

THE ARION PRESS ANNOUNCES

Their Eyes Were Watching God

by

Zora Neale Hurston

Artworks by Kenturah Davis

Introduction by Emily Bernard

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Few works of American fiction capture their worlds as completely as the life story of Janie Crawford in Zora Neale Hurston's groundbreaking 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The book is more than a triumph of literary art: it is arguably the most rigorously reported portrait we have of African-American life in the interwar Deep South. Although neglected for decades, along with its author, this brilliant portrait of Black womanhood is now rightfully recognized as a vital part of the American canon.

Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891 in Alabama and raised in Florida by parents who were formerly enslaved. Her early life was hard, yet driven by curiosity and a keen intellect she pushed continually against the racism and sexism that defined her life as a Black woman in the Jim Crow South. Known today mainly as one of the most important American writers of the 20th century, she was also an anthropologist—a student of her own community. Her

scientific observations of Black culture and folkways over decades across the African diaspora not only appeared in academic form but served as the source of her literary imagination.

Though Hurston received some recognition for her work in her lifetime, she had to fight for her own path every step of the way. She struggled to gain an education and succeeded in attending both Howard University and Barnard College, where as the only Black student she was, she quipped, “Barnard’s Sacred Black Cow.” That same sense of self and tenacity propels the character of Janie Crawford, a beautiful and tough woman whose journey gave white readers their first glimpse of how the world looks through a Black woman’s eyes. The novel begins at its ending, when Janie returns to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, a direct transcription of the actual Eatonville, an all-black town with its “porch sitters” telling tales in which Hurston spent her early life.

Janie relates to her old friend Pheoby the story of her three tempestuous marriages and the great storm that wipes it all away. She “saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone.” It has been a momentous journey: from the start she’s been impelled by a powerful need to experience true love and freedom. Hurston’s account alternates between phonetic rural speech and passages of astounding lyricism. In it, the author teaches us that the world alternates between mystery and misery, pear trees and hurricanes, brightness and shadow. As the scholar of African-American literature Emily Bernard writes in her introduction: “the beautiful world Hurston has created is fueled by a rough economy.” Yet “again and again, Janie always chooses self and freedom.”

The complexity and depth of this story is beautifully reflected in the interplay of dark and light in Kenturah Davis’s accompanying images. Much of the artist’s work explores the tension between light and shadow, and the ways that “darkness is a source of revelation,” she has said. For *Their Eyes Are Watching God*, Davis has made “text drawings” that fuse language and image. By writing and rewriting significant words and phrases from Hurston’s tale, she has built up textured and layered portraits of Janie at four different phases in her life. At the same time, readers follow her lifeline, rising and falling in a continuous line of gesture and text that appears as a footer in the artist’s own manuscript and flows like a heartbeat from the first page to the last.

Hurston’s novel was praised by the newspapers of the day but attacked by male writers of the Harlem Renaissance such as Richard Wright. It was only after the American writer Alice Walker rediscovered the book in the 1970s that Hurston’s oeuvre received the acclaim it deserves. Nor was *Their Eyes Were Watching God* the author’s only book to languish in obscurity. In the 1920s, she had met and extensively documented the life of Cudjo Lewis, the last surviving African on American soil who had been enslaved and shipped across the Middle Passage. When publishers told her to translate her account from his dialect into American English, however, Hurston refused. Her anthropological work too was often stymied. Although she was encouraged at Barnard by Franz Boas, the founder of modern anthropology, his support ultimately waned. Observers today candidly call her a genius rejected by the narrow society of her time. For the rest of her life, despite many publications, she struggled for recognition as a scholar and

died destitute in 1960. It was not until nearly a century after it was written, in 2018, that her book about Lewis, *Barracoon*, was published. It became an instant best-seller.

This new artist book from Arion Press can be considered a companion to our 2000 edition of *Cane* by Jean Toomer. Hurston and Toomer were friends and fellow travelers in depicting their own African-American communities of the South. Arion Press remains committed to bringing such essential work by authors once excluded from the canon out of the shadows and into the light.

The ARTIST

Kenturah Davis was born in Los Angeles, California in 1980 and divides her practice between Los Angeles and Accra, Ghana. She earned a B.A. in art history and visual arts from Occidental College and an M.F.A. in Painting and Printmaking from the Yale University School of Art and was an inaugural artist fellow at NXTHVN in New Haven, Connecticut. Her work has been shown in institutional exhibitions across the world, and is held in the collections of many major museums including the Hammer Museum, LACMA, MoMA New York, the Walker Art Center and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, among others. In 2022 Davis debuted her commissioned works for the Los Angeles Metro of ten permanent large-scale works for the transit authority's new K (Crenshaw–LAX) light-rail line. Her portrait of the filmmaker Ava DuVernay was unveiled in 2022 at the Smithsonian Institution's National Portrait Gallery.

Over the past decade Davis has deepened a unique practice that fuses the acts of writing and drawing to create portraits and

objects, examining the ways we use words to shape our perception of the world. Inspired by the earliest forms of writings, she explores the physicality of language by drawing or incising words and phrases into a variety of surfaces. Working from photographs, she transforms these words into portraiture, sculpture and textiles, whether by pencil rubbing over paper embossed with the text or by transforming handwritten text into threads that are subsequently woven in the Japanese technique called *shifu*. It is a process that allows her to investigate the meanings of particular texts, building images out of its particular lexicon in response. She has created book forms as well and often studies “the ways text and images are arranged on a page and organized into an object”. The Arion edition of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is her first collaborative artist book.

The COMMENTATOR

Emily Bernard has taught for two decades at the University of Vermont where she is the Julian Lindsay Green & Gold Professor of English. She holds a B.A. and a Ph.D. in American Studies from Yale University and has written extensively on African-American literature and the Black experience in America. She is a contributing editor at *The American Scholar* and author most recently of *Black is the Body: Stories from My Grandmother's Time, My Mother's Time, and Mine*, which won the 2020 *Los Angeles Times* Christopher Isherwood Prize for Autobiographical Prose. A 2020 Carnegie Fellow, Emily is currently working on a book of biographical essays about the lives of black women called *Unfinished Women*. She lives in Vermont with her husband and twin daughters.



The BOOK

The book measures 8 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 6 $\frac{1}{4}$ inches and contains 248 numbered pages printed by letterpress on 130 gsm Hahnemühle mouldmade Bugra from Monotype Garamont types cast expressly for the project, with various styles of Lydian handset for display throughout. Four portraits fold out from the book—two vertically and two horizontally—and capture Janie Crawford as imagined in different stages of relationship. The original drawings are drafted in graphite from text excerpts, repeated and overlaid until their subject is revealed in dramatic chiaroscuro. The portraits are printed on a complementary mouldmade laid sheet from the Italian Magnani mill.

Similarly, Davis has selected text fragments which appear as a running line of hand-written commentary along the bottom margin of every page. These serve not only to further the artist's practice of collapsing the distance between writing and drawing but also as her highly personal reflection on Hurston's narrative. Over 100 plates were employed to reproduce the manuscript artwork on each page.

The book is printed in three colors: black for the text; brown for the titling and chapter heads; and silver to recreate the sheen of the footers drawn in graphite. Front and rear endsheets are imprinted in the brown ink with a wallpaper of another of Davis's chosen excerpts that incorporates the book's title.

The EDITIONS

The total edition is limited to 250 copies for sale plus 26 lettered copies *bors commerce*. The Fine Press edition comprises 210 copies

bound in full teal blue cloth with a graphic silhouette in profile representing Crawford die cut from dark green Hanji paper foil stamped with titling and overlaid on the front cover. Each book has been carefully rounded by hand and is presented in a three-piece handmade slipcase with cloth edges and paper side panels imprinted with a portion of the excerpt Davis selected for the endsheets.

For the Deluxe edition, the graphic silhouette has been doubled so that the two facing die-cut profiles in teal form a dark green chalice of a matching plush leatherette between them. These 40 copies are presented in handmade clamshell boxes with Hanji paper sides and linings and blue-black cloth covers into which a reduced, debossed chalice/profile has been embedded. Spine titling for the boxes has been foil stamped on Hanji.

The PRINT EDITION

Deluxe copies of the edition are accompanied by a unique print featuring a color photograph in *chine collé* of Crawford's character reproduced on specially treated kozo washi and set opposite a blind-embossed excerpt of equivalent size from Hurston's text. The combined image area is 6 x 8 inches, and the overall prints measure 12 x 14 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches printed on 300 gsm textured Somerset. The print edition is limited to 50 copies for sale plus 3 Artist Proofs, 3 Printer Proofs, and 1 Trial Proof, allowing 10 stand-alone prints to be offered for sale individually, separate from the Deluxe copies. The prints are suitable for framing.

All copies of the print and the book have been signed by the artist.

OVERLEAF: 3-color spread with manuscript excerpt in silver.

Chapter 4

Long before the year was up, Janie noticed that her husband had stopped talking in rhymes to her. He had ceased to wonder at her long black hair and finger it. Six months back he had told her, If Ah kin haul de wood heah and chop it fuh yuh, look lak you oughta be able tuh tote it inside. Mah fust wife never bothered me 'bout choppin' no wood nohow. She'd grab dat ax and sling chips lak uh man. You done been spoilt rotten."

So Janie had told him, "Ah'm just as stiff as you is stout. If you can stand not to chop and tote wood Ah reckon you can stand not to git no dinner. 'Scuse mah freezolity, Mist' Killicks, but Ah don't mean to chop de first chip."

"Aw you know Ah'm gwine chop de wood fuh yuh. Even if you is stingy as you can be wid me. Yo' Grandma and me myself done spoilt yuh now, and Ah reckon Ah have tuh keep on wid it."

One morning soon he called her out of the kitchen to the barn. He had the mule all saddled at the gate.

"Looka heah, LilBit, help me out some. Cut up dese seed

taters fuh me. Ah got tuh go step off a piece."

"Where you goin'?"

"Over tuh Lake City tuh see uh man about uh mule."

"Whut you need two mules fuh? Lessen you aims to swap off dis one."

"Naw, Ah needs two mules dis yeah. Taters is goin' tuh be taters in de fall. Bringin' big prices. Ah aims tuh run two plows, and dis man Ah'm talkin' 'bout is got uh mule all gentled up so even uh woman kin handle 'im."

Logan held his wad of tobacco real still in his jaw like a thermometer of his feelings while he studied Janie's face and waited for her to say something.

"So Ah thought Ah mout as well go see." He tagged on and swallowed to kill time but Janie said nothing except, "Ah'll cut de p'taters fuh yuh. When yuh comin' back?"

"Don't know exactly. Round dust dark Ah reckon. It's uh sorta long trip—specially if Ah hafter lead one on de way back."

When Janie had finished indoors she sat down in the barn with the potatoes. But springtime reached her in there so she moved everything to a place in the yard where she could see the road. The noon sun filtered through the leaves of the fine oak tree where she sat and made lacy patterns on the ground. She had been there a long time when she heard whistling coming down the road.

It was a cityfied, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn't belong in these parts. His coat was over his arm, but he didn't need it to represent his clothes. The shirt with the



*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.*

THE PRINT

Here Was Peace

Embossed type excerpt
with *chine collé* on 300 gsm
textured Somerset, signed.
12 x 14 1/2 inches.

HOW to ORDER

We reserve a copy of the Fine Press edition for each of our current Subscribers. Subscribers are also offered the first opportunity to order the Deluxe edition instead, at an additional charge. Pricing varies depending on the type of subscription and is generally 20-30% below the retail price.

A supplementary fee of \$2,100 will be charged to Annual Subscribers who elect instead to purchase a Deluxe copy with the signed *chine collé* print. All other subscription prices are as follows—

FINE PRESS EDITION

210 copies

\$1,120 with Subscription (\$1,600 retail)

...

DELUXE EDITION, WITH SIGNED PRINT

40 copies

\$3,280 with Subscription (\$4,100 retail)

...

INDIVIDUAL SIGNED PRINT

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