Zora Neale Hurston, beating the hountar, or mama drum. New York World-Telegram & Sun Collection, Library of Congress.

# From Fiction to Fact: Zora Neale Hurston and the Ruby McCollum Trial

Roberta S. Maguire
University of Wisconsin, Oshkosh, United States

**Abstract:** Beginning in October 1952 and continuing to May 1953, Zora Neale Hurston contributed sixteen stories to the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the African American paper then with the largest national circulation, related to a sensational murder trial in Live Oak, Florida: Ruby McCollum, a well-to-do, married African American mother of three, was accused of shooting and killing Dr. C. LeRoy Adams, a popular white physician—her doctor—who had just been elected to the state legislature. Six of the articles covered the actual trial; the remaining ten were devoted to telling Ruby's "life story" in an effort to correct the oversimplified narrative reported in the national mainstream press—that McCollum shot Adams over a disputed medical bill—and which became the "official" account. To tell the story, Hurston relied to a large degree on elements from her 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*—a reversal of the more commonly recognized trajectory of a writer drawing on earlier journalism to inform later fiction. This essay charts the echoes from the novel and argues they are in the service of greater truth-telling than the South of that era would permit: The echoes bring to the fore a complicated story shaped by gender expectations, challenging the "official" nonstory born of racial expectations.

In 1937, Zora Neale Hurston published *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* a novel that today is regarded as a crucial text in the African American literary tradition. It tells the story of Janie Crawford, who was born in the late nineteenth century and raised in Florida by her grandmother, a former slave, and it traces her life from her awakening sense of her own sexuality and related dreams for love through three marriages. The first, to Logan Killicks, a reasonably prosperous but middle-aged farmer, was forced upon her by her protective grandmother. Janie chose the second husband to escape the first.

Joe ("Jody") Starks was closer to her in age and also ambitious. He took her to the new all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, where he quickly became the mayor. The third marriage, to a blues-playing, gambling day laborer nicknamed Tea Cake, followed shortly after her second husband, who turned out to be domineering and abusive, died. This last marriage was the fulfillment of Janie's youthful dreams, yet it ended tragically in the Everglades when she was forced to shoot Tea Cake, who, out of his mind because of an untreated bite from a rabid dog, threatened to kill her. The novel ends with Janie returning to Eatonville, after having been jailed, then tried, for Tea Cake's murder and found innocent by an all-white male jury who declared the shooting "entirely accidental and justifiable" (188). Our closing image is of Janie, self-confident and alone, back in the house her second husband built, content to live on her happy memories of life with Tea Cake.

The novel is remarkable for several reasons. First, it is a joyous celebration of African American community and culture—from the vernacular language the characters speak to the verbal games they play to the folktales they share. These cultural dimensions reflect the fieldwork Hurston conducted in the late 1920s after studying anthropology at Columbia University under Franz Boas. Second, in the novel Hurston deftly uses the technique of "free indirect discourse," which at times melds her characters' voices with the omniscient third-person narrative voice. This allows her not only to celebrate the black community but also to critique it for its obeisance to patriarchal values, which the shifting alignment of the narrative voice underscores. And, third, the novel uses the specifics of black culture to tell a universally human story, a woman's story about the search for love and self-knowledge, which is one reason it regularly appears on reading lists today for a range of courses—women's literature, African American literature, the modern novel.

*Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the 1930s were a high point in Hurston's career as a fiction writer. In fact, after that decade during which three of her novels appeared, she published only one more, *Seraph on the Suwannee*, in 1948. Unable to convince a publisher to take on her book-length projects after that, Hurston was often strapped for cash and deeply in debt. That prompted a move in 1950 back to Florida, where she had spent the happiest years of her childhood as well as significant time writing earlier books. There she thought she could live more cheaply while continuing to write. She sustained herself by growing her own food, borrowing money from friends, and turning to journalism.[1] Hurston had contributed nonfiction—articles based on her anthropological research, personal essays, and book reviews—throughout her career to such publications as *American Mercury*, *Negro Digest*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the *New York Herald Tribune*, and by the

early 1950s, given her financial situation, she was anxious for a long-term journalistic assignment. In 1952 she was just about to begin writing a column for the *Weekly Review*, an African American newspaper published in Georgia, when the *Pittsburgh Courier*, at that time the African American newspaper having the largest black readership in the country,[2] approached her with a better offer: to cover a potentially explosive murder trial in Florida.[3] She readily accepted.

With 35,000 subscribers in Florida alone,[4] the *Courier* wanted to give its readers expansive coverage of the trial, which was about to take place in Live Oak, a small town in the north-central part of the state. The defendant was Ruby McCollum, a well-to-do, married African American mother of three, who was accused of shooting and killing Dr. C. LeRoy Adams, a popular white physician—her doctor—who had just been elected to the state legislature. The shooting took place in his Live Oak office on August 3, 1952. A black woman killing a prominent white man was reason enough to cause disquiet—after all, this was the segregated South pre-*Brown v. Board of Education*—and drew national attention. The *Courier* had sent two of its reporters to the town shortly after the story broke.[5] But when rumors started circulating that the two parties had been lovers for years, and that the doctor was likely the father of one of McCollum's three children, the paper's top editors thought it would be beneficial to have someone with literary flair cover the actual proceedings.[6] By then living in Eau Gallie, Florida, a few hours' drive from Live Oak, Hurston, whom the paper described as "[o]ne of America's most illustrious women novelists,"[7] was a logical choice.

Beginning in October 1952 and continuing to May 1953, Hurston contributed sixteen stories to the *Courier*, six of which chronicled McCollum's trial, which ended on December 20, 1952, with a guilty verdict and death sentence that her attorneys appealed to the state Supreme Court. In these stories Hurston's literary flair is evident—she turns her courtroom report into an actual dramatic scene, complete with stage directions and dialogue. The remaining ten, all appearing after the trial, carried the same headline: "The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!" They functioned not only to fulfill the *Courier*'s pledge that Hurston's reporting would go beyond the court proceedings to "the undertones . . . the overtones . . . the implications" of the case,[8] but also as a corrective to the oversimplified story that was reported in the national mainstream press immediately after the shooting occurred—that McCollum shot Adams over a disputed medical bill—and which became the "official" story.[9] Hurston recalled for William Bradford Huie (who, prompted by Hurston, covered McCollum's retrial granted after her lawyers' appeal) how disappointed she initially was that such an oversimplification had been

propagated by the black and white residents of Live Oak and then embraced by the press:

> It was like a chant. The Doctor Bill; the Mad, Mean Nigger Woman. It was Dogma. It was a posture, but a posture posed in granite. There was no other circumstance in the case, let alone an extenuating one. This was the story; and the Community was sticking to it. The press was requested to take the Community's story, not to dig up any "confusing" material. And the press took it.[10]

Disappointment became "disillusionment" for Hurston when even the judge, prosecutors, and all-male jury refused to accept any challenge to the "Dogma." As she recounted, again for Huie:

> The trial was ended. A Negro woman had become infuriated over a doctor bill, and she had killed the good doctor . . . the friend of the poor . . . a man whose only rule had been the Golden Rule. . . . And now the poor men would have their justice: an eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth.
>
> The Community will had been done.[11]

"The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!" began appearing February 28, 1953, and ran weekly for just over two months. In the ten installments, Hurston wrote about Ruby's childhood, maturation to womanhood, marriage to Sam, and affair with LeRoy Adams, which, taken together, countered the official story that denied there *was* a story, a woman's story, filled with the complexity and ambiguity of human motivation. It was a challenge to gather the material, however, because the presiding judge, Hal W. Adams (no relation to the doctor), had denied all reporters any direct access to Ruby throughout the trial and while Ruby remained in jail awaiting the outcome of her lawyers' appeal. So to develop her stories, Hurston relied on the little she could get from the residents of Live Oak, who feared retribution if they said too much,[12] the recollections of a former teacher, and Ruby's family members, all of whom lived out of town—and fiction, Hurston's own 1937 novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

Other scholars have acknowledged that there are echoes of *Their Eyes* in Hurston's Ruby McCollum series. Both Valerie Boyd, in her 2003 biography of Hurston, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, and Carla Kaplan, in her 2002 edited volume of Hurston's correspondence, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters*, note how she "recycled" language from the novel, applying Janie's youthful longings to Ruby.[13] Susan Edwards Meisenhelder, in *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston*, not only comments on how the language used to describe Janie and her desires in *Their Eyes* reappears in Hurston's portrayal of Ruby, but also finds that Hurston's representation of Ruby's husband, Sam McCollum, a successful farmer/store

owner/property manager with a side gambling business, recalls Janie's second domineering husband, Jody Starks: "Like Starks who feels Janie should be satisfied as Mrs. Mayor, Sam sees Ruby's role as wife as that of sexless, subservient appendage of her husband."[14] Building on these scholars' findings, this essay explores the journalistic function of the echoes, which a close reading indicates are even more extensive than previously acknowledged. Combined with the also-repeated technique of free indirect discourse, the echoes from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* provide a framework for Hurston's representation of Ruby that points up the inadequacy of the received explanation for Adams's murder—she was angry about his bill for medical services—and simultaneously offers a critique of patriarchal values similar to that offered in the novel. The interplay between journalism and literature is one that scholars of literary journalism readily acknowledge, but here we have a reversal of the more commonly recognized trajectory of a writer drawing on earlier journalism to inform later fiction[15] with Hurston drawing on an earlier literary creation to inform her reporting of an event that happened decades later—and doing so to facilitate greater truth-telling.

**Hurston and the African American Tradition in Literary Journalism**

An instance of a writer reaching back to her earlier fiction to inform her later literary journalism is reason enough to focus on Hurston's remarkable series, since a preoccupation with form and style, and especially the historical roots of national traditions and of work produced by individual practitioners, continues as a focus of current scholarship.[16] But in addition to that, this series is important for what it adds to our understanding of the African American tradition in literary journalism. While the parameters of that tradition are just beginning to come into focus, there are a few points that we do well to keep in mind: 1) defining what makes journalism literary in the African American tradition requires an awareness of the differing trajectories and purposes of the "conventional" journalism appearing in the mainstream US press versus African American venues—for example, the mid-twentieth-century insistence in mainstream publications on objectivity has never been so prized in the black press; and 2) once African Americans began contributing to mainstream papers and magazines, place of publication—mainstream- or black-owned—exerts an enormous influence on the form and content of literary journalism produced by African Americans, as it radically alters audience expectations and authorial goals. And, finally, because of the specific history of the US black community, periods of intense production of literary journalism in the African American tradition do not always coincide with that of the mainstream.[17]

The decade of the 1950s, which is typically seen as a relatively slow period for mainstream US literary journalism, was a period of remarkable productivity for black writers of literary journalism.[18] This was the decade that saw the end of legally sanctioned segregation with *Brown v. Board of Education*. There were also more venues for black writers to publish their work than ever before: black weekly newspapers still had significant circulations; John H. Johnson was building his black magazine empire; and mainstream publications—newspapers and magazines—were more willing to employ and publish black writers. And celebrated writers from the Harlem Renaissance were still active, while a new generation, emboldened by the legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, was on the scene.

Hurston was a celebrated writer of the Harlem Renaissance. As such, she, along with Langston Hughes, was a member of the older generation of African American writers producing literary journalism in the 1950s. And hers was then and remains today a complex voice to come to terms with: While a writer of stories about black folk and the black community, she declined to include herself among the category of Race Men and Women, which she described as black intellectuals who saw themselves as "champions of 'Race Consciousness'" and for whom "no Negro exists as an individual."[19] As she noted in her 1950 essay, "What White Publishers Won't Print," that position grew from her sense that the nation's "welfare" depended upon its citizens "realiz[ing] that minorities do think, and think about something other than the race problem. That they are very human and internally, according to natural endowment, are just like everybody else"[20]—complicated, conflicted, capable of love and vulnerability, heroism, and stupidity. Her series on McCollum, appearing in a black-owned publication, is the sort of story she believed the mainstream press could not accept. Although race does not recede completely from the story, it is at most a complicating factor in a particular human drama, one that her fiction, including *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, regularly probed, and which Andrew Delbanco has described as "the destructive force of love, which renders a woman vulnerable to a man who cannot subdue his compulsive need for new conquests."[21] Appearing during the years that *Brown v. Board of Education* was working its way through the court system, the McCollum series functions as a challenge to all readers, including Race Men and Women, to see Ruby in her full complexity, a woman much like Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes*—black, to be sure, but with hopes and desires transcending race.

## How *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Shaped Ruby McCollum's Life Story

The surface similarities between Hurston's 1937 novel and the McCollum story are striking: They share a Florida setting; both Janie, the novel's

heroine, and Ruby had married a man who became exceptionally prosperous; both endure a trial dominated by white men for shooting and killing a lover. But despite those obvious and immediate similarities, the echoes of the novel, including the technique of free indirect discourse, do not clearly emerge until Hurston turns to reporting Ruby's story after the trial. It was then that, discouraged by testimony and a verdict that she described elsewhere as "mass delusion by unanimous agreement," Hurston began telling Ruby McCollum's life story in an effort to free it from the "smothering blanket of silence" she had found the trial to be.[22] Initially the echoes of the novel may seem ironic, for the trajectory of Ruby's life, as told by Hurston, moves in the opposite direction from Janie's, which, after marrying Tea Cake, was away from material wealth and deeper into the culture shared by ordinary black folk. Yet it is also those differences that, when combined with the echoes from *Their Eyes*, allow Hurston to lift Ruby out of stereotype while challenging the *Courier*'s readers to reconsider their own perceptions of gender roles in the black community.

Hurston begins her February 28, 1953, article, identified by the *Courier* as the "first . . . in a series" about Ruby McCollum's life, by recounting Judge Adams's words when he imposed the required death penalty over a month earlier, followed by the defendant's response to them: "Outwardly calm and self-possessed, Ruby McCollum returned to her seat at the counsel table." "Here was a woman," Hurston continues, "a Negro woman with the courage to dare every fate, to boldly attack every tradition of her surroundings and even the age-old laws of every land." And yet all who knew her, we are told, thought she "had nothing out of the ordinary in her"; she was "[a]lways quiet . . . and utterly absorbed in ordinary domestic affairs."[23] Hurston thereby sets up a contradiction between the courageous fighter and the meek homemaker, which is already a challenge to the "official" story of a woman who decided to kill her doctor simply because she thought his bill was too high. And in setting that up, Hurston also acknowledges the unknowability of Ruby McCollum—by others and herself: "The greatest human travail has been the attempt at self-revelation, but never, since the world began, has any one individual completely succeeded."[24] With that, the deep link to *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is initiated: In the first chapter of the novel, when Janie has returned to Eatonville, where she had lived with her second husband, and is about to tell her best friend Pheoby her life story so that Pheoby can understand who Janie has become and why she has returned, the narrator explains how the two friends "sat there . . . close together. . . . Janie full of that oldest human longing—self revelation."[25] Ruby's story, like Janie's, is a complicated—and universal—human story.

We also learn in that first article that Ruby's parents, William and Gertrude Jackson, were extremely religious and strict; they forbade their seven children to dance, play cards, indulge in board games—any amusements they believed were "harboring the very works of the devil."[26] Exploring that home life more deeply in the March 7 installment, with her primary source apparently Ruby's older brother, Hurston describes Ruby as an "obedient" child who kept largely to herself, and who by ten years of age was becoming a bit of a dreamer, absorbed in reading "romantic love stories."[27] Janie, too, had a strict upbringing, few childhood friends, and early romantic longings. She also had a fierce independent streak, which led her to protect her inner self, especially while in her oppressive second marriage to Jody Starks: "She found that she had a host of thoughts she had never expressed to him, and numerous emotions she had never let Jody know about. . . . She had an inside and an outside now and suddenly she knew how not to mix them."[28] That same impulse to shield her inner life Hurston bestows on Ruby, who, readers are told, early in life "made words with her mouth, [but] really said nothing about her inside feelings." Ruby, like Janie, was "extremely self-contained."[29]

In the third installment, the echoes of *Their Eyes* become more pronounced. There Hurston focuses on Ruby's late-blossoming womanhood, which seems to have occurred after she finished school at Fessenden Academy in Martin, Florida, at nineteen. The one named source in the article is a former teacher of Ruby's at Fessenden, L.F. Morse. The piece begins by establishing her as relatively lacking in self-awareness as a teen: she was "a pretty girl" while at school, Morse tells Hurston, "but seemed unaware of it," which Hurston amplifies by adding, "At that time" she "had never heard of the subconscious," so "[i]t never occurred to her that she might have wishes that had never emerged into the conscious."[30] Janie, too, is lacking in self-awareness and a broad context for understanding herself through much of her journey: "She didn't read books so she didn't know that she was the world and the heavens boiled down to a drop,"[31] and she is unaware of her beauty until her soon-to-be third husband, Tea Cake, encourages her to look at herself in the mirror.[32] Intertwined with that lack of awareness for both women is nonetheless a profound awakening to their sexual selves: Once out of school and with a year of teaching to her credit, Ruby "felt like a blossom on the bare limb of a pear tree in the spring . . . opening her gifts to the world, but where was the bee for her blossom?"[33]; Janie, at sixteen and living at home with her grandmother, feels, "Oh to be a pear tree—*any* tree in bloom! . . . She had glossy leaves and bursting buds. . . . Where were the singing bees for her?"[34] And further echoing *Their Eyes*, Hurston tells her readers that Ruby, finding her situation devoid of romance, "wanted beauty and poetry in her life, something to

make her everyday side-meat taste more like ham,"[35] much like Janie felt after marrying her first husband, about whom she complains to her grandmother: "He don't even never mention nothin' pretty. . . . Ah wants things sweet wid mah marriage lak when you sit under a pear tree and think."[36]

While Hurston establishes disappointment as the fuel for both Janie's and Ruby's quest for a more expansive life, the seeds for Ruby's tragedy are planted in this third installment with one last ironic echo of *Their Eyes*: We learn that when Ruby was but seventeen years old, she had had a suitor who proposed marriage, and she turned him down. Here Hurston quotes Ruby explaining why she did so: "I could not see myself loving a man who could see ten things and not even understand one. I wanted a man who could see one thing and understand ten, a mate [who] could cope with life and give me protection."[37] The language is a combined echo of what Jody Starks says to Janie when he reasserts his authority over her after she challenges him in public—"When Ah sees one thing Ah understands ten. You see ten things and don't understand one"—and of what Janie's restrictive grandmother says she wants for her granddaughter when she forces Janie into her first loveless marriage with the middle-aged farmer: "'Tain't Logan Killicks Ah wants you to have, baby, it's protection."[38] Janie's task is to disavow what her grandmother wanted for her, because, she learns, with "protection," which her second husband also offered, comes the demand for subservience. But by attributing both Jody's and Janie's grandmother's language to Ruby, Hurston already suggests Ruby has too deeply embraced the community's sanctioned role for women to break free and redefine herself as Janie does in the novel. And doing this allows Hurston, now the literary journalist, to begin suggesting in dramatic language how Ruby's desire for protection from a powerful man laid the foundation for her actions that hot morning in August when she killed Dr. Adams.

The fourth installment affirms the differences between Janie and Ruby even as it contains the greatest number of echoes from *Their Eyes*. Hurston has Ruby back at her parents' home, twenty years old, standing at the front gate to the yard, "questioning fate. For some time now she had been living at her own front gate, ready for departure." And she is feeling expansive—"The horizon of the world was her hatband"—as "she saw no reason why her life must follow the pattern of her surroundings."[39] There we have an echo of Janie, who at sixteen "went on down to the front gate [of her grandmother's yard] and leaned over to gaze up and down the road. . . . Waiting for the world to be made." And Janie likewise begins her quest in search of the "horizon," which is why she eventually comes to hate her grandmother, who, in her desire for her granddaughter to have protection, had "pinched [the horizon] in to such a little bit of a thing that she could" choke Janie with

it.[40] But Janie at the gate is not yet contemplating any means for fulfilling her dreams, whereas Ruby has met Sam McCollum and at the gate is debating with herself whether he can offer what she is seeking: "At times she felt that Sam had in him that which would bring fulfillment of her dreams and then, again, she wondered."[41] This is, however, an echo of Janie later, who after meeting Jody Starks also wages an internal debate as she contemplates leaving her first husband for him: "Janie pulled back a long time because [Jody] did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance."[42] Both women have expansive dreams, but whereas Janie is looking for "change and chance"—which ultimately leads her to a profound change in values—Ruby is focused on a man, Sam, as her "fulfillment," diminishing her opportunity for personal growth.

But nonetheless, Hurston has Ruby in this fourth article continuing to waver as she considers Sam's suitability: She was attracted to this man who "made a little summertime out of a seemingly nothing and they both lived off it for the hours they were together"; still she hesitated because although it appeared "Sam had what she wanted"—drive, wit, and the ability to protect—she was not yet certain "of his capacities. . . . Better wait and see."[43] In that sequence, Hurston reuses two aspects of *Their Eyes* that are associated with Janie's turn away from material wealth and toward the ordinary folk. The first is the repetition of Janie's words explaining to an acquaintance in the Everglades why she is so in love with Tea Cake: "He kin take most any lil thing and make summertime out of it when times is dull. Then we lives offa dat happiness he made till some mo' happiness come along."[44] The second is the literary technique of free indirect discourse ("Better wait and see"). That technique, which as a literary device in fiction blurs the voice of the narrator with that of a character, has been increasingly recognized as one that literary journalists have used to draw readers into the interior lives of their subjects.[45] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., moving beyond that technical function in Hurston's novel to its metaphoric function, has argued she employs free indirect discourse in association with Janie when Janie is making an important, positive transition on her quest for self-knowledge and happiness.[46] Beginning with this installment in the McCollum series, free indirect discourse also has both the technical function—drawing readers into Ruby's interior life—and the metaphoric function of signaling a moment of transition. But instead of indicating a step toward self-knowledge and happiness, it marks a moment preceding a decision that will eventually lead to Ruby's self-effacement and then the shooting of LeRoy Adams. Ruby does choose to marry Sam McCollum, but he does not completely fulfill Ruby's dreams because "Sam did not rule her enough."[47] Jody Starks also turns out to be less than Janie had hoped

for—but that was because he ruled too much; she tells Jody on his deathbed: "Mah own mind had tuh be squeezed and crowded out tuh make room for yours in me." [48]

Through the first four installments, Hurston is laying the groundwork for her readers to understand that Ruby's desire for protection and material things helped create the marital nightmare that led to Ruby's affair with and eventual killing of LeRoy Adams. The fifth installment, published on March 28, features snatches of gossip from the residents of Live Oak and the report from the sheriff who arrested Ruby on August 3 to further establish that. We learn that although Sam and Ruby had a partnership of sorts—Sam made the business contacts and ran the side gambling operation while Ruby controlled the cash, details apparently confirmed for Hurston by local residents—their personal relationship suffered. Believing he had fulfilled his duty to Ruby in setting her up in a large, comfortable home, Sam turned his attention to other and younger women. Hurston surmises, "It is easily possible that he had analyzed [Ruby] as caring more for material things than for him as a man." But that didn't keep him from bragging to others about his control over his wife: Hurston reports how she heard he "gloated over other men: 'I wouldn't even put up with the kind of wife you got. My wife is always at home no matter when I get there. She's home and acting like a wife ought to act." Ruby, Hurston tells her readers, "was hurt" by Sam's affairs, although "she never discussed it nor admitted it to her relatives or closest friends."[49]

All of this recapitulates the problems that emerged in Janie's marriage to Jody Starks, who thought he was doing right by Janie in providing her with a big house and fine things—but that was his dream, not hers. He too liked to brag about his wife's position: He tells the men at his store that his wife won't be doing any public speaking because "[s]he's uh woman and her place is in de home." And like Ruby, Janie initially keeps quiet about her unhappiness with the way her husband treats her, so quiet that the townsfolk think "she don't seem to mind": "Reckon dey understand one 'nother," they conclude.[50] Unlike Ruby, however, Janie eventually speaks up, not only to Jody, but also to her friend Pheoby, disavowing the kind of "protection" her husband provided. After Jody dies, she explains why she is attracted to Tea Cake rather than a prosperous suitor whom Pheoby approves of: "Dis ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma's way, now ah means tuh live mine." Unconvinced, and suggesting how against the grain Janie's thinking is, Pheoby speaks to how she longs for the life Janie is giving up: "It look lak heben tuh me from where Ah'm at."[51] But the novel shows how the willingness to give up "protection" is what allows Janie's growth in self-realization (something Pheoby too even-

tually comes to appreciate), whereas Hurston posits Ruby's inability to give that up as dooming her: "It is obvious that long years of 'protection' had blinded Ruby McCollum to the gravity of her situation on the morning of Aug. 3, 1952, when she shot Dr. C. LeRoy Adams, prominent white doctor, to death."[52]

Having established Ruby as strong but wedded to her community's definitions of proper womanhood, Hurston in the April 4 installment turns to a decisive moment in Ruby and Sam's marriage—an instance of physical abuse—that leads inexorably to the fateful affair. Her source for this is unnamed, but we surmise Ruby had a confidant of sorts who talked with Hurston, as she reports Ruby as having "once said" much that is reported. Against Ruby's wishes, Sam had brought home some of his gambling friends, who drank too much and behaved brutishly, even "callously vomit[ing] over her floor and furnishings." According to Hurston, when Ruby took Sam behind closed doors and demanded he have his friends leave, "Sam is said to have whipped her soundly and forced her to clean up the mess the guests had made." And then we get what Ruby "once said": "For that I never forgave Sam McCollum": she was pregnant and he "seemed not to care" that he might have injured the baby. Hurston reports Ruby as saying further that thereafter she "no longer felt [her]self to be the . . . mistress of his inner heart. It was a terrible shock."[53] The remainder of the article, describing how Sam introduced Ruby and Adams and then how the affair began, is based on testimony Ruby gave during the last days of her trial, but its presentation here relies heavily on fictional technique, as Hurston sets scenes and assumes the role of omniscient narrator, providing precise dialogue, character actions such as "peep[ing] from behind drapes" and "lift[ing] eyes,"[54] and the inner thoughts of the principal parties, sometimes through free indirect discourse.

Inaugurating this shift from reporting the past to narrating it is an important echo of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*: After Jody Starks slaps Janie for burning his dinner and then leaves the house, we learn "[s]he stood there until something fell off the shelf inside her."[55] Hurston follows Ruby's report of how she felt after Sam hit her with these words: "An image—something sacred and precious—had fallen off the shelf in Ruby's heart."[56] But whereas for Janie this moment leads to a profound epiphany—what fell "was her image of Jody," which she realizes then "never was the flesh and blood figure of her dreams"[57]—Ruby experiences no such epiphany about Sam. She recognizes the marriage is different, but "[a]fter a few days they carried on as usual."[58] Janie experiences a moment of self-knowledge; Ruby experiences rejection. So when Sam brings home his new friend, Dr. Adams, who immediately takes notice of Ruby, she is by Hurston's representation so effaced that this

man's attention buoys her. And after her baby is born and she again feels low, she summons the doctor to help her. She accepts the help he proposes, and the affair begins. The article ends with several lines of free indirect discourse ("She felt warm and grateful toward him. And this man was no trash out of the streets of Live Oak. This was an important, outstanding man, and—in addition—physically equipped to be desirable to many women"[59]), lines that once again signal Ruby's now ineluctable path of self-destruction.

The last major moments of free indirect discourse occur in the seventh and shortest article of the series, published on April 11. The technique dominates the installment, and its function is to chart Ruby's evolving confusion about her affair with Adams. After a "night of passion," Hurston has Ruby in bed alone, where she "thought things over. She saw the net closing around her. Did she want to escape? Well, yes, and then again, no." The free indirect discourse continues: "How had the former Ruby Jackson gotten into such a fix? My God, her mother and father, brothers and sisters would die of shame if they dreamed of it. And Sam, the community of Live Oak would explode like gasoline. Please God, help her! For, she didn't see how she could help herself."[60]

And then, when Ruby realizes she is pregnant by Adams, Hurston again marks the moment as transitional with free indirect discourse: "But alone, Ruby was worried. What would Sam say or do? What about her own family? What about the Negroes of Live Oak?"[61] It is a transition to total entrapment, a reversal of the most pronounced moment of free indirect discourse associated with Janie in *Their Eyes*. In that example, Janie makes a leap to freedom by moving from reassuring herself that she still has money—the kind of protection Joe Starks offered—despite that some of her money, along with Tea Cake, has gone missing ("She had ten dollars in her pocket and twelve hundred in the bank")—to being worried about Tea Cake ("But oh God, don't let Tea Cake be off somewhere hurt and Ah not know nothing about it")—to a willingness to throw in her lot with Tea Cake and his improvisatory lifestyle ("And God, please suh, don't let him love nobody else but me. Maybe Ah'm is uh fool, Lawd, . . . but . . . Ah been waitin', Jesus. Ah done waited uh long time").[62]

The last three articles of the McCollum series function as a denouement for Ruby's "life story." The eighth, appearing on April 18, contains the final clear echoes from *Their Eyes*, as it delineates the total collapse of Ruby's marriage to Sam and then moves back to the courtroom drama that had ended three months earlier. Hurston describes how Sam, upon learning that Ruby was carrying LeRoy Adams's baby, "quietly moved into a separate bedroom" in the family home "and, after a while, began to complain of pains about his

heart." With Ruby "lost to him," he continued to decline: "In quiet moments, the sides of his face looked limp and sagging, like wet-wash hung out to dry from his ears."[63] These details recall Jody Starks, who, after Janie publicly calls into question his manhood in response to his insults regarding her age and appearance, "moved his things and slept in a room downstairs." His physical deterioration thereafter also accelerates, as Janie observes "how baggy Joe was getting all over, like bags hanging from an ironing board. A little sack hung from the corners of his eyes and rested on his cheek-bones; a loose-filled bag of feathers hung from his ears and rested on his neck beneath his chin."[64] Janie is saddened by Joe's state, as she recognizes how his need to control had finally diminished him, turning a "man" into simply a "voice." And then she takes "careful stock of herself" and likes what she sees: "a handsome"—and independent—"woman," freed from Jody's protection.[65] Ruby, however, even after the shooting of Adams, Hurston suggests, cannot take stock of herself as a woman apart from a man: "'I picked from the very top,' [Ruby] would say. 'I was married to the top Negro of Suwanee County, and Dr. Adams was the top white man. When I tie up with a man, I have influence with him. Men love me when they get to know me.'"[66]

Hurston represents Ruby as never moving beyond wanting to derive her identity from a man, a social prescription Janie instinctively rebelled against. When Jody tells her *his* ambition "makes uh big woman outa [*her*]," the narrator reports, "[a] feeling of coldness and fear took hold of" Janie,[67] a fear of the very entrapment that defined—and derailed—Ruby's life.

The final two installments reinforce that Ruby was indeed trapped. In the April 25 story, Hurston tells her readers exactly that: "Ruby feels—and, perhaps, justly so—that she has been the victim of a trap." Readers might think the trap was one set by Dr. Adams, who "began to prescribe medicines for her that had a queer effect upon her." And he too began to feel possessive, wanting her apparently to move out to his farm and to submit to his sexual advances even on the morning of August 3. But the series as a whole suggests a larger trap—lack of self-knowledge born of a need for protection. As Hurston has Ruby, post-trial and in jail, say, "I do not grasp that it is myself at times. I seem to be walking in somebody else's dream."[68] And Hurston brings back in the final installment Ruby's words uttered at the end of her trial, reinforcing her continuing lack of self-knowledge: "I, I, I don't know whether I was right, or wrong . . . ," which support Hurston's conclusion: "[I]t is highly probabl[e] that Mrs. McCollum is a victim instead of the cold, ruthless killer that the state claims her to be."[69]

**Conclusion**

That Ruby McCollum shot and killed Dr. C. LeRoy Adams was never in dispute. Instead, the trial was intended to uncover the motivation for the killing, which it never did. Knowing that, Hurston set for herself the task of trying to piece together and make sense of Ruby's story in order to dispel the fictional motivation—that Ruby McCollum killed her doctor because she didn't want to pay her bill—embraced by the national press, courtroom, and Live Oak community. It was a motivation required by the mid-twentieth-century Southern etiquette of race relations, which denied the possibility of complicated sexual relationships that crossed racial lines. The great irony, of course, is that such a denial insured that race would remain the dominant factor, suppressing motivations shaped by the gender roles the era endorsed. By using dimensions of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her own novel delineating a woman's growth in self-understanding, Hurston brought gender to the fore in her series. Janie Crawford and Ruby McCollum shared much initially, but it was what they didn't share—call it nerve, or the imagination, to ignore social expectations regarding female independence—that changed Janie's successful quest for self-understanding into Ruby's cautionary tale of how "protection" can be perverted. In the South of the 1950s, it took imagination—and fiction—to tell that story.

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*Roberta S. Maguire is professor and chair of the Department of English at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, where she teaches courses on African American literature and culture and literary theory. She was the editor of the Fall 2013 special issue of* Literary Journalism Studies*, which focused on African American literary journalism, and she has published on the narrative nonfiction of Albert Murray, Alice Childress, and Anna Julia Cooper, as well as on the scope of African American literary journalism produced during the 1950s. Her current research focuses on the history of literary journalism in the US black community.*


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## Notes

1. Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner, 2003), 411–14.

2. Circulation of the paper was 280,000 in 1950, according to Patrick S. Washburn in *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 185.

3. Boyd, *Rainbows*, 414. As "the nation's top black newspaper" at mid-century (Washburn, *Voice of Freedom*, 4), the *Pittsburgh Courier* drew African American subscribers from across the nation, and especially from eastern states like Florida.

4. Washburn, *Voice of Freedom*, 4.

5. The paper sent Revella Clay and A.M. Rivera, Jr., who contributed between them three articles, the last appearing October 4, 1952, with the headline "State Fights Insanity Plea." See also the summary of the early *Courier* coverage in C. Arthur Ellis, Jr. and Leslie E. Ellis, *The Trial of Ruby McCollum: The True-Crime Story that Shook the Foundations of the Segregationist South!* (Bloomington, IN: 1st Books Library, 2003), 137.

6. The Ellises in *The Trial of Ruby McCollum* indicate Hurston was invited to take on the assignment because of her literary talent: "Sensing that the McCollum story had all the makings of a novel, and maybe even a movie, the *Courier* engaged Zora Neale Hurston, the famous writer of the Harlem Renaissance, to lead their team in Live Oak" (137). Reinforcing this conclusion is the biographical description the paper included with Hurston's first article: "One of America's most illustrious women novelists . . . will bring to *Courier* readers in her own poignant language . . . a moving, interpretive, descriptive analysis of the hearings . . . and the trial . . . of Mrs. Ruby McCollum. . . . With a searching pen . . . she will report the proceedings . . . the undertones . . . the overtones . . . the implications" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, October 11, 1952).

7. "Drama on the Suwanee," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 11, 1952.

8. Ibid.

9. See, for example, "Doctor Slain Over Bill," *New York Times*, August 3, 1952; "Negro Woman in Florida Kills White Doctor; Unrest Is Curbed," *New York Herald Tribune*, August 3, 1952; "Ruby McCollum Sane; Faces Trial For Murder," *New York Amsterdam News*, October 18, 1952; and "Set Nov. 18 for Trial of Fla. Woman," *Chicago Defender*, October 25, 1952.

10. William Bradford Huie, *Ruby McCollum: Woman in the Suwanee Jail* (New York: Dutton, 1956), 92. Hurston's quoted words are part of a recollection of the first trial that Hurston wrote for Huie and which he included in his book.

11. Ibid., 101.

12. A.M. Rivera, Jr., "Chill Anxiety Grips Race Where Matron Shot Medic in Florida," *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 4, 1952.

13. Boyd, *Rainbows*, 416–17; Carla Kaplan, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 608.

14. Susan Edwards Meisenhelder, *Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick:*

*Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 179.

15. Familiar examples are Stephen Crane's reworking of "Stephen Crane's Own Story" in "The Open Boat" and Ernest Hemingway's inclusion of his Spanish Civil War reporting in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

16. See the articles collected in Richard Lance Keeble and John Tulloch, eds., *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination*, vol. 2 (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), and in John S. Bak and Bill Reynolds, eds., *Literary Journalism Across the Globe* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2011), for how these concerns remain at the center of the scholarly discourse.

17. I have fleshed out these ideas more fully in an essay, "African American Literary Journalism in the 1950s," which appeared in *Global Literary Journalism: Exploring the Journalistic Imagination,* vol. 2, eds. Richard Lance Keeble and John Tulloch (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 75–93, and in my introduction to the special issue of *Literary Journalism Studies* devoted to African American literary journalism (*Literary Journalism Studies* 5, no. 2 [2013]: 8–14).

18. "African American Literary Journalism in the 1950s," 75–79.

19. Zora Neale Hurston, "Art and Such," in *Folklore, Memoirs, and Other Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1995), 908.

20. Hurston, "What White Publishers Won't Print," in *Within the Circle: An Anthology of African American Literary Criticism from the Harlem Renaissance to the Present*, ed. Angelyn Mitchell (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 119.

21. Andrew Delbanco, "The Political Incorrectness of Zora Neale Hurston," in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* 18 (Winter 1997–98): 103.

22. The quoted descriptions of the trial are in Huie, *Woman in the Suwanee Jail,* 89.

23. Hurston, "The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!," *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 28, 1953.

24. Ibid.

25. Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2006), 7.

26. Hurston, "Life Story," February 28, 1953.

27. Hurston, "The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 7, 1953.

28. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 72.

29. Hurston, "Life Story," March 7, 1953.

30. Hurston, "The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!," *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 14, 1953.

31. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 76.

32. Ibid., 104.

33. Hurston, "Life Story," March 14, 1953.

34. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 11.

35. Hurston, "Life Story," March 14, 1953.

36. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 24.

37. Hurston, “Life Story,” March 14, 1953.

38. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 71, 15.

39. Hurston, “The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 21, 1953.

40. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 11, 89.

41. Hurston, “Life Story,” March 21, 1953.

42. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 29.

43. Hurston, “Life Story,” March 21, 1953.

44. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 141.

45. See, for example, Phyllis Frus, *The Politics and Poetics of Journalistic Narrative: The Timely and the Timeless* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 13–52, and Nora Berning, *Narrative Means to Journalistic Ends: A Narratological Analysis of Selected Journalistic Reportages* (New York: Springer, 2010), 73.

46. See Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “Zora Neale Hurston and the Speakerly Text,” in his *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 170–216.

47. Hurston, “Life Story,” March 21, 1953.

48. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 86.

49. Hurston, “The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, March 28, 1953.

50. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 43, 50.

51. Ibid., 114.

52. Hurston, “Life Story,” March 28, 1953.

53. Hurston, “The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 4, 1953.

54. Ibid.

55. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 72.

56. Hurston, “Life Story,” April 4, 1953.

57. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 72.

58. Hurston, “Life Story,” April 4, 1953.

59. Ibid.

60. Hurston, “The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 11, 1953.

61. Ibid.

62. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 120.

63. Hurston, “Life Story,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 25, 1953.

64. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 81.

65. Ibid., 87.

66. Hurston, “Life Story, April 18, 1953.

67. Hurston, *Their Eyes*, 46.

68. Hurston, “Life Story,” Pittsburgh Courier, April 25, 1953.

69. Hurston, “The Life Story of Mrs. Ruby J. McCollum!,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, May 2, 1953.