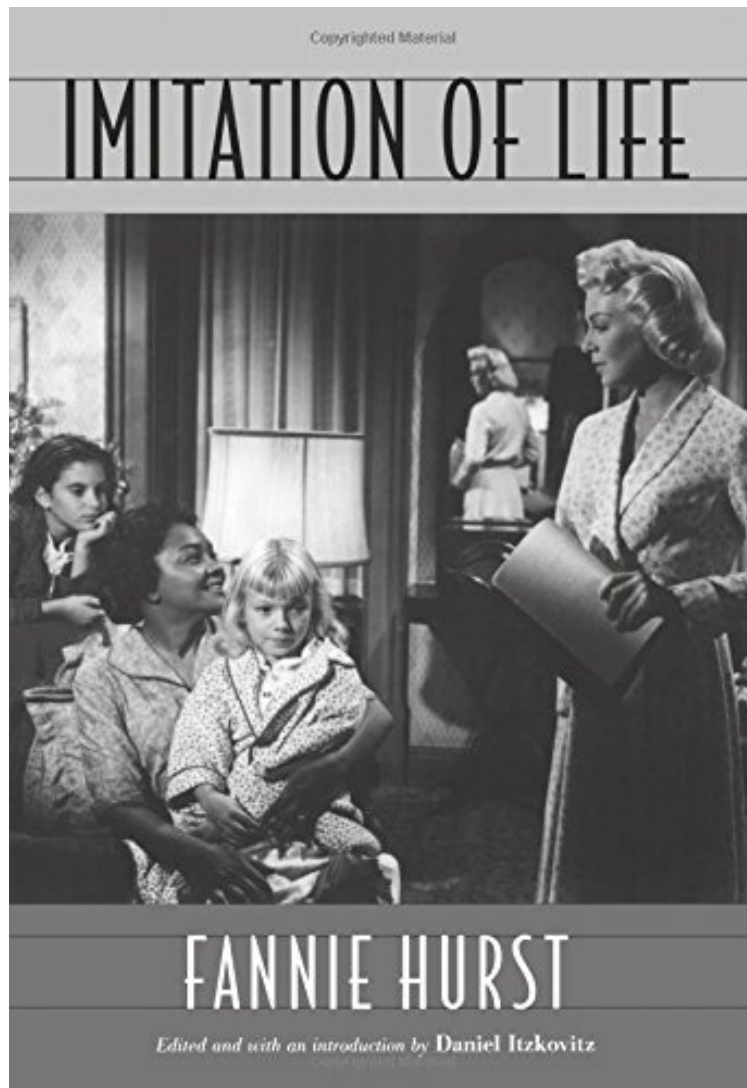


Imitation of Life

Fannie Hurst, Daniel Itzkovitz
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Fannie Hurst, Daniel Itzkovitz : Imitation of Life before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Imitation of Life:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. I was disappointed that the author didn't give more credit to Delilah By Catherine Rotan While I realize that this was about Bea's struggle to survive in a man's world, I was disappointed that the author didn't give more credit to Delilah. After Delilah died it was as if she didn't even exist. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. great 'sudser'. Loved it as a kid By VANESSA Y. MCCLINCHY great 'sudser'. Loved it as a kid, and love it still, if only for Mahalia Jackson's voice, if not for a great story. How it got

framed as Lana Turner's story is a Hollywood mistake, but still worth it.³³ of 36 people found the following review helpful. **LIMITATION OF LIFE...**By lawyeraau This is an oldie but a goodie, and although it may seem somewhat anachronistic, in fact, almost embarrassingly and offensively so, it is well worth reading. A best selling novel when it was first released in 1933, the reader should keep in mind that much of what is in the book would today be perceived as racist. The book is reflective of a paternalistic view of African-Americans that was prevalent at the time in which this book was written. It is certainly a view that is jarring in these more enlightened times, as the book reflects the nature of the racism that was then inherent in our society. This is not a book that would be written today, as modern society, though still racist in many ways, would view it as being totally politically incorrect. That being said, the book focuses on two female characters, Bea Pullman, a white teenage widow living in Atlantic City, New Jersey with her elderly father and a baby daughter named Jessie, and Delilah Johnston, a young black widow with a light-skinned baby daughter named Peola. Both women are struggling to survive in pre-World War I society, where the lot of widows in a man's world could be a difficult one. When they join forces, an alliance born of necessity is forged. Delilah becomes Bea's housekeeper and caregiver, taking on the traditional woman's role, while Bea struggles to be the breadwinner in a world not yet hospitable to the idea of a business woman. When Delilah's culinary talents merge with Bea's innate business acumen, they are both on their way to fame and fortune. Before you know it, Bea is making a mint with Delilah's recipes, running a successful chain of B. Pullman waffle emporiums, which are presided over by a mammy figure imitative of Delilah, as well as a successful line of candy called Delilah's hearts, bearing Delilah's beaming image on the box. Delilah, thus, becomes a beloved icon, a sort of revered mammy, but a mammy, nonetheless. Bea, on the other hand, remains somewhat of a behind-the-scene enigma, eventually branching out into real estate development and becoming a phenomenon for a woman of that time. Meanwhile, Delilah continues to remain with Bea, living with her and waiting on her, always the perennial mammy. While Bea always treats Delilah with affection and care, there is not a level playing field between the two. Delilah treats Bea with worshipping servitude, while Bea treats Delilah as if she were a beloved family retainer. There is something reminiscent of the old master/slave dichotomy in their relationship. Moreover, while Bea is cognizant of Delilah's contribution to her financial success, they are not contractual business partners, as Bea pays Delilah a salary, though a lesser one than Bea would like, as Delilah refuses raises. Moreover, although there is great affection between the two, the issue of color is always there, both overtly and covertly. Meanwhile, the years have passed, and Delilah's light-skinned daughter, Peola, clearly knows the score. She certainly has no intention of being anyone's mammy and wants to pass for white, as she does not wish to be relegated to second class citizenry. She does not try to do this because she wants to be white, but rather, she wants the advantages associated with being white in that time. She simply wants what Jessie has. Hers is not a decision based upon race self-hate, but one that is based upon a realistic assessment of how she could be all she could be. Peola's philosophy is that there is nothing wrong in passing, but rather, the wrong is inherent in a world that would make such necessary. Still, Peola breaks Delilah's heart by doing this, and Delilah is sustained only by her stalwart faith in God. When Delilah dies, a waffle queen icon to millions, the person dearest to her heart, her own flesh and blood, is missing from her funeral cortege. Bea is not without her share of heartbreak, as well. She spends years struggling to make that almighty buck and ensure that everyone within the sphere of her hearth is taken care of financially. She rises to great heights in the business world, leaving little time for that man lovin' that Delilah is always talking about. Bea struggles to give her daughter Jessie all the advantages she never had. When Bea finally falls in love with Flake, a man several years younger than her and a trusted business confidant, she finds that her daughter has already laid claim to his heart. Without that man lovin' and with her beloved Delilah having gone to meet her Maker, Bea is left to face her imitation of life. This is really a wonderful soaper of a book. From it would flow two successful, though controversial, film adaptations. Both the 1934 version with Claudette Colbert and Louise Beavers, as well as the 1959 one starring Lana Turner and Juanita Moore, are terrific and well worth seeing. Though both are loose adaptations, it is the 1934 version that is probably the one truest to the book. In the context of today's society, however, each film will shock the viewer's sensibilities with its political incorrectness, as will the book.

A bestseller in 1933, and subsequently adapted into two beloved and controversial films, *Imitation of Life* has played a vital role in ongoing conversations about race, femininity, and the American Dream. Bea Pullman, a white single mother, and her African American maid, Delilah Johnston, also a single mother, rear their daughters together and become business partners. Combining Bea's business savvy with Delilah's irresistible southern recipes, they build an Aunt Jemima-like waffle business and an international restaurant empire. Yet their public success brings them little happiness. Bea is torn between her responsibilities as a businesswoman and those of a mother; Delilah is devastated when her light-skinned daughter, Peola, moves away to pass as white. *Imitation of Life* struck a chord in the 1930s, and it continues to resonate powerfully today. The author of numerous bestselling novels, a masterful short story writer, and an outspoken social activist, Fannie Hurst was a major celebrity in the first half of the twentieth century. Daniel Itzkovitz's introduction situates *Imitation of Life* in its literary, biographical, and cultural contexts, addressing such topics as the debates over the novel and films, the role of Hurst's one-time secretary and great friend Zora Neale Hurston in the novel's development, and the response to the novel by Hurst's friend Langston Hughes, whose one-act

satire, *Limitations of Life* (which reverses the races of Bea and Delilah), played to a raucous Harlem crowd in the late 1930s. This edition brings a classic of popular American literature back into print.

Although it's a white novel, *Imitation of Life* is certainly a part of the African American canon. No film was more important to me as a colored child growing up in West Virginia; the funeral scene has to move even the most stoic viewer to tears. Now this new edition of the novel brings this richly layered story back into public view, where it will, I hope, remain. Henry Louis Gates Jr., Harvard University