places on her exclude her from the life she wants to live and prevent her from expressing her personality. Joe's sexism and his dedication to social status both keep Janie from living her life.

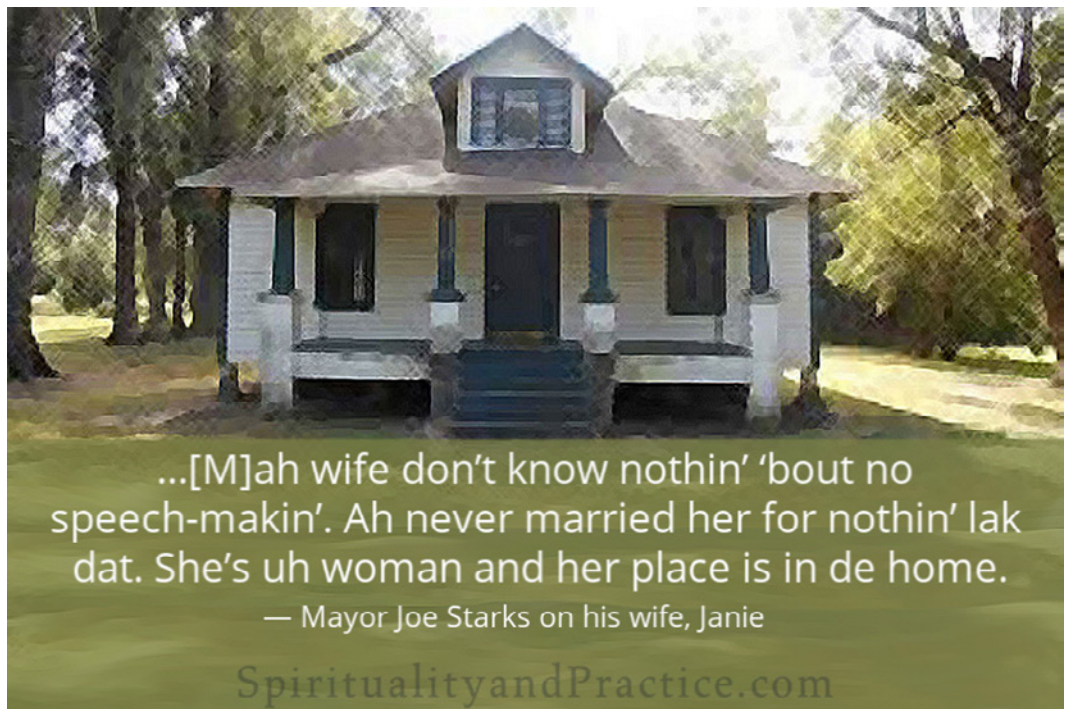
As a woman, “her place is in de home,” and being the mayor’s wife, “makes uh big woman outa” her; her status makes her “somethin’ different,” someone who should not go “off in all dat mess uh commonness.” Joe, like Nanny before him, decides what Janie ought to value and what Janie ought to consider a privilege. Janie hates to sell in the store and figure prices for bulk items, “But Joe kept saying that she could do it if she wanted to and he wanted her to use her privileges.” What Joe defines as a privilege and a form of freedom is, for Janie, “the rock she was battered against.”

The ultimate symbol of the discrimination against which Janie must defend herself is the head-rag Joe makes her wear. It symbolizes not only discrimination based on gender but also discrimination based on color. Hurston’s honesty about colorism within the African-American community was one of the reasons black luminaries and critics dismissed *Their Eyes Were Watching God* when it was published. They felt that revealing the divisions within the community was not helpful in the fight against racism and for equality. But colorism—a system that assigns value and beauty according to how light one’s skin is—was and is a reality in African-American communities.

Janie’s head-scarf symbolizes this tension and its implications for those seen as “privileged.” Janie is considered beautiful, even as a child, due to the lightness of her skin and her smooth, flowing hair. These make her a particular target for the envy of women and the desire of men, so, out of jealousy, Joe makes her hide her hair in a head-rag whenever she is in the store.

That hated head-rag is the first thing to go after Joe dies. Janie never puts it on again, but colorism continues to dog her. Mrs. Turner’s rabid colorism almost drives a wedge between Janie and Tea Cake and certainly leads to Tea Cake beating Janie, which he does in order to assert ownership before Mrs. Turner’s brothers comes to visit. Hurston makes it clear that “[Mrs. Turner] didn’t cling to Janie Woods the woman. She paid homage to Janie’s Caucasian characteristics as such. And when she was with Janie she had a feeling of transmutation, as if she herself had become whiter and with straighter hair”

Mrs. Turner’s colorism is a form of internalized racism, the belief that white skin and flowing hair is the apex of beauty. The long arm of slavery strikes again — reaching past generations, through black-owned towns, and into the muck!



...[M]ah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin'. Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home.

— Mayor Joe Starks on his wife, Janie

SpiritualityandPractice.com

Discussion: Discrimination

THINK

1. There is often a thin line between privilege and limitation. Janie is told to enjoy the privilege of sitting high, of working with her brain rather than her body, of having “Caucasian” features. But each of those also places limits on Janie’s life. What other examples can you find — in the book or in your communities — of the thin line between privilege and limitation?

REFLECT

2. In what ways have you been asked to live out other people’s missed or unavailable opportunities? What was your response to these expectations? Were you aware of them at once or only upon reflection? How did they change the course of your life?

PRACTICE

3. There may be someone in your life — maybe it’s an other, maybe it’s you — who feels limited by assumptions made on the basis of gender, race, age, nationality, etc. List some concrete actions that can be taken to change the narrative for yourself or someone else so that life may be lived with greater authenticity.

Love

Joe's death frees Janie from the intimate discrimination she experienced at the hands of both of her husbands. Reflecting on her life after Joe's funeral, Janie admits that she "hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love" and asserts that "Most humans didn't love one another nohow, and this mislove was so strong that even common blood couldn't overcome it all the time."

Much of what we call hate begins as love that misses the mark, love that gets twisted and then twists others. In fact, in this novel and for Janie, discrimination and exclusion are the opposites of love. Discrimination suffocates love. Janie cannot develop love for Logan and Joe because they bring issues of status into their intimate relationships with her. She loves Tea Cake so fiercely precisely because he does not. No one else sees Tea Cake's value, but Janie does, and she sees that Tea Cake sees her. They reflect one another. This kind of equality — truly seeing the other — is the basis for love of all kinds, and for Janie and Tea Cake, it provides the basis for one of the richest and most modern love stories in American literature. Their relationship is not perfect, but Janie's insistence that they be partners makes a strong womanist statement that has stood the test of time.

Love can create its own world, and that world can either reflect or resist the wider world in which it exists. Tea Cake makes Janie feel the way she felt the day she discovered the forces of creation, and she fights to protect that feeling from the pressures and expectations regarding gender and class. With much hard work that always feels well worth the doing, Janie and Tea Cake establish a love that is resistant to the arbitrary rules of the outside world, a relationship in which status has no status.

There are a few hurdles, of course. Resistance to social norms is not easy, even (or especially) when the prize is love. Tea Cake reluctantly "classes off" Janie in Jacksonville, and his first time is his last. He takes her money and, feeling rich, decides to throw a big party for railroad workers and their wives. Echoing Joe, he claims that he didn't come back for her because "Dem wuzn't no high mucky mucks ... You ain't usetuh folks lak dat and Ah was skeered you might git all mad and quit me for takin' you 'mongst 'em."

The difference between this incident and Joe's classing her off is not commented on by the narrator, but powerfully apparent in the dialogue. In conflict with Joe, Janie "didn't change her mind but she agreed with her mouth" because he "wanted her submission" and would "keep on fighting until he felt he had it." With Tea Cake, Janie is able to use her voice, and when she asserts her needs, intimacy grows between them:

"Looka heah, Tea Cake, if you ever go off from me and have a good time lak dat and then come back heah tellin' me how nice Ah is, Ah specks tuh kill yuh dead. You heah me?"

"So you aims tuh partake wid everything, hunh?"

"Yeah, Tea Cake, don't keer what it is."

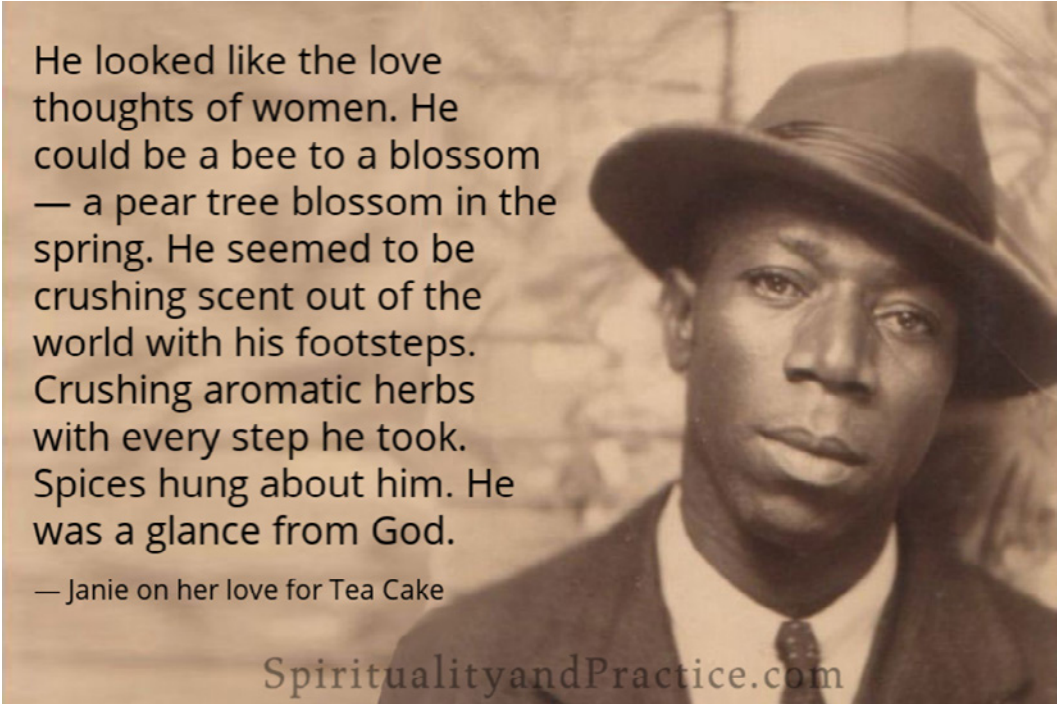
"Dat's all Ah wants tuh know. From now on you'se mah wife and mah woman and everything else in de world Ah needs."

"Ah hope so."

Tea Cake does not close off in order to protect some misguided and culturally acceptable manifestation of masculinity. Neither does he demand that Janie take on specific roles that will “keep her in her place” and make him feel more secure. He changes his notions about the involvement of gender and class considerations in their intimate relationship; in fact, he seems relieved to. He opens up and lets Janie into his soul not just as his wife and his woman but as “everything else in de world” he needs.

While it takes this conflict and frank conversation to jar Tea Cake out of his masculinist class assumptions and realize he can be natural with Janie, Janie requires no such convincing. Even though her grandmother, Logan, and Joe had all tried their hardest to disabuse her of her unsocialized vision of love, and even though Janie herself worries over the damage their “mislove” might do to her, she remains unconditioned in her heart; her instincts remain intact. She tries weakly to dismiss Tea Cake like her friends do, but she knows he represents springtime: “She couldn’t make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom — a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God.”

Though Janie imagines their love in nearly prelapsarian imagery, what makes Janie and Tea Cake’s story so compelling is its contemporary sensibilities around equality and partnership. Natural as Janie feels these qualities to be, she and Tea Cake each must fight to restore and reclaim them from the grips of their society. Their success in doing so and then living into the joy of discovering one another every day is the essence of their love story.



He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom — a pear tree blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. Crushing aromatic herbs with every step he took. Spices hung about him. He was a glance from God.

— Janie on her love for Tea Cake

SpiritualityandPractice.com

Discussion: Love

THINK

1. Read the first paragraph of Chapter 17. How does this violent passage affect your feelings about Janie and Tea Cake's partnership? I have described their relationship as one that strives for equality. Does Tea Cake's violence invalidate this interpretation? What about Janie's apparently passive response? How does Tea Cake's reasoning — "Ah beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss." — allow us to contextualize the violence? Why do you think Hurston provides (through Janie) much commentary on the ways that Logan and Joe control Janie but very little critique of Tea Cake's violence?

REFLECT

2. With whom do you share a natural intimacy, an authentic and equal partnership? How did you manage to make that connection in a world saturated with obstacles to authenticity?

PRACTICE

3. So often when we hear the word "love," we think of either romantic love or familial love, but religions and wisdom traditions throughout time have emphasized love of neighbor and love for strangers. Either individually or — even better — with a group of friends or a community group, devise a way to welcome the strangers in your midst.

Experience

Hurston's ability to imagine a love that reads so real far surpasses that of other great writers of the early twentieth century (think of her great contemporaries John Steinbeck and F. Scott Fitzgerald). This talent is an effect not simply of her status as a woman writer but of her dedication to a womanist worldview.

It would be a shame to read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as, ultimately, about romantic love, even if you deemed it exemplary in that aspect. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* tells the story of a woman who learns early to *love the world* — and as soon as she does, learns that her race, her gender, and her color throw up a wall between the world and her. Janie's greatest love is for the world beyond these walls, and she keeps precious and protected that part of her that knows "it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her."

The event that first frees Janie to embrace the world is not the arrival of Tea Cake but the departure of Joe. Joe's death makes her, finally, an independent woman. Her inheritance is both means and wisdom. She has the general store, yes, but she also has a store of knowledge: she knows better what captivity looks like and is certain not to mistake a "him" for a "horizon" ever again. Essentially, Joe's death finally places Janie in a position from which she does not need to *escape*. She ran from Nanny and Logan and ended up "safe" with Joe. A widow with money, wisdom, and self-awareness, Janie can now run *to* someone or something, not *from* someone or something.

Janie pauses after Joe's death. She grieves for him very little in her heart, but his death is a watershed moment for her psyche. It is almost as if Joe's death confirms Nanny's death. Nanny was, of course, already in the ground before Joe died; nevertheless she lived on through Joe because that marriage was a domino that fell from Nanny's fear.

With Joe dead, the dominos stop falling, Janie stops making panicked decisions, and as a single woman, she settles into the anger that will free her, the anger that will tear down the walls her grandmother first threw up:

“She hated her grandmother and had hidden it from herself all these years under a cloak of pity. She had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*; it was important to all the world that she should find them and they find her. But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things* Here Nanny had taken the biggest thing God ever made, the horizon — for no matter how far a person can go the horizon is still way beyond you — and pinched it in to such a little bit of a thing that she could tie it about her granddaughter’s neck tight enough to choke her. She hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. Most humans didn’t love one another nohow, and this mislove was so strong that even common blood couldn’t overcome it all the time. She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell. Been set for still-bait.”

Janie’s ambition for the horizon is a desire to live on terms other than those handed down by the long arm of slavery that molded Nanny’s thinking. Notice in the above passage how Janie defines herself outside of the desire for things, outside participation in the marketplace, outside the objectification that would make her not only a salesperson in the store but an adornment to lure in customers.

Janie’s experience of the horizon through the companionship of Tea Cake keeps her life and the novel from being a tragedy. With Tea Cake, she learns checkers, participates in the life of the store as she had always wanted, goes fishing at midnight, wears overalls, and works in the muck. In other words, she plays, socializes, and resists social norms — all the things Nanny and her dominoes had tried to deny her. And, of course, with Tea Cake, she also experiences violence, a disastrous hurricane, the dangers of Jim Crow, and rabies-induced madness. It would be too flip to write off the effect of all of that on Janie, but it would also be wrong to add it all up and decide that her life was tragic.

Tragedy would have been the continued fall of Nanny’s dominos and the continued distance of the horizon. Life, for Janie, is the horizon, and she lives towards it just as she waits on that hurricane in the muck, with eyes open, watching God:

“In a little wind-lull, Tea Cake touched Janie and said, ‘Ah reckon you wish now you had of stayed in yo’ big house ‘way from such as dis, don’t yuh?’

“‘Naw.’

“‘Naw?’

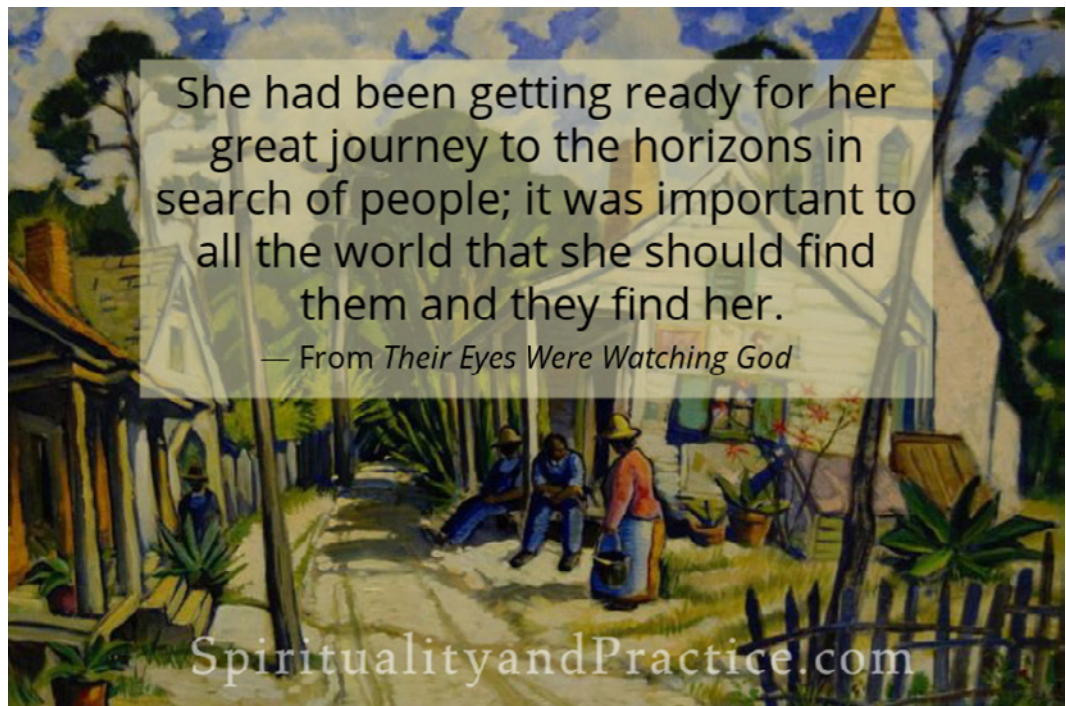
“‘Yeah, naw. People don’t die till dey time come nohow, don’t keer where you at. Ah’m wid mah husband in uh storm, dat’s all.’

“‘Thanky, Ma’am. But ‘sposing you wuz tuh die, now. You wouldn’t git mad at me for draggin’ yuh heah?’

“Naw. We been tuhgether round two years. If you kin see de light at daybreak, you don’t keer if you die at dusk. It’s so many people never seen de light at all. Ah wuz fumblin’ round and God opened de door.’ ”

Janie’s perspective is very clear. She means to live life. She means to be true to her own sixteen-year-old sage, the one who grew to wisdom under the pear tree and thought, “Oh to be a pear tree — *any* tree in bloom! With kissing bees singing at the beginning of the world! ... She had glossy leaves and bursting buds and she wanted to struggle with life but it seemed to elude her.” Yes, what Janie wants is simply for life not to elude her. Struggle and love — both mean she is living the life she wants. There’s nothing tragic about it.

Janie ends her life as fisher, not bait. She caught love and a hurricane both. That is the way. Back in Eatonville, in her second-story room, she looks out the window: “Here was peace. She pulled in her horizon like a great fish net. Pulled it from around the waist of the world and draped it over her shoulder. So much of life in its meshes! She called in her soul to come and see.”



Discussion: Experience

THINK

1. Janie tells Pheoby that there are “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.” It is easy to see that Janie experiences life for herself. It is not as easy to interpret the role of God in her life. What is that role? Why title the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*? What sort of theological statement is Hurston making? (You might look at chapter 18 where the title appears as narration.)



2. After Janie reflects on her life, Pheoby responds, “ ‘Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this.’ ” Who has inspired you to breathe more life into your relationships or your work? What effect did this have on your life?



3. Do something this week that you always thought would be fun but have never done, perhaps because it did not seem age-appropriate, gender-appropriate, or class-appropriate.

NOTES:

Other Reading Guides for the We the People Book Club:

The Grapes of Wrath by John Steinbeck

The Underground Railroad by Colson Whitehead

A Good Man Is Hard to Find by Flannery O'Connor

Selected Poems of Walt Whitman and Maya Angelou

Tenth of December by George Saunders

Gilead by Marilynne Robinson

Puddnhead Wilson by Mark Twain

The Fire Next Time by James Baldwin and

Between the World and Me by Ta-Nehisi Coates

Ceremony by Leslie Marmon Silko

The Sympathizer by Viet Thanh Nguyen

The Partly-Cloudy Patriot by Sarah Vowell

Their Eyes Were Watching God by Zora Neale Hurston

Download Reading Guides at [SpiritualityandPractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/WethePeopleBookClub)



The **We the People Book Club** is a year-long program contemplating America's past and possibilities as presented by classic and contemporary literary voices. It is a part of The Practicing Democracy Project, a collaboration between **The Center for Spirituality & Practice** and the **Fetzer Institute**.

The Practicing Democracy Project offers resources to strengthen and deepen the way we live out democracy. These spiritual practices help us do the work both in ourselves and in relationship with our neighbors and communities.

Some practices enhance or support the essential civic virtues and qualities of American democracy, such as respect and service. Others help us deal with problems and obstacles that depress democracy, such as anger and rigid thinking.

The Project offers spiritual practices and resources for all of us — from advocacy and civic organizations to congregations and companies.

For more information on the Project, visit PracticingDemocracy.net.

All commentaries, reading guide questions, and practice suggestions for the We the People Book Club are copyright 2018 by Spirituality & Practice (**[SpiritualityandPractice.com](https://www.spiritualityandpractice.com)**), a multifaith website presenting resources for people on spiritual journeys. Julia Davis, a 2018-2019 Fellow with the Practicing Democracy Project, wrote this Book Club Reading Guide.

Their Eyes Were Watching God book cover design by Robin Billardello. Cover photograph copyright Frank Krahmer/Getty Images.

