



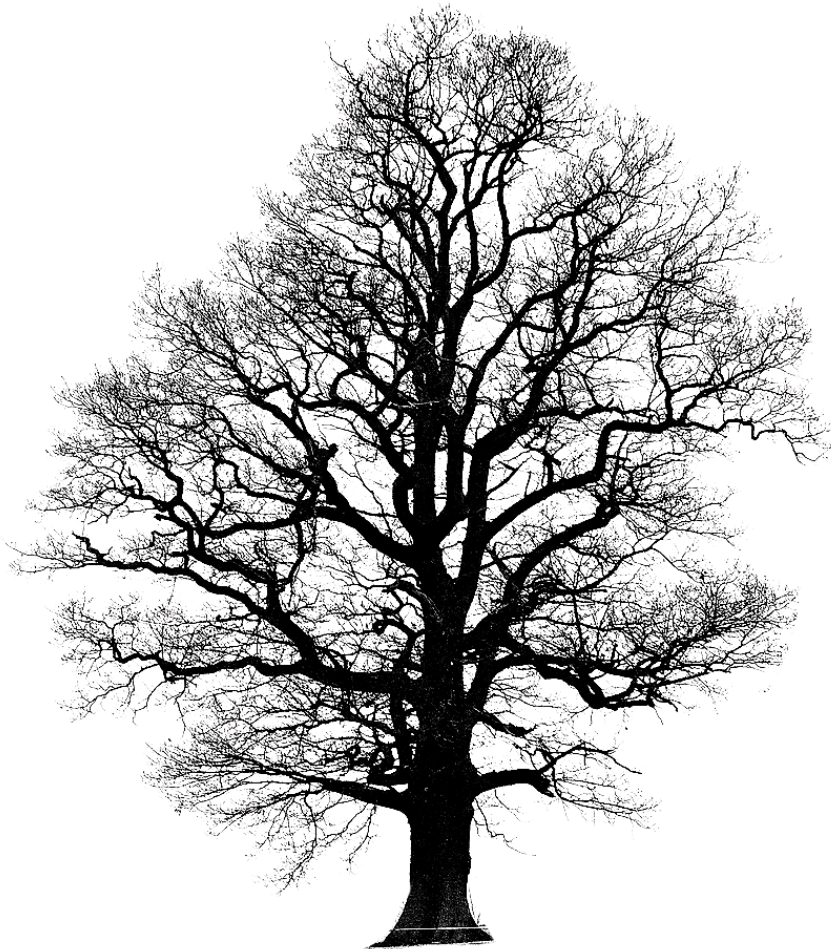
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NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS

# Reader Resources

## **Their Eyes Were Watching God**

by Zora Neale Hurston



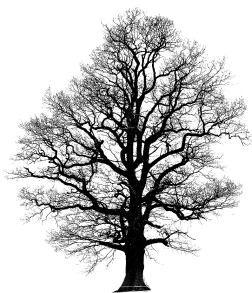
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## Preface

To call Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* an "African American feminist classic" may be an accurate statement—it is certainly a frequent statement—but it is a misleadingly narrow and rather dull way to introduce a vibrant and achingly human novel. The syncopated beauty of Hurston's prose, her remarkable gift for comedy, the sheer visceral terror of the book's climax, all transcend any label that critics have tried to put on this remarkable work. First published amid controversy in 1937, then rescued from obscurity four decades later, the novel narrates Janie Crawford's ripening from a vibrant, but voiceless, teenage girl into a woman with her finger on the trigger of her own destiny. Although Hurston wrote the novel in only seven weeks, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* breathes and bleeds a whole life's worth of urgent experience.



“The wind came back with triple fury, and put out the light for the last time... They seemed to be staring at the dark, but their eyes were watching God.”

## What is the NEA Big Read?

A program of the National Endowment for the Arts, NEA Big Read broadens our understanding of our world, our communities, and ourselves through the joy of sharing a good book. Managed by Arts Midwest, this initiative offers grants to support innovative community reading programs designed around a single book.

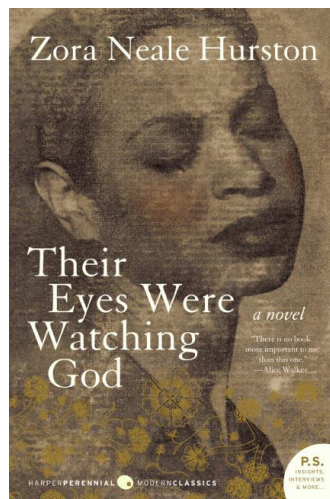
A great book combines enrichment with enchantment. It awakens our imagination and enlarges our humanity. It can offer harrowing insights that somehow console and comfort us. Whether you're a regular reader already or making up for lost time, thank you for joining the NEA Big Read.



# About the Book

## Introduction to the Book

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) begins with *our* eyes fixed on a woman who returns from burying the dead. Written in only seven weeks while on a Guggenheim Fellowship in Haiti, Zora Neale Hurston's novel chronicles the journey of Janie Mae Crawford from her grandmother's plantation shack to Logan Killicks' farm, to all-black Eatonville to the Everglades—until a tragedy brings her back to Eatonville. From this vantage point, Janie narrates her life story to her best friend, Pheoby Watson, satisfying the "oldest human longing—self-revelation."



Forced to marry for money at sixteen, Janie at first believes that love automatically comes with marriage. Unable to endure her mule-like servitude and the desecration of her dreams, she spontaneously leaves Logan for Joe Starks, a handsome, ambitious man determined to put her on a pedestal once he becomes mayor of Eatonville. After enduring a mostly joyless twenty-year marriage to him, Janie finally meets a young, uneducated wastrel named Tea Cake. With him she thinks she can find genuine love for the first time, but fate intervenes, and Janie fears she may have to choose between his safety and her own.

Although the novel is not an autobiography, Hurston once reflected that it is, at heart, a love story, inspired by "the real love affair of [her] life." She also fictionalized another important incident in her life in the novel: In 1929, Hurston survived a five-day hurricane in the Bahamas, getting herself and another family out of a house moments before it began to collapse.

Hurston's conviction that black culture is valuable, unique, and worthy of preservation comes through in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* via its harmonious blend of folklore and black idiom. In Janie Mae Crawford, Hurston rejects nineteenth and early twentieth-century stereotypes for women and creates a protagonist who though silenced for most of her life ultimately finds her own voice.

# About the Author

## Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)

Now lauded as the intellectual and spiritual foremother to a generation of black and women writers, Zora Neale Hurston's books were all out of print when she died in poverty and obscurity in 1960.

Born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston and her family soon moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black incorporated town in the United States. Her parents were John Hurston, a carpenter and Baptist preacher who served several terms as mayor of Eatonville, and Lucy Potts Hurston, a schoolteacher before she raised eight children. Her mother's death and father's remarriage led the outspoken Hurston to leave her hometown at fourteen and become a wardrobe girl in an all-white traveling Gilbert and Sullivan troupe.

She completed her education at Morgan Academy in Baltimore and Howard University in Washington, DC, supporting herself with a variety of jobs from manicurist to maid. Heeding her mother's encouragement to "jump at de sun," she arrived in New York in January 1925 with \$1.50 in her pocket.

Later that year, as the only black scholar at Barnard College, Hurston studied with Dr. Franz Boas, often called the father of American anthropology. His encouragement, combined with a stipend of \$200 a month and a car from patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, allowed Hurston to complete much of her anthropological work in the American South. This lifelong passion to collect, record, and broadcast the everyday idiomatic communication of her people would inform four novels, two collections of folklore, an autobiography, and dozens of stories, articles, plays, and essays.

This ambition also led to tension in her romantic life. Hurston married and divorced three husbands and, at age forty-four, fell in love with twenty-three-year-old Percy Punter. When he asked her to forsake her career to marry him, she refused because she "had things clawing inside [her] that must be said." She wrote *Their Eyes Were*



Zora Neale Hurston, 1934  
(Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)

*Watching God*, trying in its pages "to embalm all the tenderness of [her] passion for him."

Despite the novel's 1937 publication, Hurston's struggle for financial security continued throughout the 1940s. Once, she even pawned her typewriter. The largest royalty any of her books ever earned was \$943.75. Since most of her books were published during the Depression, she paid her bills through story and essay sales, book advances, and two Works Progress Administration jobs with the Federal Writers' Project.

In the 1950s Hurston remained devoted to writing, but white publishers rejected her books, in part because the "New Negro" had fallen out of fashion. Other complications followed, and her health seriously declined. Her anticommunist essays and denunciation of school integration increasingly alienated her from other black writers. After a stroke in 1959, she reluctantly entered a welfare home, where she died penniless on January 28, 1960. Her grave remained unmarked until 1973.

## Hurston's Death...

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in New York on September 18, 1937. Less than two weeks later, Richard Wright (later the author of *Native Son* and *Black Boy*) notoriously condemned the novel for carrying "no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy." He believed that the novel's lack of anger was one of its greatest faults, as well as its "minstrel technique that makes 'the white folks' laugh."

While Wright claimed that Hurston pandered to whites, Alain Locke said she oversimplified Southern black experience under the segregationist system known as Jim Crow. In January 1938, Locke's infamous review publicly asked Hurston when she would begin to write "social document fiction." This response so wounded her that she later regretted writing the novel at all.

But critics who felt that Hurston's fiction undermined their attempts to combat racism misunderstood her aesthetic. As she once wrote in a letter, "I tried . . . not to pander to the folks who expect a clown and a villain in every Negro. Neither did I want to pander to those 'race' people among us who see nothing but perfection in all of us." Holding to this vision would cost her, financially and otherwise, right up until her death in 1960.

A decade later, writer Alice Walker was researching a story on voodoo. She came across Hurston's *Mules and Men* (1935), which ultimately led Walker to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the book she regards as the most important of her life.

Posing as Hurston's niece, Walker traveled to Eatonville, where she endured many sets of contradictory directions and found her way at last to the cemetery: the Garden of Heavenly Rest, on 17th Street. Even there, no one was certain of the grave's location. The weeds were so thick that Walker feared snakes might be lurking underfoot. She finally found the spot, and she purchased and commissioned a proper stone to mark Hurston's grave.

## ...and Resurrection

In the mid to late 1970s, three important publications launched the Hurston revival that continues to this day.

In the March 1975 issue of *Ms. Magazine*, Walker published her article about finding Hurston's grave, titled "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston." Literary scholar Robert Hemenway had already been working on the first Hurston biography, which came out in 1977. And in 1979, Walker highlighted fourteen prose works in the first-ever Hurston anthology.

Hurston's posthumous literary revival also had much to do with revisions to the literary canon then taking place in university English departments across the United States. The emergence of feminism and multiculturalism has helped bring her to the center of the literary stage. But the strongest voice in Hurston's favor has been her own. How fitting that the protagonist readers most often associate with Zora Neale Hurston is Janie Crawford—a woman who not only survives against long odds, but triumphs.

# Historical and Literary Context

## The Life and Times of Zora Neale Hurston

### 1890s

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- 1891: Zora Neale Hurston born January 15 in Notasulga, Alabama.
- Jim Crow laws codified.
- 1897: John Hurston, Zora's father, is elected mayor of Eatonville, Florida.

### 1900s

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- 1904: Hurston's mother dies; her father remarries months later.
- First anti-lynching bill introduced in Congress. It never gets out of committee.
- W. E. B. DuBois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*.

### 1910s

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- Hurston leaves Florida, lives in Tennessee, and finishes her high school education in Baltimore.
- World War I begins in 1914, and ends in 1919.
- 1915: Ku Klux Klan reborn in Georgia.

### 1920s

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- 1920: Nineteenth Amendment gives women the right to vote.
- 1925: Hurston receives degree from Howard University and moves to New York.
- Busboy Langston Hughes sneaks poet Vachel Lindsay three poems and hangs up his dishrag for good.

### 1930s

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- 1934: Lippincott publishes Hurston's first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, followed by *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in 1937.
- During the worst years of the Depression, over 25% of the labor force is unemployed.
- 1935: FDR launches Federal Writers' Project.

### 1940s

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- Hurston writes *Dust Tracks on a Road* in California.
- America enters World War II after attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The war ends in 1945.
- 1947: Jackie Robinson debuts for the Brooklyn Dodgers.
- 1948: President Truman signs orders to end military segregation and federal hiring discrimination.

### 1950s

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- *Miami Herald* article "Famous Negro Author Working as a Maid" embarrasses Hurston.
- 1954: In *Brown v. Board of Education*, school segregation is ruled unconstitutional.
- 1955: Rosa Parks refuses to give up her bus seat to a white man.

### 1960s

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- 1960: Hurston dies on January 28, of "hypertensive heart disease," and is buried in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery.
- 1963: Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers "I Have A Dream" speech.
- 1964: Congress passes Civil Rights Act.

## Harlem Renaissance: The Era

F. Scott Fitzgerald coined the term "Jazz Age" to reflect an era of ragtime, jazz, stylish automobiles, and uninhibited young women with bobbed hair. But this decade also marked the Harlem Renaissance—the artistic, political, and cultural birth of the "New Negro" in literature and art.

Scholars rightly have trouble with the term "Harlem Renaissance." Although the great northward migration led many African Americans to Harlem, a similar renewal was also happening in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, especially through the influence of Louis Armstrong's and Duke Ellington's jazz. Most of the literary Harlemites were not from New York, nor did they depict Harlem life in their writing—least of all in their fiction. In addition, the decade is not really a renaissance so much as a creative outpouring, a reframing of how Negro artists chose to convey their African and American heritage. This stance was no longer one of apology or defeat, but rather of assertion and pride.

The beginning of the period most closely coincides with Benjamin Brawley's 1918 book *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States*. Alain Locke's 1925 anthology *The New Negro* later synthesized a Negro vision of all the arts, featuring sections on art, music, dance, sculpture, drama, and poetry. He argued that "for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place,' or 'helped up,' to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden."

Despite still-flourishing Jim Crow laws, many white New York writers, publishers, and patrons rallied behind Negro writers and intellectuals, who in turn vociferously protested injustice and racism. As a result, an environment was created where many talented black painters, sculptors, singers, and writers flourished *as artists*—something new for the grandchildren of American slavery.

Harlem nightclubs and salons also provided opportunities for musicians, actors, writers, and poets to mingle, especially at the mixed parties hosted by Carl Van Vechten. At these gatherings, Hurston first met longtime friends such as Fannie Hurst and Langston Hughes. As a popular member of the Harlem elite, Hurston was known for her Eatonville folktales, her radical behavior, her controversial opinions, and her audacious hats.

Though Hurston's fiction can still be usefully read in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, most of her work was published after its heyday.

## Harlem Renaissance: Hurston's Circle

Zora Neale Hurston wrote that New York City was a "long step for the waif of Eatonville," but the support and criticism of several intellectuals, artists, and patrons helped her become one of the movement's most vivacious and controversial personalities.

One of America's most popular and highly paid writers of the 1920s and '30s, **Fannie Hurst** (1889-1968) published more than eighteen novels, including *Imitation of Life*. She originally hired Hurston as a secretary, but they soon became friends. On their frequent trips together they defied Jim Crow laws by eating in restaurants together, but Hurston was often forced to sleep in a separate hotel.

Like Hurston, poet **Langston Hughes** (1902-1967) lived in Harlem in the 1920s, published in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, worked on the journal *Fire!!*, and received awards from *Opportunity*. When he accompanied Hurston on one of her Southern folklore-collecting trips, he encouraged her to seek the assistance of his patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason. Hurston's close friendship with Hughes ended after a long dispute over their collaborative play, *Mule Bone*.

Hurston considered **Charles S. Johnson** (1893-1956) "the root" of the entire Harlem Renaissance. As editor and founder of the magazine *Opportunity*, he published several of her early stories, including "Sweat." Hurston began a correspondence with him while she was still a student at Howard University in Washington, DC. He emphatically encouraged her to move to New York, a decision that profoundly affected her career.

**Charlotte Osgood Mason** (1854-1946) was already the "Godmother" of Hughes and Alain Locke when she met Hurston. Under Mason's patronage, Hurston published her first anthropological pieces but was forbidden to publish anything else. The one-year contract Hurston signed in 1927 was eventually extended until 1931.

Some argue that no white person contributed more to the Harlem Renaissance than **Carl Van Vechten** (1880-1964). As a photographer, writer, and patron of the arts, he promoted the careers of many artists, including Hughes and Hurston. His 1926 novel, *Nigger Heaven*, split the Harlem elite. His photo collections at Yale and Howard universities remain important to this day.

# Other Works/Adaptations

## Hurston and Her Other Works

Zora Neale Hurston's writing career took off when Charles S. Johnson published her early short stories, which featured characters altogether unlike those of her contemporaries. Delia Jones from "Sweat" (1926) uses her wits to outsmart her abusive, unfaithful husband. Missie May from "The Gilded-Six Bits" (1933) reclaims her sexuality after bearing a child within her marriage. These women diverged from prevailing stereotypes for black women in fiction: the overweight mammy, the tragic mulatto, the promiscuous Jezebel.

This complexity deepens in Hurston's novels. The omniscient narrator of her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), neither indulges nor condemns its errant protagonist, the preacher John Buddy Pearson. (Hurston drew from her parents' tumultuous history for inspiration here, but the adaptation was far from literal.)

Like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Jonah's Gourd Vine* refuses to dismiss black speech as gibberish. Both novels are steeped in folklore, recorded in dialect, and drenched in poetry. Referring to her first novel, Hurston wrote: "What I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color."

She continued to explore this interest in her later novels. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) blends the Old Testament prophet with the Moses of black folklore to imagine a powerful account of slavery and freedom. Similarly, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) chronicles the story of two white Florida "crackers" who are deeply in love and deeply at odds.

Hurston wanted black Americans to turn within to find their cultural and spiritual center: "[U]nless some of the young Negroes return to their gods, we are lost." For her, these gods dwelt in the music, dance, and stories of folk culture. The two collections of folklore she published in her lifetime were remarkable, as no other writer was trying to do what she was doing.

*Mules and Men* (1935) was the first great collection of black American folktales and hoodoo material from New Orleans, including over sixty-five folktales, such as "How Jack Beat the Devil," "Why Women Take Advantage of Men," and "The Talking Mule." Her second collection, *Tell My Horse* (1938), gives an eyewitness account of the mysteries of voodoo in Haiti and Jamaica. The appendix includes Negro songs, another lifelong love of Hurston's.

Her unconventional 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, consciously blurs the line between fact and fiction. She completed the book while employed as a story consultant for Paramount Studios in Los Angeles. She barely mentions her first marriage and never mentions her second. She makes no reference to the Great Depression, the two World Wars, or her politics.

Hurston continued writing until her death, even though publishers rejected several novels. She died without finishing her last, an ambitious work that would have reimagined the life of Herod.

During her forty-year writing career, she wrote more than fifty short stories and essays, many plays, and, in her last decade, a series of articles for the *Pittsburgh Courier* about the sensational trial of Ruby McCullum, a black woman charged with the murder of her white lover, a prominent doctor.

Hurston's lonely, little-noticed death does not diminish her. Always a deeply spiritual woman, she wrote in *Dust Tracks on a Road* that "nothing is destructible; things merely change forms. When the consciousness we know as life ceases, I know that I shall still be part and parcel of the world."



## Selected Works by Hurston

- *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, 1934; 1990
- *Mules and Men*, 1935; 1990
- *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, 1937; 1990
- *Tell My Horse*, 1938; 1990
- *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, 1939; 1991
- *Dust Tracks on a Road*, 1942; 1996
- *Seraph on the Suwanee*, 1948; 1991

Hurston's publisher during her life was J.B. Lippincott, with the exception of her last novel, which was republished by Scribner. Her reprinted works are published by HarperCollins.

## Posthumously Published

- *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing...and Then Again When I Am Looking Mean and Impressive: A Zora Neale Hurston Reader*. Ed. by Alice Walker. New York: The Feminist Press, 1979.
- *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life*. Written with Langston Hughes. Edited and with introductions by George Houston Bass and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. New York: HarperPerennial, 1991.
- *The Complete Stories*. Introduction by Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and Sieglinde Lemke. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- *Every Tongue Got to Confess: Negro Folk-Tales from the Gulf States*. Edited by Carla Kaplan, foreword by John Edgar Wideman. New York: HarperCollins, 2001.

# Discussion Questions

1. Why does Janie choose to tell her story only to her best friend Pheoby? How does Pheoby respond at the end of Janie's tale?
2. Hurston uses nature like the pear tree, the ocean, the horizon, the hurricane not only as a plot device but also as metaphor. Describe the ways these function as both. Can you think of others?
3. The novel's action begins and ends with two judgment scenes. Why are both groups of people judging her? Is either correct in its assessment?
4. Many readers consider the novel a *bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel, as Janie journeys through three marriages. What initially attracts her to each man? What causes her to leave? What does she learn from each experience?
5. In the novel, speech is used as a mechanism of control and liberation, especially as Janie struggles to find her voice. During which important moments of her life is Janie silent? How does she choose when to speak out or to remain quiet?
6. Is there a difference between the language of the men and that of Janie or the other women? How do the novel's first two paragraphs point to these differences?
7. The elaborate burial of the town mule draws from an incident Hurston recounts in *Tell My Horse*, where the Haitian president ordered an elaborate Catholic funeral for his pet goat. Although this scene is comic, how is it also tragic?
8. Little of Hurston's work was published during the Harlem Renaissance, yet her ability to tell witty stories and to stir controversy made her a favorite guest at elite Harlem parties. Identify several passages of wit and humor in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
9. How does the image of the black woman as "the mule of the world" become a symbol for the roles Janie chooses or refuses to play during her quest?
10. What do the names of Janie's husbands Logan Killicks, Jody Starks, Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods tell us about their characters and their relationships with Janie?
11. What kind of God are the eyes of Hurston's characters watching? What crucial moments of the plot does the title allude to? Does this God ever answer Janie's questioning?
12. Re-read the last three pages of the novel. How do the imagery and tone connect with other moments in the novel? Does Janie's story end in triumph, despair, or a mixture of both?

# Additional Resources

## Other Works about Hurston and the Harlem Renaissance

- Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner, 2003.
- Hemenway, Robert E. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977.
- Huggins, Nathan. *Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- Hurston, Lucy Anne, and the Estate of Zora Neale Hurston. *Speak, So You Can Speak Again: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Doubleday, 2004.
- Kaplan, Carla, ed. *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*. New York: Doubleday, 2002.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*. New York: Harcourt, 1983.
- Wall, Cheryl A. *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995.

## If you want to read other novelists influenced by Hurston, you might enjoy:

- Toni Morrison's *Jazz*, 1992
- Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place*, 1982
- Alice Walker's *Meridian*, 1976

## If you want to read other writers of the Harlem Renaissance, you might enjoy:

- Langston Hughes's *The Weary Blues*, 1926
- James Weldon Johnson's *The Book of American Negro Poetry*, 1922
- Jean Toomer's *Cane*, 1923

# Credits

## Works Cited

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## Acknowledgments

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