Their Eyes Were Watching God: Crash Course Literature 301

Crash Course: Literature
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Hi I'm John Green, this is Crash Course Literature, and your eyes are watching me, but their eyes are watching God.

I'd like to apologize to my friends and family for that joke.

Anyway, today we're discussing Zora Neale Hurston's brilliant novel of a woman's self-realization and empowerment, or possibly a cautionary tale about the importance of the rabies vaccine, your call really.

Great books can stand up to multiple readings. Anyway, today we're going to be discussing a little bit of Hurston's biography.

Mr. Green, Mr. Green, no no no no no! You said that authors' biographies don't matter because the author is irrelevant, only the text matters!

Oh, Me From The Past, how I haven't missed you.

So, OK. When we're studying literature, we're not just thinking about texts. We're also thinking about how to think about texts. Like, should we read a novel in its historical context, or consider the life of its author, or only look at the book itself? In considering a book's meaning should we privilege character, or plot, or symbols, or language? And also how do our own experiences and biases shape our readings?

Now, I often argue against focusing too much on the life of an author, no least because I am one, and don't enjoy people peering too much into my personal history. But in this particular case, we are going to consider the life of Zora Neale Hurston, both because it's important to take many different perspectives when trying to learn to read critically and because her life was uncommonly important to her masterpiece.

So, Zora Neale Hurston was born in Alabama in 1891, but her family soon moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black incorporated township in the United States, and the model for the town of the same name in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. You know what? Let's just go to the Thought Bubble.

Hurston described Eatonville as "the city of five lakes, three croquet courts, 300 brown skins, 300 good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jailhouse." After her mother died and her father remarried, she was sent away to school, but her father stopped paying her tuition. As a teenager, Hurston did a bunch of odd jobs and then signed on as a maid for the lead singer of a traveling theatrical troupe. And a decade later, she surfaced in Baltimore, erased 10 years from her age, and finished high school.

She enrolled in Howard University, then transferred to Barnard College. And after graduating in 1928, she began coursework for a PhD in anthropology at Columbia University, while also contributing to the Harlem Renaissance with our old friend Langston Hughes.

Hurston wrote short stories, plays, a few novels, two highly regarded works of anthropology, and an award-winning autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, some of which she almost certainly made up. But her books never sold that well during her lifetime, and in later life, she returned to Florida and worked as a substitute teacher and a maid.

She died of a heart attack in 1960 and was buried in an unmarked grave. In 1973 the novelist Alice Walker found that grave and paid for a headstone inscribed: "Zora Neale Hurston: A Genius of the South." Walker then wrote an article about it in *Ms. Magazine*, which helped spur renewed interest in Hurston's work. According to her autobiography, Hurston wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks, quote, "under internal pressure" while on a Guggenheim Fellowship to Haiti to study the local folklore.

Oh man, seven weeks! I hope that's one of the lies in her autobiography.

But actually, Hurston didn't think much of the novel. She wrote, "I wish that I could write it again...I regret all of my books." Thanks Thought Bubble.

So one last biographical note: The internal pressure she mentions probably refers to an unhappy love affair with a much younger Columbia student who wanted her to give up her career to become a pastor's wife, which wasn't going to happen.

Ok, now to the book. So, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* straddles a couple of genres. It's part bildungsroman, but it can also be read as a romance, in which the heroine, Janie Mae Crawford finally finds perfect love with her third husband Tea Cake. Well, it's perfect love until Tea Cake is bitten by a rabid dog in the middle of a hurricane, and then Janie has to shoot him. It's classic love story.

The book initially received mixed reviews, including a pretty damning once from the great novelist Richard Wright, who wrote that it wasn't political enough: "The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought... Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatsoever to move in the direction of serious fiction... Her characters eat and laugh and cry and work and kill; they swing like a pendulum eternally on that safe and narrow orbit in which America likes to see the Negro live: Between laughter and tears." Wow.

So I think that what Wright missed in the novel is that, as a later generation of feminists would insist, the personal is political. Their Eyes Were Watching God has a few moments of explicit political commentary, like in the aftermath of the hurricane when the white men order black workers to bury the white corpses in coffins and throw the black ones in a hole with quicklime. But this book isn't a story about politics or race as much as it is about Janie's emancipation - or if you read the book skeptically, her inability to emancipate herself. Which involves politics and race.

As Hurston wrote in her autobiography, she didn't really want to write about what she called the "Race Problem." Quote: "My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color." But, of course, Hurston also understood that in the America she was writing about, race was part of what made a man or a woman do such and so.

The novel was also initially criticized for its use of vernacular speech and nonstandard spelling. As you can see reading it, Hurston uses a very different authorial voice from the voice that she gives to Janie. Like the narrator's first words are: "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 same 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." Whereas Janie's first words are, "Aw, pretty good, Ah'm tryin' to soak some uh de tiredness and de dirt outta mah feet."

So Hurston isn't trying to brag about how much smarter and better educated she is than her characters. Don't forget her academic background was in anthropology, and a lot of her field work involved going to communities in the South and the Caribbean to record local songs and stories. And she placed great value in how people expressed themselves: the humor, the inventiveness, the liveliness of language, and her work can be read as a tribute to that.

But the different kinds of speech are also, as the scholar Henry Louis Gates points out, a way of acknowledging that there is often a gap between what characters think and how they express themselves. As Gates writes, "[Hurston's] is a rhetoric of division, rather than a fiction of psychological or cultural unity."

But still, just because the words the characters use are simple and sometimes misunderstood, that doesn't mean there isn't a great depth of feeling behind them. And in fact, I'd argue that Janie's intellectual sophistication matches the author's, even if the voice is different.

So the story begins with a 40-year-old Janie Mae Crawford returning to Eatonville and telling the story of her life to her best friend Phoebe. Janie grows up as the pet of a white family for which her grandmother worked. Her grandmother, a former slave, marries Janie off to a much older man at 16.

Both Janie and her mother were conceived in rape, so when Janie shows signs of sexual awakening her grandmother wants her to get married immediately to the richest man around.

A lot of this sexual awakening actually takes place while Janie is lying, dreaming under a pear tree and sees quote: "The ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight." Which is pretty much as sexy as botany gets.

But Janie is disgusted by her first husband and it doesn't matter that he owns sixty acres of land and has an organ in his parlor. His feet smell and he's no pear tree in general. So when she meets another man, Joe Starks, also somewhat older, but more stylish and a smooth talker, she runs away with him.

Joe takes her to Eatonville where he soon becomes mayor, and Janie gets to enjoy the high status of being "Mrs. Mayor". But he belittles her in front of others, beats her at least once, and in one of the book's great metaphorical gestures, Joe frees a mule, but he never frees Janie.

And then after Joe's death, Janie takes up with a much younger man called Tea Cake. Tea Cake isn't rich and he isn't powerful, but he offers Janie a lot of what's been missing from her earlier marriages, FUN. He makes her laugh, he plays songs for her on the guitar, he teaches her how to drive, he brings her to the Everglades because quote: "Folks don't do nothin' down dere but make money and fun and foolishness." And they have a great time! Until that hurricane and the rabid dog and Tea Cake going crazy and Janie having to shoot him to save herself while he's busy biting at her arm.

After being acquitted of Tea Cake's murder, she throws him a lavish funeral and then heads home to Eatonville in her muddy overalls, happy because as she tells Phoebe, "she's been to the horizon and back." Which is a fascinating phrase, because the horizon, of course, definitionally is a place that you can't get to, let alone get back from. It's one of the most discussed lines in the book, some take it to mean that she has finally achieved her own self-hood, others take it to mean that she's about to die of rabies.

Once the book was rediscovered, early critics following Alice Walker mainly chose the empowerment reading. Walker even wrote a poem that begins, "I love the way Janie Crawford left her husbands." This reading suggests that Janie eventually comes into her own voice and her own authority and that it's separate from her husbands. She doesn't get it from her first husband's wealth, or from her second husband's power, but instead through love.

And then in recounting her life story to Phoebe, she's learned to speak for herself, to put herself at the center of her own story, and it's suggested that Phoebe might become empowered in turn. Or at least a little. Phoebe says that she's become 10 feet higher just from listening to Janie.

But in the last couple decades, there's been some push-back against those earlier readings. Some critics note that Janie is often more passive than active. I mean she only leaves one husband, the other two just have a way of dying. I mean I guess she had agency at the end of her relationship with Tea Cake, but only in the sense that she was choosing between killing him and dying of rabies.

And also, if were gonna say that Janie establishes authority over herself by telling her own story, then we need to acknowledge that Janie herself discounts the power of the spoken word. I mean in one of my favorite lines of the book, she tells Phoebe that "you've gotta go there to know there."

And there are also questions about Tea Cake as a romantic hero. I mean yes, he seems like a fun guy, but he takes Janie's money without asking and uses it to throw a party that he doesn't invite her to. Later, he beats her out of a desire to prove his ownership of her. So life with Tea Cake has a deeply ugly side, and it's worth remembering that Tea Cake has to die before Janie can return to Eatonville on her own terms.

I'm not gonna try to argue for one reading over another because I think what makes *Their Eyes Were Watching God* such a major American novel is it's complexity. It doesn't offer an easy answer for how a woman with Janie's life can achieve complete independence or full self-hood. I mean, her last thoughts of the novel are not "Finally! I have achieved self-hood!" Instead, she's thinking about Tea Cake.

Will she go through life alone? Will she find another man? Or will she remain wedded to Tea Cake's memory? Or, because of his dying rabid gesture biting her in the arm, there are some very skeptical critics who think it won't be long before Janie dies herself.

And yet, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is one of the very few novels of this period that is centered around a woman speaking for herself and achieving an understanding of her own life, complete with the feet and the mules and the hurricanes, all of it. And it's that richness and complexity that make's the novel so special.

Thanks for watching, and watch out for rabid dogs, also sexy pear trees.

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