Countless works by Black authors have found multiple lives through film adaptations, recontextualizing the ways in which modern audiences can engage with these narratives. From Charles Chesnutt’s novel *The House Behind the Cedars*, and the 1927 film directed by Oscar Micheaux, to Angie Thomas’ *The Hate U Give* and the 2017 film directed by George Tillman Jr., adaptations have brought renewed attention to works by Black authors expanding the discussion of a range of topics, including race, identity, coming of age, class conflict, and Black love. Black film, like Black writing, gives us history, past and present, real and reimagined. In order to highlight works within the Project on the History of Black Writing’s collection and demonstrate the impact these adaptations have had on the reception, circulation, and growing popularity of Black literature, this year’s Black Literary Suite (BLS) has selected the theme: "Black Writing in Reel Time." The timeline, interactive map, and selected filmography highlight works that range from the Antebellum period, such as Solomon Northup’s autobiography *Twelve Years a Slave*, to the 21st century, where novels like *The Hate U Give* offer meaningful reflections that educate, challenge, and -yes- entertain us.
Often considered the father of Black film, Kansas-born filmmaker Oscar Micheaux wrote, directed, and produced *The Homesteader*, a 1919 black-and-white silent film, adapted from his 1917 novel based on his experiences. Other important time periods in our collection include the Harlem Renaissance, where the work of literary greats such as Zora Neale Hurston would have to wait until present day to find a film audience. Her semi-autobiographical novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a love story about Black womanhood showcasing an historic all-Black town in Florida, was later adapted into a teleplay, directed by Darnell Martin and produced by Oprah Winfrey’s Harpo Films. During the Civil Rights era, Gordon Parks made his directorial debut with the 1969 film version of his 1963 novel *The Learning Tree*, while adaptations like Alex Haley’s *Roots* portray the harsh realities of chattel slavery and the fight for freedom and social justice. Ernest Gaines’ *A Lesson Before Dying*, released as a film in 1993, showed the lasting effects and ongoing struggle against a socially unjust system. Other works from our collection featured in our exhibit include Walter Mosley’s *Devil in a Blue Dress*, transformed into a 1995 neo noir thriller directed by Carl Franklin, and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, directed by Jonathan Demme as another Harpo production. Coming-of-age favorites such as James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, produced by PBS in 1985, and popular best-sellers like Terry McMillan’s *Waiting to Exhale*, a 20th Century Fox production released in 1995, demonstrate the extended networks from which contemporary films now emerge. Some novels benefit from a variety of media presentations, like Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, which has been adapted multiple times for the stage and screen. Whether it’s the 1951 film adaptation by Argentine filmmaker Pierre Chenal starring Wright himself, Jerrold Freeman’s 1986 film, or Rashid Johnson’s cinematic rendition in 2019 starring Ashton Sanders, each Native Son adaptation has attempted to fit Wright’s ideas to the changing times. These films allow narratives to be retold through the audience’s eyes, bringing fresh angles through which we can interpret stories that are as familiar as they are classic.

Our 2020 BLS is a walk-through of Black writing, reborn for a new age and seen in a new light. The exploration of fiction and autobiographies as films emphasizes the resounding impact these works have had on society. Both in their original form and adaptations, we are able to discover the heart of the Black community through different ways of seeing. We can begin to understand the love, courage, struggles, and triumph associated with each journey. “Black Writing in Reel Time” honors the Project on the History of Black Writing’s commitment to expand our knowledge of Black writing and its power beyond the classroom, by promoting discussion and dialogue among readers, writers, and the general public.
12 YEARS A SLAVE
Solomon Northup, whose mother had been emancipated from slavery, was born in July 1808 in Minerva, NY. He grew up a free person and although he was educated and living in New York, he was kidnapped and sold into slavery in 1841. He endured 12 years of enslavement, until 1853, when an old colleague from the North found Northup, and with the help of their friends, was able to prove Northup’s free status, securing his release from slavery. Northup wrote his autobiography, *12 Years a Slave*, published in 1853. As an example of the genre of slavery narratives, it recounts his experiences, giving a first-person view of what slavery was like in the United States.
An illustration from *Twelve Years A Slave*, the memoir of Solomon Northrup, 1853: "Chapin Rescues Solomon from Hanging".

*12 Years a Slave* is set in the pre-Civil War era, detailing the author's birth as the son of an emancipated woman in the North, living and working in upstate New York alongside his family. As an adult, he was a laborer and a violinist, supporting his family. One night, two men offered him a job to work as a fiddler for a traveling circus. Northup took the offer and was kidnapped by the men and sold into slavery in Louisiana. From there, he was sold to many owners, most notably, the cruel southern planter Edwin Epps. During his time under Epps' ownership, Northup met Patsey, a young high-spirited enslaved girl who was known as the "Queen of the Cotton Fields" for her hard work, which was intended to offset the perception of laziness among Blacks at the time. The story ends with Northup's 1853 return to freedom with the aid of Northern friends who had come to his rescue.
One of the defining characteristics of Northup’s narrative is its raw and factual account of pre-Civil War slavery. The “slave narrative” as a genre first appeared in the 18th century and continued to be written well beyond the Emancipation period. Foundational to the development of the African American novel, its association with anti-slavery and the abolition movement prevented its inclusion as “literature” until the mid-twentieth century, when the recovery of these works resulted in hundreds of narratives, both as told to- and self-authored, which had circulated throughout the United States and Europe. Both original works written during the period and the thousands of oral narratives collected under the Federal Writers Project in the 1930s offer powerful testimony and documentary evidence of the horrors of a system which could not be ignored. Northup’s narrative is one of the longest and most detailed. Originally published in 1853, it was well received and reprinted in 1869 but then virtually disappeared for nearly 100 years. Its recovery occurred in 1968 after Sue Eakin, a historian who grew up near the Louisiana plantation where Northup had been enslaved, spent years learning about Northup’s life and determined to prove those who considered it fiction wrong. She spent the rest of her life in ongoing recovery efforts, including contacting Northup’s descendants, and finally, in 2007, two years before her death, completing the enhanced edition of 12 Years a Slave with maps, pictures, and historical notes. Its accuracy and factual detail allow the novel to be considered by many one of the most reliable historical references on slavery that we have.
In partnership with the National Endowment for the Humanities, legendary African American film director Gordon Parks directed the first film adaptation of Northup’s novel: *Solomon Northup’s Odyssey*. Released in 1984 as a made-for-television film that formed part of PBS’s *American Playhouse* series, the film starred Avery Brooks as Northup and portrayed the somber realities of slavery while remaining gentle and muted. Parks’ work received great praise, with one of its outstanding features being the decision to have a mixed-race cast and crew, which had become Parks’ trademark since his debut film The Learning Tree. In his memoir *A Hungry Heart*, Parks wrote, “I wanted a mixed crew, perhaps to show Southerners how Whites and Blacks could work peacefully together . . . . It had never occurred to some of the Whites that these different races could enjoy eating beside one another.” For Parks, his choices were a statement of equality and a fight for equal rights.

Theatrical release poster for McQueen’s *12 Years A Slave* film adaptation.

British director Steve McQueen and scriptwriter John Ridley provided another adaptation, using Eakin’s version to create the film *12 Years a Slave*. Released on October 18, 2013, the film starred
Chiwetel Ejiofor as Solomon Northup, Michael Fassbender as Edwin Epps, and Lupita Nyong’o as Patsey. As the first major Hollywood film to provide an inside view of slavery by those who experienced it themselves, McQueen’s film shocked many audiences around the world with the true horrors of slavery. Alex Haley’s Roots (1977) was by then a distant memory. The Journal of American History stated, “The true accomplishment of the film is its masterly use of the melodramatic form to produce an audiovisual experience that many have praised for its skillful rendering of the horrors of slavery.” Finding great success worldwide, the film received praise for its raw and passionate portrayal of Northup’s life. In 2014, 12 Years a Slave took home three Academy Awards, including Best Motion Picture, Best Supporting Actress, and Best Adapted Screenplay. It also received the Golden Globe for Best Motion Picture and the BAFTA Award for the same. Alongside its great success, the film also received some criticism, primarily in its accuracy in representing Northup’s novel. Some scenes within the film, as pointed out by The Atlantic, were not present in the novel, such as one of the opening scenes, wherein Northup has a sexual encounter with a female slave. However, former USA Today reporter and film critic, Susan Wloszczyna states that the added scenes and details bring the viewer in and make them feel as though, “they have actually witnessed American slavery in all its appalling horror for the very first time.” Agreeing, the Journal of American History states that while it’s not fully accurate, the details of the film fuel its ability to bring viewers in and allow them to identify with Northup, a feat most slavery films fail to accomplish.

12 Years A Slave, title page source: The New York Public Library.
Its vulnerable and gut-wrenching recounting forces readers to live through the experiences of those living under slavery, creating a new sense of empathy and understanding. Its historical aspect also allows present-day society to look back on its past and face its reality. McQueen’s film, paired with Ejiofor’s acting, was somber but meditative, which allowed viewers to place themselves in Northup’s shoes and live with him through the horrors of the slavery era. *12 Years a Slave* helps to further contemporary audience’s understanding of slavery as a dehumanizing and immoral act of violence.
THE SPORT OF THE GODS BY PAUL LAURENCE DUNBAR
Paul Laurence Dunbar was born June 27, 1872 in Dayton, Ohio, to parents for whom emancipation came as residents of Kentucky. Despite his parents’ early divorce, both played a central role in his upbringing. His mother, Matilda Murphy Dunbar, taught him how to read, instilling a love of language early. His father, Joshua Dunbar, had escaped to Canada before returning to the United States to fight in the Civil War, joining the Massachusetts 55th Regiment, the first officially recognized Black military unit in the US. In high school, Dunbar served as the editor-in-chief of his school newspaper and became the senior class president while being the only Black student in his graduating class. His high school English curriculum included a full diet of 19th century American and British Romantic poetry, which provided him the models for his future work. After graduating from high school, however, his hopes of continuing his education were dashed due to his financial situation. While working as an elevator operator, in 1893, Dunbar published Oak and Ivy, his first collection of poetry. Two years later, when he published Majors and Minors (1895), Dunbar caught the attention of William Dean Howells, a major novelist and literary critic. That same year, he began his courtship with Alice Ruth Moore, a fellow poet and teacher, whom he married in 1898. It was Howells who subsequently helped Dunbar publish his most widely known volume of poetry in 1896: Lyrics of Lowly Life. The attention Dunbar’s Lyrics garnered helped him land a steady job in the reading room of the Library of Congress. During his time there, he turned his attention to writing fiction, including The Sport of the Gods (1902), considered one of his best works. In a short period of time, Dunbar became a dedicated writer of literature. Having grown up exposed to that generation between slavery and freedom, his work borrowed from rich oral folk and written traditions. Although he was not always certain or pleased with what his critics praised him for—white critics preferred his dialect poems, for example - Dunbar wrote in traditional dialect and standard English, finding eager audiences for both. His linguistic innovation and mimicry weren’t fully appreciated until years after his death. Although poets after Dunbar like Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes admired and emulated his work, it was James Weldon Johnson, leading Harlem Renaissance critic, whose criticism of Dunbar’s overuse of a derivative plantation dialect prevailed. Hughes’ reliance on Black vernacular speech, indirection and humor to attack racist practices show a direct link to Dunbar’s tradition. Nevertheless, Dunbar was the best known, read and recited - Black writer of his time, among white and Black, whose work could be found in the leading magazines of the period.
While Dunbar’s professional life was advancing rapidly, his personal life was falling apart. The marriage was troubled from the start. Dunbar suffered from poor health, compounded by heavy drinking, after alcohol was prescribed as medication for his tuberculosis. After the couple separated in 1902, Alice Dunbar continued her publishing career using her husband’s last name. In 1906, after the prolonged deterioration of his health, Dunbar succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of 33, after spending his final years with his mother in Dayton, Ohio. In his short life, Dunbar produced eleven volumes of poetry, a volume almost every year between Oak and Ivy and his last Lyrics of Sunshine and Shadow, published in 1905, the year before his death. His five works of fiction, novels and short story collections, between The Uncalled (1898) and The Sport of the Gods, prefigure the Harlem Renaissance. A Dunbar revival began in the second half of the 20th century, marked by the centennial of his birth. An event organized by the University of Dayton drew major Black poets, including Margaret Walker and Nikki Giovanni, both of whom provided a revised assessment of the poet, who struggled to find a voice, feeling himself caught between two literary worlds. Jay Martin, who was responsible for that centennial, published A Singer in the Dawn: Reinterpretations of Paul Laurence Dunbar (1975), a study that opened up important new discussions about Dunbar’s legacy.

The Sport of the Gods analyzes topics that were unaddressed prior to its appearance in 1902. Written through the lens of a family of Black, southern sharecroppers, the story centers around the Hamilton family, Berry, Fanny and their children, Joe and Kitty, who work as servants to the white Oakleys. The reader follows the Hamiltons as they are forced to flee a relatively stable life in the post-Civil War South as sharecroppers to imprisonment and disillusionment in New York City. The majority of the novel takes place in New York City after Berry is sentenced to prison after being
falsely accused of theft by the Oakleys. The Sport of the Gods reflects the naturalist writing of the period. With its focus on themes of Black criminality, family disintegration, and fate, Dunbar’s portrayal of the South is notable as it counters the prevailing romanticization of popular pastoral images of the South. Thomas Alan Dichter approaches Dunbar’s work through the lens of racial criminalization and more specifically, the portrayal of the Hamilton family as the default perpetrators of a crime due to their status as a Black family in the South living in proximity to a white family, perceived as well-to-do.

Produced by Reel Productions, a white-owned company who specialized in race films, i.e. all Black casts, The Sport of the Gods was adapted to film and released on April 23, 1921. The studio had already been responsible for other films, including The Burden of Race, Ties of Blood and The Secret Sorrow, all released that same year. Directed by Henry J. Vernot, the film starred Leon Williams as Berry, Lucille Brown as Fanny, G. Edward Brown as Joe, and Elizabeth Boyer as Kitty. Like the work of Oscar Micheaux, early white commercial ventures that produced adaptations of a work by a Black author have not left much information, especially from this silent film era. Few of these films have survived. After its initial release, an ad in The Chicago Defender stated, “The Sport of the Gods’ is a stirring melodrama of the underworld and exposes in a dramatic manner the methods and dives of the underworld’s most sinister characters...[it is] a picture that everyone should see and affords entertainment for man, woman, and child.” About a month later, public response to the adaptation was positive with that same newspaper printing an article with the subtitle, “Great Production Playing to Large and Satisfied Audiences at The Owl.”
Paul Laurence Dunbar’s The Sport of the Gods stepped away from the antebellum plantation fiction, choosing instead to focus on prescient themes that would become crucial to the experiences of African Americans in the post-slavery South. The sharecropping system as a replacement for plantation slavery and the subsequent out-migration from the South and its impact on race relations are linked with the criminalization of Black bodies and of the Black family. Dunbar dared to draw attention to the internal lives of Blacks and social, cultural, and economic transformations in early 20th century America. Although Dunbar spent most of his life in his native Ohio, he was a visionary writer whose prophetic writing foreshadowed many current realities.
THE HOMESTEADER BY OSCAR MICHEAUX
Before there were contemporary Black filmmakers like Ava Duvenary, Spike Lee, Tyler Perry, and Lena Waithe, there was Oscar Micheaux [ne Michaux]. Dubbed “The Czar of Black Hollywood,” Micheaux was an author, Pullman porter, homesteader, and filmmaker. Born January 2, 1884, as one of thirteen children to freed people Calvin S. and Belle Michaux in Metropolis, Illinois, Micheaux grew up in Great Bend, Kansas. After dropping out of high school, Micheaux became a Pullman porter in Chicago and then a South Dakota homesteader. His enterprising nature displayed itself early. Micheaux began writing novels during the South Dakota period and would continue to write and publish his novels through his Book Supply Company, thus providing the scripts for many of his films. His first novel was the semi-autobiographical *The Conquest: The Story of a Negro Pioneer* (1913). Another novel, *The Homesteader* (1917) expanded his theme by including the conflicts of interracial marriage. Believing that the Black community should practice self-reliance, Micheaux infused that theme into all that he did as a successful novelist, film director, and independent producer. A year after he founded Micheaux Pictures Corporation, he made his debut as a screenwriter, cameraman, director, producer, and distributor for the film based on *The Homesteader*, the first known full-length feature film by an African American, released in 1919. As the most successful early Black filmmaker, who worked in both the silent and sound eras, Micheaux single-handedly produced numerous Black films, including an adaptation of Williams Waddell Chesnutt’s *The House Behind the Cedars* in 1927.
A move to New York meant that he could base his company on 135th Street in Harlem, where he produced films over a thirty-year period. Micheaux’s method was not different from most independent Black filmmakers today. He would announce plans for the film, raise money, and secure commitments at film theatres and venues in advance. Once he had enough money, he would shoot the film quickly to meet the deadlines for the distribution schedule he had established. Micheaux was only an early example of the continuing “fight against Hollywood,” which refers to the treatment and depiction of Black life by the industry. The system worked for some 44 films and 24 features that he produced. There were at least 15 sound films, the first of which was The Exile that appeared in 1931. Micheaux was an innovator in the industry since *The Exile* was not only based on his first published novel, *The Conquest* (1913), it was also the first known sound film by an African American. Micheaux’s films countered many stock stereotypes in the film industry at the time since he featured race men in starring roles as doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and semi-gangster types. A short list of Micheaux’s most well-known films and their contributions include the following: 1920’s *Within Our Gates* features a lynching sequence as a counter to white lynching films; 1925’s *Body and Soul*, starring Paul Robeson, earned a posthumous Lifetime Achievement Award by the Directors Guild of
America; and 1938’s God’s Stepchildren, focused on the theme of color consciousness, similar to the classic Hollywood film *Imitation of Life*.

Evelyn Preer as Orleans in *The Homesteader* source: New York Public Library.

Micheaux’s films have had to be recovered and remastered, which has made it difficult to assess the full importance and range of his work. A look at some of his film titles shows him to be both an artist and a social historian, especially those adapted from his published novels Wind from *Nowhere* (1941), *The Case of Mrs. Wingate* (1944), *The Story of Dorothy Stanfield* (1946), and *The Masquerade* (1947). His attention to both Chicago and New York settings helps to give credence to the expanded notion of the New Negro Renaissance, best understood as a period marked by the
emergence of Black cultural production in multiple sites, many of which were major destination points for the Black migration. Micheaux’s last film, Betrayal (1948), makes an important comment on his little known status at the end of his life. He died in Charlotte, NC in 1951, and showed his commitment to the state of his birth by expressing his desire to be buried in Great Bend, Kansas.

Viewers struggled to fit in a crowded theater to watch *The Homesteader* at Chicago’s most prestigious black theater, the Vendome, pictured here in 1944. Source: Hansel Mieth/The Life Picture Collection via Getty Images.

*The Homesteader* follows a Black farmer named Jean Baptiste who faces many challenges on his homestead in South Dakota. Jean Baptiste falls in love with a biracial woman named Agnes, who is passing for white. Wanting to stay loyal to the Black race, he decides to marry a Black woman named Orleans instead. As the novel progresses, Orleans kills her father and commits suicide. Baptiste is later reunited with his former love Agnes and her mixed heritage is revealed. In his novel, Micheaux explores the themes of race relations, interracial marriage, passing, and homesteading. Because the
novel was well-received by audiences, it caught the attention of George P. Johnson, who was the book manager of Lincoln Motion Picture Company, a Black film enterprise. Although Johnson was interested in making The Homesteader into a film, creative differences drove Micheaux to finance the film himself. The Homesteader had an all-Black cast, including Blacks who could pass in the role of white characters. Marketed as a “new epoch in the achievements of the darker races,” and highly anticipated, The Homesteader debuted at the Vendome, a Black premier theater in Chicago. Audiences flocked to the premiere, which was filled to its maximum capacity of 8,000. Half-Century Magazine said, ”Many scenes rank in power and workmanship with the greatest of white western productions.” Lorenzo Tucker, an actor for Micheaux films, was quoted in the LA Times, “He'd [Micheaux] stay up all night and have all the parts ready when we met in the morning to start shooting. He always knew exactly what he wanted.” The film was considered groundbreaking, as it showcased Black people in roles other than caricatures on screen. Currently, The Homesteader is one of Micheaux’s films yet to be recovered.

The Wichita Beacon (Wichita, Sedgwick, Kansas, United States of America) 8 March 1919 source: The Department of Afro-American Research Arts and Culture.

Oscar Micheaux left a tremendous mark on the film industry. His books and films were among the first forms of Black-owned entertainment available. His ability to quickly shoot scenes was ingenious. A New Yorker article proclaimed that “Oscar Micheaux was not the first Black filmmaker, but he was the first Black auteur because he dared to dabble in taboo topics like interracial marriage and passing.” The political nature of his subject matter necessarily kept Micheaux on the sidelines of a booming industry. He focused on issues that the Black community faced, depicted Black people in a positive light, and portrayed them as entrepreneurs like himself. Micheaux’s efforts toward positive representation for Black people and his ability to create relatable stories drew crowds to his films.
THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD BY ZORA NEALE HURSTON
Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama to John Cornelius Hurston and Lucy Potts Hurston. Born into slavery, John traveled to Eatonville, Florida, the first African American incorporated municipality in the U.S., where he later became a minister and Eatonville mayor. When Hurston was 13, her mother Lucy passed away, an event she recounted in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road* (1942) -- “It seemed as she died that the sun went down on purpose to flee away from me.” Her father’s remarriage and the tension with her stepmother caused Hurston to leave home. Working several odd jobs, Hurston moved to Baltimore, Maryland, entered high school at 26, giving her age as 16 to receive funding. After completing an associate degree from Howard University, Hurston published her first short story "*John Redding Goes to Sea*" (1921) and a poem “O Night” (1921) in the Howard literary magazine *Stylus*. When she moved to Harlem in 1925, her home became the place for social gatherings for Harlem Renaissance writers like Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Bennett, Countee Cullen and several others, who together launched the literary magazine *Fire!* (1926). It was also in New York where Hurston began her graduate studies in anthropology at Barnard College under Franz Boas, launching her career as an anthropologist. Her deep understanding of southern folk culture and folkways and a unique narrative skill resulted in a remarkable body of work that was ahead of its time. Foregrounding Black culture and the South in particular remained the theme and focus of her professional career. Over the next two decades, Hurston was active in the Harlem and Chicago Renaissances but traveled widely to collect African American folklore in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, as well as conduct ethnographic research in Haiti and Jamaica.
After publishing her first novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Hurston would go on to publish two more works of fiction, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939), and Seraph on the Suwanee, and widely used collections of ethnography and folklore found in *Mules and Men* (1935), *The Florida Negro* (1938), and *Tell My Horse* (1938); along with plays, essays, and her autobiography. Despite her various literary and anthropological successes, Hurston remained an outlier. Ostracized for social and political views and the anti-urban focus of her work, she faced a career in decline in the 1940’s. After moving to Fort Pierce, Florida in 1948, where she worked as a maid and substitute teacher, she began accepting opportunities to write for magazines and newspapers, including the Pittsburgh Courier. After a series of strokes, Hurston died in obscurity and was buried in an unmarked grave in The Garden of Heavenly Rest in Ft. Pierce. More than a decade after her death in 1960, Alice Walker published an essay in *Ms. Magazine*, recounting her journey in search of Hurston, leading to the discovery of Hurston’s grave. Walker inscribed her tombstone with “Zora Neale Hurston — A Genius of the South — 1901-1960 — Novelist — Folklorist — Anthropologist.” The essay, Walker’s journey, and a first biography by the late Robert E. Hemenway helped to introduce Hurston to a new generation, sparking a revival of interest in her work.
Their Eyes Were Watching God’s original appearance on Sept. 18, 1937 departed from the works by most Black authors of the period. It tells the story of Janie Crawford, a middle-aged Black woman who returns to Eatonville and confides in her friend Pheoby the story of her three marriages. Her first semi-“arranged” marriage to Logan Killocks, a pragmatic and unromantic man is followed by one to Jody Starks, the self-important mayor of Eatonville. In the novel, Janie exposes her abusive relationships with men and the confirmation of her grandmother’s words that they were “branches without roots...that makes things come round in queer ways.” Janie finally meets Tea Cake, the first man she truly loves, sharing a life together in Jacksonville until the untimely end of their relationship after a terrible hurricane. The novel covers themes of love, desire, power, independence, and womanhood as Janie finds herself. The novel received mixed reviews, as Hurston tackled difficult topics in the lives of Black women, exposing misogyny, which also tainted the novel’s reception. Among her biggest critics was Richard Wright, whose career was emerging at the same time and who said Hurston’s appeal to white audiences showed “no desire whatsoever to move in the direction of serious fiction.” George Stevens, however, would comment accurately on what most critics could not see. In one of the first reviews in the Saturday Night Review of Literature, he said, “No one has ever reported the speech of Negroes with a more accurate ear for its raciness, its rich invention, and its music.” It would take decades for the novel, with its use of vernacular and self-identifying themes, to find its place in the canon of Black women’s literature both for its stylistic and thematic significance. In our time, Their Eyes has become an extremely popular literary anthem for Black women. Widely taught in high schools and colleges, this novel’s move from obscurity to visibility is a much-needed celebration for soulful, complex narratives of Black women’s becoming and belonging.
The film adaptation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was released on March 6, 2005. The television adaptation of the book, which starred Halle Berry as Janie and Michael Ealy as Tea Cake, had different opinions regarding its success. One of the key elements of Their Eyes Were Watching God’s film debut was its producer, Oprah Winfrey. The film adaptation was done by Winfrey’s production company for their TV audience, which is mostly white females. Due to this audience, the film was made to attract a large viewing and was marketed to appeal to the white audience. This made the film different from the novel, mostly in that it focused more on love as a broad topic, and had little to no mention of the novel’s themes of race, power, and identity. *Entertainment Weekly* reviewed the film and said, “While the book chews on meaty questions of race and identity, the movie largely resigns itself to the realm of sudsy romance”. In a similar opinion, the *NY Times* mentioned that the film was dull at times, however, the use of vernacular made the movie “irregular and stimulating”. Berry played a big role in drawing audiences to the movie. Her past success and physical appearance interested viewers, but her role was more focused on her appearance than her talent. Her performance did, however, gain both an Emmy and a Golden Globe nomination in 2006. The film did not find much success outside of award show nominations and was simply regarded as no more than a sexy romance film starring Halle Berry.

While riddled with debate and criticism, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as a novel offered a detailed portrayal of a Southern Black woman’s journey toward self-realization. While the novel found success both in its time and after Walker’s rediscovery, the film adaptation fell short for modern critics. Appealing to a mostly white audience, the film stripped the novel of its literary essence, depending on celebrity and romance, foregoing more complex concerns about Black women’s identity that Hurston emphasized. Regardless, it brought renewed attention to the novel and interest in Hurston’s larger canon, an interest that continues to grow.
NATIVE SON BY RICHARD WRIGHT
Richard Wright was born on September 4, 1908 on a plantation in Roxie, near Natchez, Mississippi. During his childhood, Wright moved frequently, after the departure of his father, until his mother eventually settled in Jackson, where Wright completed elementary school. His enjoyment of reading and writing stories was discouraged by his Seventh Day Adventist family, especially his grandmother. Leaving school early to take a job necessary to support his family, by the time Wright was 19, he moved to Chicago, securing a job at the U.S. Post Office. Attracted to the opportunities available to him as a member of the John Reed Club, Wright officially joined the Communist Party, where he furthered his education and published his first works of poetry and prose. Wright was the key organizer for the South Side Writers Group, where Black Chicago-based poets, artists and other writers met including Arna Bontemps, Margaret Walker, Frank Marshall Davis, Theodore Ward, Russell Marshall, Aldon Bland, and Robert Davis. Together their work would become the foundation for the Black Chicago Renaissance, as all of the members began actively publishing. In 1938, Wright published his first award-winning short story collection, Uncle Tom’s Children. A few years later, Wright published Native Son (1940), the first novel written by an African-American author to become a Book-of-the-Month Club selection. Considered to be his most famous work, the novel became a classic, making him an international celebrity. Before his move to Paris with his family, Wright published his memoir, Black Boy in 1945. Wright, who lived abroad for the remainder of his life, published seven works of fiction, one of which, A Father’s Law, appeared posthumously in 2008. Wright also returned later in life to poetry, especially Japanese haiku. Wright was equally as well known for his non-fiction work, Black Power, The Color Curtain, Pagan Spain, and White Man, Listen! powerful essays that show his astute observations of the most important issues of the time, especially global, social, and political change. Wright died in Paris in 1960.
Wright had several of his works adapted to stage and screen, but *Native Son* has benefitted from multiple adaptations. The novel is set in 1930s South Side Chicago and follows the story of Bigger Thomas, a poor, Black, young man. In the beginning, the story presents Bigger as feeling hopeless and oppressed due to his racial and socioeconomic status. He believes he cannot achieve anything larger than himself and gives in to a life of crime. However, after purposely sabotaging a robbery, he ends up working for wealthy, white Mr. Dalton. While in his employ, Bigger has a night out with Mr. Dalton’s daughter Mary. The night turns ugly when, in a drunken haze, Mary takes Bigger to her room, but in fear of being caught by her blind mother, Bigger murders Mary. He then goes on to try to hide what he has done by framing Jan, Mary’s boyfriend. From there, the novel goes on to portray how Mary’s murder gives Bigger a newfound sense of power and the corruption that power brings, including a scene where Bigger kills his girlfriend, Bessie. In the end, Wright uses this anti-hero to help the audience understand the effects of racial prejudice, especially violence as a by-product of social and economic factors. *Native Son* sounded an alarm that was especially significant in a rapidly expanding urban environment. The novel was praised for its boldness, but also received criticism for gratuitous violence. One of Wright’s biggest critics was author James Baldwin, who argued that Wright was perpetuating negative stereotypes that plagued Black Americans: “I don’t imagine many black people would have embraced such a grotesque portrait of themselves.” Wright, however, acknowledged that he purposely created Bigger as a composite exaggerated protagonist in order to “elicit a white audience’s sympathy and to shock it into racial awareness and political action.” *Native Son* found great success. Within only three weeks of being released, the novel had already sold 215,000 copies and become the first novel written by an African American to make the *bestseller list*. *Native Son* is still considered to be one of the most influential novels in the American literary canon.
Native Son adaptations began with a play one year after the novel’s release, directed by Orson Welles and showcased at New York’s St. James Theater in 1941. Wells’ play did not take off due to racism in theater, but French cinematographer Pierre Chenal and Uruguayan producer Jamie Prades adapted the novel to film for South American viewing in 1951 and cast Wright himself as Bigger Thomas. The film had little success due to its limited audience.
THE FOXES OF HARROW BY FRANK YERBY
Born on September 5th, 1916 in Augusta, Georgia, to Rufus and Wilhelminia Yerby, Frank Yerby spent his childhood and early adulthood in Augusta where he completed high school at Haines Institute, and earned his degree in English at Paine College. He subsequently moved to Nashville, Tennessee where he began graduate school at Fisk University and continued at the University of Chicago, before accepting faculty appointments at Florida A&M College (now Florida A&M University) and Southern [University] in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Shortly after the end of his educational career, Yerby received the O. Henry Memorial Award for his short story, *Health Card* (1944), which centers around the racial inequalities experienced by a Black soldier and his wife. Although several of his peers gained employment with the Federal Writers Project, Yerby was keen on establishing a career as a commercially successful novelist. When his first novel, *The Foxes of Harrow* (1946), was adapted to film a year later and nominated for an Oscar, his dream was becoming a reality. Thereafter, he wrote and published nonstop. While Yerby would become one of the most successful Black novelists of his time, he was criticized for his lack of racial consciousness. He did treat race in his 1969 novel *Speak Now*, the story of a Black jazz musician in Paris who finds it impossible to escape his racial heritage. Yerby believed, however, that the Black novelist must separate his personal thoughts from his work. Over the course of four decades, Yerby wrote 33 novels, with two more film adaptations for *The Golden Hawk* (1952) and *The Sacacen Blade* (1954). The concealment of his racial identity, intentional or not, may well have contributed to his wide success. Once Yerby recognized the appeal that the antebellum southern romance had for his readers, he delivered a novel almost every year until 1985, the date of his last published work. Yerby’s continued success was defined by what he called his “costume novels,” the genre he perfected over
the course of his decades-long career. He was known to respond to readers who wrote him with lengthy personalized letters, which affirmed his fan base. Yerby was a member of an expatriate generation, spending his life in Spain, where he died on November 29th, 1991.

Despite their popularity, Yerby departed from his southern romances regularly, setting his novels in other locations in the US as well as Greece, Europe, and Israel. One of Yerby’s most memorable novels that did not fit his usual mode was the *The Dahomean* (1971), the story of an African chieftain who was sold into slavery. Most remember Yerby, however, for *The Foxes of Harrow*, a product of its time. This historical novel follows the life and rise of Stephen Fox, an Irish immigrant who moves to the southern United States to pursue his own version of the American Dream. Set in antebellum New Orleans, the white protagonist transforms a single white pearl into a large plantation and a respectable social standing within a Creole community through his marriage to the main love interest, Odalie Arceneaux. The novel explores Black identity mainly through the lens of the enslaved Caleen as he actively fights against racial inequality. The complex topic of Black identity is explored through Fox’s interactions with the residents of New Orleans, consisting of white Americans, Creoles, Cajuns, mulattos, and emancipated Black people, among others. In scholarly circles, *The Foxes of Harrow* has been analyzed in the Journal of Ethnic American Literature by Dr. Veronica Watson who wrote about whiteness and, more specifically, how authors like Yerby defamiliarized it and deconstructed it into, what she states, is a constructed racial identity with no place as a civilizing social structure.
The Foxes of Harrow, the first novel by a Black author to become a major motion picture, was sold to 21st Century Fox for $150,000. Directed by John M. Stahl, the film was produced for $2.75 million and released to American audiences on September 24th, 1947. The star-studded cast featured Rex Harrison as Stephen Fox, Maureen O’Hara as Odalie Arceneaux, Richard Haydn as Andre LeBlanc, and Victor McLaglen as Captain Mike Farrell. Due to its historic nature and the period in which it was filmed, The Foxes of Harrow received plentiful criticism and praise. The New York Times gave the film a less than positive review, calling it predictable and full of romantic clichés. The reviewer states that the film doesn’t hold up to similar films such as Gone With the Wind and further states, “The writing is dull, the dialogue pompous, the settings conspicuously faked and the performances—even those of good actors—are embarrassingly attitudinized.” Variety Magazine gave the film a more upbeat review, giving the director high praise for his depiction of a powerful drama.
with an exciting story and strong production. Aside from artistic critiques of the film, Stahl’s adaptation of *The Foxes of Harrow* was criticized for sanitizing some of the more controversial parts of the book. An *Ebony* article from December of 1947 stated that the film bore little resemblance to the book.

*The Foxes of Harrow* by Frank Yerby is important especially for the role it played in normalizing works of literature by Black Americans to a white-dominated society. Though the storyline revolved around Stephen Fox and Odalie, who were both white, in the antebellum South, Yerby’s depiction of their relationship with Black, Creole, and Cajun people in New Orleans helped demystify the complexities of race in the South and in turn, humanized non-white people. Yerby’s seeming avoidance of racial issues in his early career is disappointing from a modern-day perspective; however, the choices Yerby made for the time period in which he lived were justified. John M. Stahl’s adaptation of Yerby’s work left much to be desired with its omission of the more controversial sections of the book but it was a major milestone in American literary and motion picture history.

The first big-budget adaptation of the film came in 1986. Directed by Jerrold Freedman, the adaptation was riddled with controversy. Although the film was scheduled for release on the 25th anniversary of Wright’s death and the first international conference on Wright at the University of Mississippi in 1985, the funds necessary to complete the film took longer to raise than anticipated. Producer Diane Silver spent three years raising enough money for a total budget of $2 million. However, her decision not to include Bessie’s murder created tension between her and Freedman. In the novel, Bessie is Bigger’s girlfriend and Freedman argued that “The scene is pivotal in the novel because it underscores the disintegration of Bigger Thomas, a victim of racism and segregation in
Chicago of the 1930s who in turn becomes a victimizer.” He claimed that Silver was only interested in
commercializing the movie to appeal to audiences. The movie received minimal praise, with some of
the first reviews, like the New York Times stating, “[Native Son] is not a very good film, though it has
its surprises. In crucial ways, the original work has been so softened that it almost seems upbeat,
which would have infuriated Wright.” Wright’s message of racism and the effect of oppression on the
Black community, fortunately, saved the film from being a complete upset.

More than 30 years later, another adaptation of Native Son made its debut, this time as a 2019
HBO special directed by contemporary artist Rashid Johnson, with a screenplay by Pulitzer Prize
winning playwright Suzan Lori-Parks, who had written the screenplay for Their Eyes Were Watching
God in 2005. While this version of Wright’s novel invited criticism, it also received praise for its
reimagining of the classic. The film, set in modern-day Chicago, brought in notable and new stars
including Ashton Sanders as Bigger; Sanaa Lathan as Bigger’s mother, and Kiki Lane as Bessie. The
film portrays Bigger (called Big in the film) as an Afropunk, eccentric, less unhinged young man who
is scared and on the run for his freedom. The adaptation presented several new approaches. It gives
Bigger a deeper characterization, moving him beyond the stereotypical Black man portrayed in the
novel. Like the 1986 adaptation, the film excluded Bessie’s murder scene in an attempt to counter the
historical violence perpetrated against Black women. “We’re living in a time where we’re trying to
correct some of this behavior . . . I wasn’t willing to have [the film] hijacked by this really quite dark
and toxic murder of Bessie,” director Johnson stated in an interview with Mother Jones. Other
publications, including The Atlantic, criticized the 2019 adaptation, arguing that it is overdone and
that Johnson’s artful visuals paired with Lori-Parks’ overly poetic writing give the feel of a graduate
school project and that “too often, make for a jazzy and unnerving film that prioritizes legibly black
aesthetics over the development of black characters.” At the same time, The Atlantic considers the
film’s strongest points the space for originality that the diversion from the original text provides. Vice
magazine praised Johnson’s adaptation, considering it a well done, relevant adaptation of a still-relevant novel, primarily because of the way “Bigger embodies the fears and anxieties that constrain so many Black people.” Although the film adaptations of Native Son did not consistently resonate with audiences, the novel continues to have an impact on society by providing a basic understanding of what the Black community faces. Despite criticisms, Native Son was a pivotal moment in African American literature.
GO TELL IT ON THE MOUNTAIN
Born in 1924 in Harlem, New York, James Baldwin grew up with his mother Emma Berdis Jones and stepfather, David Baldwin, a Baptist preacher. One of eight children, Baldwin had a tumultuous relationship with his stepfather. An early talent for writing led to his first article “Harlem —Then and Now,” which was published in his middle school's magazine, The [Frederick] Douglass Pilot. A calling to the ministry also came early, and following in his stepfather’s footsteps, Baldwin became youth minister for a Harlem Pentecostal Church. His departure from the church came after his discovery of the role Christianity played in reinforcing slavery, even as it provided the basis for resistance. Baldwin’s realization that he was gay was a critical factor in his early years and would continue to inspire his writing. His first publication was a 1947 review of the writer Maxim Gorky that ran in The Nation, followed six years later by his semi-autobiographical first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953). Although Baldwin expatriated to Paris in 1964, following other Black artists who opposed US racism, his writing would continue to mark him as an activist intellectual. His works - plays, fiction, and especially his essays - have become classic. Baldwin returned to the US time and time again, becoming one of the most visible writers during the critical years of the Civil Rights Movement. His last published work was a collection of poetry. He died of stomach cancer in 1987.
Baldwin’s enormous output during his lifetime included seven essay collections between Notes of a Native Son (1955) to The Evidence of Things Not Seen and The Price of the Ticket, both in 1985; six novels between Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953) and his last two, If Beale Street Could Talk (1974), and Just Above My Head (1979); three plays, one of which, Blues for Mr. Charlie (1964) was often seen as a desegregation anthem; along with collaborations and children’s books. Posthumous works continue to emerge, like the widely circulating I Am Not Your Negro, made into a 2016 documentary. Go Tell It on the Mountain, a loose depiction of Baldwin’s life, tells the story of John Grimes, an intelligent and introspective 14-year-old growing up in Harlem during the 1930s and his explosive relationship with his father. John, a talented writer in whom his white teachers take an interest, is unable to hone his talents because his father, Gabriel, only allows him and his younger half-brother, Roy, to clean and read the Bible. Baldwin’s poignant discussions demonstrate the effects of racism on different generations. As the novel progresses, the reader sees John struggle with his increasing sexual awareness.
In 1984, PBS produced a made-for-television film adaptation of *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, directed by Stan Lathan. The film starred Paul Winfield as Gabriel Grimes, Alfre Woodard as Esther, Gabriel’s mistress, Ruby Dee as Elizabeth Grimes, and James Bond III as John Grimes. Originally conceived as a mini-series, a lack of funds reduced the project to a two-hour movie, primarily funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The film, like the novel, showcases the insidiousness of racism as it intersects with a young boy’s coming into sexual awareness of his difference. Although the film received no nominations or awards, it was widely viewed by audiences.

A second of Baldwin’s works, *If Beale Street Could Talk*, made it to the big screen in 2018 and garnered numerous awards. Academy Award winning director Barry Jenkins had written an earlier screenplay based on the novel but was inspired to take the next step after his success with *Moonlight*. The film, like the novel, shows Baldwin’s understanding of the complicated nature of the criminal justice system: a young Black man who is a talented, emerging artist, is falsely accused of a rape, which he could not logically have committed, but for which he is sentenced to prison by a system that keeps him incarcerated. The story is written against the backdrop of racist practices, including housing discrimination and an unfair legal system, where access to legal representation is too costly to be available, just as it depicts the impact on Black families. The film adaptation had an all-star cast, including Kiki Layne as Tish, the pregnant girlfriend of the accused Alonzo “Fonny” Hunt, played by Stephan James. In the film version, Tish takes on the legal system in an effort to prove Fonny’s innocence before the birth of their child. A powerful performance by Regina King, who won the 2019 Best Supporting Actress Academy Award as Tish’s mother, is complemented by Coleman Domingo as Tish’s father, Michael Beach as Fonny’s father, and Aunjanue Ellis as Fonny’s mother.
THE LEARNING TREE BY GORDON PARKS
Gordon Parks was born in Fort Scott, Kansas on November 30, 1912 to Andrew Jackson Parks and Sarah Ross. The youngest of fifteen children, he joined his siblings in working on the family farm. As a child, Parks faced aggressive discrimination while attending a segregated school, much of which is related in his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Learning Tree* (1963). His mother’s death when he was fourteen was the end of his childhood in Kansas, just as it was the end of his formal education. His high school counselor had already determined that he was unfit for and should, therefore, not pursue higher education. He had been very close to his mother, and her loss was even more devastating when he was sent to live with his sister and her husband in St. Paul, Minnesota. Internal conflict in the family forced Parks to leave that home by the time he was 15. For a decade, Parks took various odd jobs in several cities, including Chicago, but continued to self-educate by reading widely whenever he could. Among the things he taught himself was the use of a camera, having bought his first, a used one, at age 25. His experiments and keen eye for fashion quickly paid off when Parks secured a position in a St. Paul, Minnesota women’s clothing store. By 1941, in the era of the Chicago Renaissance, Parks’ reputation for portrait photography earned him a Rosenwald Fellowship. Parks was a member of that generation of writers and artists who benefitted from the
New Deal programs. The subsequent fellowship from the Farm Security Administration allowed him to create some of his most famous photographs, like American Gothic. A job as a correspondent with the Office of War Information also provided opportunities to travel internationally, while capturing all-Black regiments, but it was Parks' love of fashion photography that would bring him to the attention of Vogue magazine and a long term relationship with Life magazine. He ultimately expanded his skill for documentary photography becoming the foremost photojournalist of his time.

While Parks was best known for his photography, most have agreed that he was multi-talented, a modern Renaissance man. Prevented from gaining the education he desired, by the end of his life, Parks had been awarded over 50 honorary degrees. Kirk Sharp, director of the Gordon Parks Museum, said, “He dedicated that 30th honorary doctorate degree that he received to the teacher and counselor who told him don’t go to college.” Parks' writing career started as early as 1947, when he published Flash Photography and in 1948 a second book on documentary portraiture. During the course of his life he published 15 books and was closely associated with the founding of Essence magazine in 1970. His interest in entertainment also began early, and he taught himself to play piano well enough to get paying jobs as a jazz pianist. The lack of formal musical training, however, did not prevent Parks from developing his own system of notation, which he used for numerous compositions. Not surprisingly, photography gave him a set of allied interests and skills, including painting, where he specialized in oil, which resulted in several major exhibits. Yet it was his well-trained eye that guided most of his career's work and fueled his interest in film. Parks said, “I saw that the camera could be a weapon against poverty, against racism, against all sorts of social wrongs.” Film gave Parks another weapon.

On his 2004 visit to Fort Scott for the inaugural Gordon Parks Festival, in addition to donating a major collection, Parks agreed to be buried beside his parents, but only if they were removed from the city’s segregated cemetery. The city, supported by then Kansas Governor Kathleen Sibelius, followed his wishes. Parks died of cancer in 2006 in Manhattan, New York, and like his predecessor, Oscar Micheaux, is buried in his home state of Kansas. The Gordon Parks Foundation continues to preserve his work internationally while the Gordon Parks Museum/Center continues his legacy with an annual festival and other programs.
In *The Learning Tree*, a young Black boy named Newt Winger endures the racism of those around him as he comes of age in the rural town of Cherokee Flats, KS. During this journey, he faces a question of ethics when he witnesses his friend Marcus’s father kill Jake Kiner, a white shop owner who is Newt’s boss. After testifying against Marcus’s father, Newt’s relationship with Marcus suffers as the realities of racial prejudice and a staggering difference in upbringing become clear. Throughout the book, Newt and Marcus’s difference in upbringing makes an impact on how they view and navigate the world. Newt, raised by a loving and respected family, is naive and believes in doing the right thing. Marcus, on the other hand, raised by an alcoholic single father, sees the world as harsh and cruel and violence as the only way to resolve conflict.
As a film, *The Learning Tree*, first released in 1969, was a historic moment. With Parks as the director, The Learning Tree was the first major Hollywood feature-length film to be directed by a Black person. It also launched Parks’ film career, which included *Shaft* (1971), and its sequel *Shaft’s Big Score* (1972), leading to what became known as the blaxploitation film era. Filming the movie proved to be a challenge in multiple ways for Parks and his crew. The biggest challenge came from Parks’ decision to film in his hometown of Fort Scott, Kansas. Because the movie had a mostly Black cast and crew in a predominantly white town, racial tension within the community made filming a more strenuous process. Even with all its challenges, however, the film was considered a transitional work in African American film history, according to the Schomburg Center’s Mary Yearwood. Parks had engineered a shift from depictions of “blackness as undesirable toward asserting black power that we see in Shaft (a BAD Motha – shut yo mouth),” adds film scholar Danyelle Green. But Parks’ impact was perhaps more impactful on the color line. Not only were the residents of Fort Scott able to play extras in the film, according to an interviewer with *KMUW* (National Public Radio-Wichita), but Parks “broke the color line in a number of unions. He helped blacks — including wardrobe people, hairdressers, assistant cameramen and gaffers — by demanding the unions open up to them.” Parks was constantly focused on giving opportunities to everyone and making sure the voices of the Black community were heard. The film first premiered at the Warner Bros.-Seven Arts press junket. The film’s budget was less than $2 million and made $1.3 million in box office revenue from 27 theaters. Even though it was a monetary upset, the film was important historically and honored by its selection for the National Film Preservation Board [US Film Registry]. Public reviews of The Learning Tree were not entirely kind but there was unanimous agreement about its value. A 1969 *New York Times* newspaper clipping notes that it was a “photographers film” explaining that while it had stunning visuals, the plot and dialogue were not memorable. However, the film continues to be relevant “in its depiction of multidimensional black humanity plagued by racism,” says Danyelle Green. The film’s history also remains relevant for Parks’ canon, which includes six films, two of which, *Leadbelly* (1976) and *Solomon Northrup’s Odyssey* (1984), shift away from the genre he had helped to create. Moreover, Parks paved the way for Black filmmakers.

Parks’ drive to overcome obstacles and doubts placed on him proved to be successful, as shown through his prolific and expansive career. Newt’s journey offers a perspective on the nature versus nurture argument, especially in relationship to youth. Parks and *The Learning Tree* shed valuable light on the role of Kansas in the history of American film.

* Cherokee Flatts is a fictionalized town inspired by Fort Scott.
Kristin Hunter [Lattany] was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on September 12, 1931. As the only child of a school principal father and a school-teacher mother, Hunter grew up reading a wide array of literature. As a teenager, she was inspired by authors like Virginia Woolf and Henry Miller as well as the writers of the Harlem Renaissance, especially the women, whose works ultimately encouraged her interest in pursuing a professional writing career. At the age of 14, she started working for a prominent African American newspaper, The Pittsburgh Courier, where she worked until she graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 1951, majoring in Elementary Education. To satisfy her parents, she worked briefly as a teacher before she took a position as an advertising copywriter, giving her more time to write. In 1955, she won a TV contest for her script titled *Minority of One*, which became a CBS television documentary about school integration. To avoid controversy, it focused on a French-speaking immigrant going into an all-white school rather than Black/white school integration. While still working as a copywriter, in 1964 Hunter published her debut and still best-known novel *God Bless the Child*, a book about three generations of women and colorism in the Black community. She quickly followed with *The Landlord* (1966), which brought even more attention, *The Survivors* (1975), *Kinfolks* (1996), *Do Unto Others* (2000), and her final book, *Breaking Away* (2003). A shift in her career occurred as she began to write fiction for younger Black audiences, including *The Soul Brothers and Sister Lou* (1968), the short story collection *Guests in the Promised Land* (1973), and *Lou in the Limelight* (1981), the sequel to *Soul Brothers*. These books brought her numerous awards, including from the National Council on Interracial Books for Children. Throughout her career, Hunter was active as a book reviewer, with articles appearing in newspapers and magazines, and as a poet. Between 1972 and 1985, she combined her writing career with a position teaching English and Creative Writing at the University of Pennsylvania. Hunter passed away on November 14th, 2008 in Magnolia, New Jersey.
The Landlord is a comedic, urban novel that centers around the trials and tribulations of Elgar Enders, a white businessman who failed out of eight Ivy League schools and spent time in a mental hospital after buying an apartment building in a decrepit neighborhood, to be taken more seriously by his family. During this endeavor, Enders strives to cater to the needs of his Black tenants, who drive him to his psychiatrist Dr. Borden, every day. The novel’s themes of identity, Black stereotyping, redemption, and mental health, did not generate much critical response, owing no doubt to its white main character. Corinne Hirsch, wrote in her 1974 Emory University dissertation “The Image of the White Man in the Black Fiction of the 60s” that the development of the main character, Elgar Enders, throughout the novel, centers on his relationship to and view of Black people. His perception, initially dominated by racial stereotypes, changes over the course of the novel as he begins to see his Black tenants as individuals.
Released on May 20th, 1970, and directed by Hal Ashby, the film adaptation of The Landlord starred Beau Bridges as Elgar Enders, Lee Grant as Joyce Enders, Diana Sands as Francine Johnson, Pearl Bailey as Marge, and Louis Gossett Jr. as Copee. The film received mostly positive reviews. Kay Bourne from the Bay State Banner, a Black newspaper, wrote in June of 1970, “The Landlord is dealing with the practical and emotional impetus for black nationalism in a multiracial society. Going a step further it dwells on the responsibility of those who are left out of the new nation and those who don’t want to take part in the new nation.” Howard Thompson, a writer at The New York Times wrote in May of that same year, “To put it plainly and succinctly as the rent bill, ‘The Landlord’ is a honey, a wondrously wise, sad and hilarious comedy . . . more than anything else, and all hands can line up for credit, the picture leaves an almost eerie tonic effect of truth and laughter, with a dead-serious appraisal of senseless racial awareness, white and black, at its core.” While The Landlord was received positively by critics, it suffered at the box office because its plot and message did not resonate with audiences at the time. Arthur Krim from United Artists, the studio behind the film, later stated, “What was expected to be provocative material to the new modern film audience in 1968-1969 . . . black and white relationships in an urban setting, emerged as a film . . . of limited interest to the audience of 1970.” This was a classic case in which the unrealistic optimism at the time of programming a film did not hold true for a receiving audience by the time the film was released.

Directly a product of its time, The Landlord presented a comedic approach to tackling racial stereotypes and mental health. As observed by Corinne Hirsch, the novel also introduced to audiences the positive character transformation of a white character as a result of his interactions with Black people By modern day standards, in the book and the film, The Landlord appeared at a time when viewing Blacks as objects rather than subjects was beginning to be passé. With a variety of positive reviews, both the novel and the film continued an important trend in literary history for Black authors like Hunter, who applied humor to tough topics.
BELOVED BY TONI MORRISON
Toni Morrison, born Chole Wofford, was the second eldest of four children born to Ramah Willis and George Wofford in Lorain, Ohio in 1931. Given the name Anthony after Saint Anthony of Padua following her conversion to Catholicism, Morrison eventually was nicknamed “Toni,” which she carried into her professional life. After completing her education at Howard University (BA in English) and Cornell University (MA in English), Morrison took a teaching position at Texas Southern University in Houston and married Harold Morrison but divorced him when her two sons were quite young.

As a single mother with two children, she accepted a position in the school division of Random House where she later would become its first Black editor in the Trade Division. In the latter role, she pioneered a new era of Black writing, which had tremendous commercial appeal. Morrison’s editorial leadership at Random House led to the publication of works by writers such as Angela Davis, Toni Cade Bambara, Huey Newton, Muhammad Ali, Nettie Jones, and Gayl Jones, along with major innovative projects such as The Black Book (1974) a collage of artifacts and archival documents that visualize a history of early Black life in the US. Long working hours and parental responsibilities required her to get up at 4 AM daily to write the novel she called The Bluest Eye (1970). She was 39 years old, and the first novel by an unknown writer is difficult to market. Two novels later, and with the success of Song of Solomon (1977), Morrison became a writer full time, and published Tar Baby (1981) before the appearance of Beloved (1987) that garnered a Pulitzer Prize and brought her worldwide recognition. After the publication of Jazz (1992), Morrison received the Nobel Prize for Literature (1993), and although she was the third Black recipient, she was the first African American to receive the coveted honor. Morrison continued to write extensively following her editorial career, publishing five more novels and receiving more than 25 awards from around the world, including France’s highest award, the Legion d’honneur (Legion of Honor) in 2010. A gifted essayist as well, Morrison published five essay collections, including Playing in the Dark (2007), the one most widely quoted; several children’s books with her son Slade; several plays and the libretto for Margaret Garner, an opera based on the story she had already foregrounded in Beloved (1987). At the time of her passing in 2019, Morrison was recognized as the world’s greatest novelist and the reigning queen of American letters.
Morrison published her fifth novel, *Beloved* in 1987. It is based on a real-life narrative of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who ran away, killed her two-year-old daughter to avoid her being recaptured into slavery, and was subsequently hung not for murder but for destroying the slave owner’s property. Beloved chronicles the lives of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver—lives that are haunted by Beloved, the daughter whose life Sethe had taken. The book narrates Sethe and Paul D’s life on the Sweet Home Plantation in Kentucky and Beloved’s haunting return following Sethe’s escape. The novel became the model for the genre of neoslave narratives, with its focuses on trauma, loss and dehumanization, and the effects of American slavery on subsequent generations. While the historical period of slavery had been the subject of history and fiction and captured the interest of an international scholarly community, Morrison’s important contribution lies in her ability to “make the slave experience intimate . . . the sense of things being both under control and out of control persuasive throughout, that the order and quietude of everyday life would be violently disrupted by the chaos of the needy dead; that the herculean effort to forget would be threatened by memory desperate to stay alive. To render enslavement as a personal experience, language must first get out of the way.” Her imaginative retelling of not only what happened, but how it felt psychologically and emotionally would elicit different responses, new and more readers, just as it paved the way for new writers. While Mariane Hirsch had coined the term “postmemory” for a generation who lived with the history of the Jewish Holocaust, Morrison in *Beloved* offered us “rememory,” to define the cultural specificity necessary to confront the horrors of slavery. “I urged memory to metamorphose itself into metaphorical and imagistic associations. . . not simply recollecting or reminiscing or even epiphany. . . Rememory as in recollecting and remembering as in reassembling the members of the body, the family, the population of the past.” Morrison sought to create a narrative infused with legitimate and authentic characteristics of the culture, its sounds and meanings of the spoken and the unspoken that she believed could be both “race-specific and race-free.”
Terry McMillan was born in 1951 in Port Huron, Michigan, and is best known for her novel *Waiting to Exhale* (1992). She lived with her mother, a factory worker, following her parents’ divorce. McMillan’s earliest interactions with reading were the Bible and school textbooks. But during her teenage years, a job shelving books for her local library turned her into an avid reader. Courses in African American literature from Los Angeles City College introduced her to Black authors such as Richard Wright, Zora Neale Hurston, and Ann Petry before receiving her BA in journalism from the University of California, Berkeley. Petry’s novel *The Street* (1946) greatly influenced McMillan’s desire to write novels depicting the lives of middle-class Black women. McMillan published her first novel, *Mama*, in 1987 inspired by her hardworking mother. Disturbed by her publisher’s limited promotion of her debut novel, she wrote letters to African American bookstores and booksellers in an effort to increase publicity for Mama. As a result, the book sold 5,000 copies. McMillan published a second novel, *Disappearing Acts* (1989), but landed her first major success with *Waiting to Exhale* (1992) which was adapted to film due to its wild popularity. *How Stella Got Her Groove Back*, which McMillan published in 1996, was destined for the same success as *Exhale*, its film adoption being released in 1998. Two additional novels, *A Day Late and a Dollar Short* (2001) and the earlier published *Disappearing Acts*, were both adapted to television. McMillan continued her publishing success with *The Interruption of Everything* (2006) and *Getting
to Happy (2010), the latter as a sequel to Waiting to Exhale. Increased interest in the lives of Black women - emphasizing the contradiction between professional success and personal relationships - fed a new market for more readable contemporary fiction McMillan is credited with having helped to launch. Two additional novels Who Asked You (2013) and I Almost Forgot About You (2016) add further to her distinct canon of Black women’s fiction. McMillan also published a popular anthology of fiction, Breaking Ice, in 1990.

First edition of Waiting To Exhale

Waiting to Exhale jumpstarted a genre of novels and films that depicted the lives and experiences of middle-class Black women of the post-Civil Rights/New Age eras as they try to navigate the conflicting demands of the workplace and the heart. The novel centers around a friend group of four such middle-class women living in Phoenix who are successful in their careers and trying to find “Mr. Right.” The four main characters are Bernadine "Bernie" Harris, a homemaker who sacrificed her career ambitions to raise her children and support her husband’s business only for him to leave her for his co-worker; Savannah "Vannah" Jackson, a successful television producer who has an affair with a married man; Robin Stokes, an insurance executive who is also a mistress to a married man;
and Gloria "Glo" Matthews, a beauty salon owner and an overprotective single mother. The themes - friendship, Black love, and Black womanhood - spoke to a new generation of women whose expectations for heterosexual relationships left them in precarious circumstances with limited choices. *Waiting to Exhale* sold 300,000 hard copies and 3 million paperback copies after its debut. It was on the *New York Times* Bestseller List for 38 weeks, according to Manie Barron, a publisher for *Amistad Press*, who stated, “Her numbers were a wake-up call to mainstream publishers, who said ‘Wow (Blacks) do read. Not only do they read but they buy books.”

The novel was groundbreaking for its time, departing from what the mainstream publishing industry called the “literary fiction” of Black women writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Gayl Jones. Because of relatable themes and realistic dialogue, many literary critics showed their disdain for the increasingly popular works by labeling it “girlfriend fiction.” According to the *New York Times* writer Daniel Max, white audiences labeled McMillan as the Black Judith Krantz of her time. But it was precisely the realism and the desire to see their everyday experiences captured on the page and eventually on the screen that attracted women readers to her work. Overall, *Waiting to Exhale* was groundbreaking because McMillan’s relatable storylines not only forced white mainstream publishers to promote similar Black stories, but it also broke another barrier. A growing network of independent publishers welcomed thousands of new writers who supplied their sizeable readership with even more relatable themes. As a result, trade publishers faced a shifting culture, where readers were getting what they wanted more easily, just as writers had more choices of publishers and more control over what and how they wrote.
The success of the novel brought its own fan base eager for the release of the 1995 film adaptation of *Waiting to Exhale*. The *LA Times* reported that 400 people were turned away from a promotional screening of the film. Marking Forest Whittaker’s feature film directorial debut, the film was filled with a star-studded cast: Whitney Houston as Savannah Jackson, Angela Bassett as Bernadine Harris, Loretta Devine as Gloria Matthews, and Lela Rochon as Robin Stokes. The film’s budget was $16 million and it grossed $82 million. Kenneth “Babyface” Edmonds produced an all-female soundtrack for the film from singers such as Mary J. Blige, Brandy, TLC, Aretha Franklin, and Whitney Houston. The film won four NAACP Image Awards: Outstanding Lead Actress in a Motion Picture for Angela Bassett, Outstanding Soundtrack, Outstanding Motion Picture, and Outstanding Supporting Actress in a Motion Picture for Loretta Devine.

The success of *Waiting To Exhale* brought an increased awareness of the relationship between Black reading culture and Black consumerism, the untapped market among Black women readers in particular, destroying the myth that Blacks don’t read, just as it increased the visibility of Black middle-class women as a viable force within the society. With magazines like *Essence*, which launched its own Best Sellers List, McMillan’s success became replicable. The conventional characters to whom professional Black women could relate was a contributor to the film’s success. *Waiting to Exhale* as a film was groundbreaking also because of its crossover appeal to white audiences. Despite the criticism of its perceived male-bashing, the realistic plotline, cinematography, and star-studded female soundtrack helped to produce a wildly successful film, with it and the book both becoming landmarks of popular culture. With back-to-back blockbuster films, since *How Stella Got Her Grove* quickly followed, and a host of novels that fill a critical void in the Black cultural landscape, Terry McMillan remains a household name in the literary and film world.
While interest in adapting Morrison’s work was high, Lydia Diamond’s is the only known stage adaptation. Diamond’s adaptation of The Bluest Eye appeared in 2006. Beloved’s commercial success - its appearance on the *New York Times* Best Seller list for 25 weeks - would make it a natural choice for film adaptation. And the person to do that was Oprah Winfrey, who, as the story goes, obtained Morrison’s phone number through the fire department. Winfrey was able to gain the film rights, and secured Jonathan Demme as the film’s director, along with major Hollywood actors, including Danny Glover as Paul D, Thandie Newton as Beloved, newcomer Kimberly Elise as Denver, while Winfrey herself played Sethe. *The Chicago Tribune* wrote, “*Beloved* is a movie that swims in your bloodstream, echoes through your bones.” Despite some critical acclaim, the film was considered a box office failure. One criticism was that it did not capture the subtleties of theme and nuance that are so powerful in the novel. For example, the film downplays the intricacies of Paul D and Sethe’s relationship, one of the strongest features of the novel. The doomed protagonist is another reason why the film did not fare well according to Kenneth Lombard, president of Magic Johnson Theaters, which operates a national theater chain that targets middle-class African Americans, in an interview for the *Baltimore Sun*. 
Angie Thomas was born in 1988 and still lives in Jackson, Mississippi where she grew up with her mother and grandmother. As a teenager, Thomas was a rapper whose skills were featured in Right On magazine in 2003. She went on to receive a BFA in creative writing from Belhaven University, where she began her debut novel *The Hate U Give* (2018). Considered a young adult novel, it garnered various awards, including a Walter Grant from We Need Diverse Books, the Carnegie Medal Shortlist for Children’s Books, the William C. Morris Award, and the Coretta Scott King Award. Thomas said that the inspiration for the novel in part came from her childhood in Mississippi. Following a shooting she witnessed, her mother took her to the library to show her there was more to the world than violence. The novel was also inspired by the 2009 shooting of Oscar Grant, who was murdered by a police officer in Oakland, California. Thomas’ second novel, *On the Come Up*, was released in 2019. As of this writing according to Deadline Hollywood, *On the Come Up* is headed into production. Wanuri Kahiu is reported to be directing the film.
The Hate U Give follows Starr Carter, a young girl from the predominantly Black community of Garden Heights who struggles with her identity as she switches between the two sides of herself: the Garden Heights Starr, who lives in a community routinely facing violence and racism, and Williamson Prep Starr, a wealthy private school student who only has white friends. While at a neighborhood party, she reunites with an old school friend, Khalil. After the party, Khalil offers to take her home, but along the way, they are pulled over and searched by a police officer who then shoots and kills Khalil. The remainder of the novel follows Starr as she struggles with the two sides of her identity as she confronts the brutal realities of today's society. This novel's themes – identity, Black stereotypes, and police brutality – are set against the background of the Black Lives Matter Movement, allowing The Hate U Give to cover difficult subjects that affect contemporary America. In an article for “Women in Higher Education,” Amma Marfo, a recognized writer and speaker for SPEAK Educators, suggests that The Hate U Give and its success, while addressing assumptions about the Black community, opens up conversations about contentious topics. The powerful novel plays a critical advocacy role especially for young people, who see themselves caught between what is safe and doing what is honest and right.
Fox executive Elizabeth Gabler, known famously for securing the rights for the book *Hidden Figures* and its blockbuster film success, was responsible for bringing the novel to film audiences. Starring Amandla Stenberg as Starr and Algee Smith as Khalil, the film also featured notable actors, including Russell Hornsby, Regina Hall, Anthony Mackie, Common, and Issa Rae. Released on October 19, 2018, *The Hate U Give* struggled to compete with other major releases at the time, including *Venom*, *A Star is Born*, and *Halloween*. However, the movie’s $34.9 million in worldwide box office sales surpassed its $23 million budget by almost $12 million. One of the biggest struggles the film faced was keeping its PG-13 rating. Past movies dealing with similar subjects have been considered R-rated, however, director George Tillman Jr. wanted to make sure the movie remained relevant and accessible to younger generations. Some of the major backlash of the film came from the choice to cast Stenberg, an actress with a lighter complexion, as Starr, who is described as a dark-skinned teen in the novel. Other criticisms included the film’s ties to Disney and having a white screenwriter, Audrey Wells. The film received great praise from media outlets including *Ebony* magazine, who commented on its impressive acting and effective layering in bringing attention to unspoken subjects. Stenberg was nominated for a Critics Choice Award and won the NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Actress in a Motion Picture. The film provided an important message and brought visibility to a marginalized community and to struggles that are too often overlooked.

Both the book and the movie shed light on struggles faced in the Black community and problems which are typically considered controversial or easily dismissed. Thomas brings a humanistic aspect to the story which makes it highly relatable to crossover audiences. Looking through the lens of a young girl dealing with the realities of a society still battling forms of institutional racism, Thomas is able to open up the conversation around topics like police brutality and racial injustice in order to promote much needed change.