



Porgy

DuBose Heyward

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Porgy by DuBose Heyward with an afterword by James M. Hutchisson This is the first major southern novel to portray African Americans outside the stereotypes. This novel is the story of Porgy, a crippled street-beggar in the black tenement. Unwashed and unwanted, he lives just on the edge of subsistence and trusts his fate to the gods and chance. His one shining moment is his pursuit of Bess, whom he wins and then loses during one summer of passion and violence. The fictional characters of Porgy, Bess, Black Maria, Sportin' Life, and the other Gullah denizens of Catfish Row have attained a mythic status and have become inextricably identified with Charleston. This story by DuBose Heyward is, of course, the origin of George Gershwin's acclaimed folk opera Porgy and Bess. Heyward created Porgy with such sympathy, honesty, and insight that Porgy has ascended into the pantheon of the universal. This edition includes an afterword by James M. Hutchisson, Heyward's biographer, who places Porgy in its social and historical context and shows how the novel revolutionized American literature. In 1927, even before Gershwin transformed the novel with a musical score, the book was successfully dramatized for the New York stage. The production revolutionized the black theater movement with its casting of black actors. Porgy, published in 1925, proved to be on the leading edge of the great southern renaissance, in which works by William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and others would depict black characters of increasingly emotional and psychological complexity. DuBose Heyward (1885-1940) published Porgy to tremendous critical acclaim and financial success. He wrote poetry, short fiction, plays, and screenplays. James M. Hutchisson, a professor of English at The Citadel in Charleston, is the author of DuBose Heyward: A Charleston Gentleman and the World of Porgy and Bess (University Press of Mississippi).

Porgy Details

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From Reader Review Porgy for online ebook

Will says

"Bess lay upon the bed in Porgy's room and stared at the ceiling with hard, bright eyes. From time to time she would pluck at the sheet that covered her and utter hurried, indistinct sentences that bore not the slightest relation to existing circumstances. A week had passed since her release, and its seven interminable days had been spent in this fashion.

Porgy was out upon the day's rounds. Occasionally the door to the sick-room would open, and an awed, black face peer in. The mystery of delirium frightened and perplexed the negroes, and limited the manifestations of kindness and sympathy that they usually bestowed upon unfortunate friends. Even Maria was not proof against this dread, and the irrelevant observations that greeted her when she went in with the daily lunch sent her hurrying wide-eyed from the room.

Porgy returned early in the evening. His face was deeply marked, but the lines were those of anxiety, and his characteristic firmness of mouth and jaw was gone. He closed the door on the curious glances of his neighbors, and lifted himself to a seat upon the bed.

'How Bess now?' he asked softly.

She shifted her gaze from the ceiling to his face.

'Eighteen miles tuh Kittiwat!' she muttered. 'Rattlesnake', palmettuh bush, an' such.'

Her eyes were suddenly fearful, and she closed her hand tightly upon his.

Porgy cast a hurried glance over his shoulder. Then, reassured, stroked her brow, and comforted her in his deep, gentle voice.

'Yuh hyuh wid Porgy now; an' nuttin' can't hurt yuh. Soon de cool wedder comin' an' chill off dese febers. Ain't yuh 'member how dat cool win' come tuh town wid de smell ob pine tree; an' how de star is all polish up lak w'ite folks' silber ? Den ebbery body git well. Ain't yuh know ? Yuh jus' keep still, an' watch wut Porgy say.'

She was silent after that, and closed her eyes. Presently, to his relief, he saw that she was sleeping. This was the moment for which he had been waiting. He went out, closing the door very gently, and joined a group of sympathisers in the court.

'Wut we goin' do now?' he asked. 'A week gone, an' she ain't none better.' Peter knocked out his clay pipe on a flagstone, with three staccato little raps, thus gaining the attention of the circle.

'Ef yuh wants tuh listen tuh me,' he remarked weightily, 'I advise yer tuh sen' she tuh de w'ite folk' hospital.'

His words were received with a surprise amounting to incredulity.

'Fuh Gawd sake, Daddy Peter !' an awed voice said at last. 'Ain't yuh knows dey lets nigger die, so dey kin gib um tuh de student?'

But the old negro stood his ground.

'De student ain't gits um 'til he done dead. Ain't dat so? Den he can't hurt um none. Ain't dat so, too? An' I gots dis tuh say. One ob my w'ite folks is er nuss tuh de hospital; and dat lady is er pure angel wid de sick nigger. Ef I sick tuhmorruh I goin' tuh she; an' wut she say is good wid me. I wants dis carcass tek care ob w'ile he is alibe. W'en he done dead, I ain't keer.'

'Yuh ain't keer whedder yuh is cut up an' scatter, 'stead of bein' bury in Gawd own grabe-yahd?' someone asked the iconoclast.

Under this direct attack, the old man weakened.

'Well, mebbe I ain't sayin' I jus' as lief,' he compromised. 'But I t'ink Gawd onduhstan' de succumstance, an' mek allowance.'"

Linda Taylor says

Really enjoyed this. It was a quick read. Heyward is very poetic and descriptive. It definitely helps that I had already seen "Porgy and Bess" and knew the story, because sometimes the language was a bit difficult. I got better at reading the Gullah dialogue as I went on, but I would like to listen to this one read aloud someday. The forward by Dorothy Heyward as well as the afterward both helped to put this novel in historical perspective. I could "hear" some of Gershwin's music in my head as I read this! Always interesting to read the original version of this iconic story.

Teresa Proença says

"— Os homens e as mulheres não são iguais — comentou Porgy. — Há um mês viviam elas com os seus maridos. O temporal levou-os. Pois já se esqueceram deles e entregam-se aos que vêm depois.
— Não, a verdade não é essa — replicou Bess — e nunca hás-de compreender. Elas têm filhos a sustentar. São mulheres, e para mais negras. Fazem o que podem, e é tudo."
(página 93)

Nicole Wyatt says

I have read and re-read this book many times. The hardest part about it is reading it in the Gullah dialect, but by the first couple of chapters, I could hear the characters speaking in my mind. I have never seen the play Porgy and Bess, nor do I think I want to. In my mind, the characters in Catfish Row are who they are. I wouldn't want to tarnish that image. It's one of the best and overlooked books ever.

Gina Rheault says

Porgy. Alone? I had no idea he'd existed apart from Bess and from the Gershwin musical. Porgy is a beggar,

so crippled he has to be carried, and he begs in downtown Charleston, trundled there by his friend Peter, a meek man who is used and abused by others. Porgy lives in a complex called Catfish Row and otherwise than begging he is a pretty sociable guy.

Apart from what it's become, opera upon opera upon opera, the book itself is a neighborhood story. It could be Dickens' London, or Elena Ferrante's Naples, or *The Wire* abbreviated. So, there are white outsiders, a cast of neighborhood characters, and a murder, and jailings, and big storms. At the core is a love story that develops between Porgy & Bess, a Mary Magdalene figure.

I was inspired to read it because I once got stranded in Charleston, and found it to be an amazing city in every way. Also super feisty black women like Nina Simone seemed to give "Porgy & Bess" some respectability by singing certain of its songs. And finally, Porgy reminded me of a most amazing man, also with bum legs who begged on Queen Street in The Beach in Toronto. Thus the interest. It's a pretty good book and, I thought, more touching than the movie version I tried to watch on youtube.

Abbie says

I decided to look this book up in the local library after watching a documentary on Broadway by Michael Kantor. This story is what the Gershwin brothers' opera "Porgy and Bess" is based on. It's an interesting little book, oddly pieced together during a year of the crippled beggar, Porgy's, lifetime. The year in which Bess came to him and stayed with him and changed the monotony of his days and his life. I found it interesting, though when Bess comes into Porgy and the other residents of Catfish Row's life, I found it to obscure Porgy's thoughts and feelings. The book came to follow Bess and the other residents instead of how Porgy was thinking and feeling. And when the title boasts "Porgy," I naturally thought the book to revolve about him. It wasn't a bad read. I simply thought I would have more insight into the title's character than I feel I did.

Christine Powell says

I found this book to be quite interesting, but the language somewhat difficult. I can't ignore the context of a white, early century author writing the main characters who are not. The dialect of Gullah is easier to figure out to me when spoken, but the frequency of N words made that not something that was going to happen. I actually haven't seen *Porgy and Bess*, but love a kids book the author also wrote.

Pudds Downing says

If you are the kind of person who loves walking on hot coals or having shards of bamboo shoved under your fingernails, you absolutely must read this book.

Brian McCann says

The basis for the Gershwin epic American golf opera.

Audra says

I just can't get through the language...maybe there's a movie somewhere?

Tom says

Porgy has been sitting on my shelf since the legendary Frogtown Books closed and sold out their collection. In anticipation of this Friday's performance of Gershwin's opera by Toledo Opera, I knew it was time to take it down and read it. What a beautiful book. All the characters I knew from various arias from the opera are there in the flesh, artfully described by Heyward. The descriptions of his beloved Charleston are rich and evocative, heavy with humidity, sea breezes and salt air, fish markets and cobbled streets. The Gullah people of Catfish Row come alive through Heyward's depictions and painstaking use of dialect. This is a powerful story well told.

Seth says

A novella or extended short story with flashes of beautiful prose. One has to wonder whether the author's apparently sincere attempt at rendering African-American dialect from the steamboat era is exaggerated. It is certainly hard to parse, in ways that Mark Twain never is. The drama itself is very good.

BurgendyA says

Porgy was a really great novel. Dubose Heyward brought to life the black community of South Carolina of the early 1920s. The story had interesting and some sweet characters. Poor disabled beggar Porgy had a lovely caring heart. Especially for Bess, he was always helping her with her troubles. Since her man Crown left her with nothing. So she wound up staying with Porgy. They both happy together even though they struggled together not only in their hardship, but from some of the people with cruel intention in their surrounding.

This beautiful, and bittersweet folk tale was worth the read. But one thing I had to admit is that it was a little odd is their language at first. Luckily it wasn't too difficult as long as you get used to it & follow along. I understood that all of the southern slang made sense in that period of time. I could see why 'Porgy' was the first major southern novel to portray African Americans outside of their stereotypes. A classic indeed.

I can't wait to see the movie. Unfortunately it is not on DVD. Let's just hope they make it into dvd soon. =)~

Mary Overton says

The novel on which Gershwin based his opera, "Porgy and Bess." Heyward collaborated with Gershwin and wrote much of the libretto.

From the Afterword, by Heyward's biographer, James M. Hutchinson:

"The story of the crippled beggar Porgy and his lost Bess, in this, its original form, was a landmark in southern literature when it was published in 1925 and is today a cultural document.... The novel opens a window on a unique time, place, and culture: early twentieth-century Charleston - specifically, that quarter occupied by the Gullahs, a black community peculiar to the coastal south..." pg. 159

When Porgy begged, he "sat silent, rapt. There was something Eastern and mystic about the intense introspection of his look. He never smiled, and he acknowledged gifts only by a slow lifting of the eyes that had odd shadows in them. He was black with the almost purple blackness of unadulterated Congo blood. His hands were very large and muscular, and, even when flexed idly in his lap, seemed shockingly formidable in contrast with his frail body. Unless one were unusually preoccupied at the moment of dropping a coin in his cup, he carried away in return a very definite, yet somewhat disquieting, impression: a sense of infinite patience, and beneath it the vibration of unrealized, but terrific, energy..... [Porgy:] was waiting, waiting with the concentrating intensity of a burning-glass." (pp. 17-18)

Worldly, strong-willed Maria, keeper of the community's moral compass, describes alpha male Crown, the stevedore:

""Dem sort ob mens ain't need tuh worry 'bout habin' 'omen.... Dey kin lay de lash on um, an' kick um in de street; den dey kin whistle w'en dey ready, an' dere dey is ag'in lickin' dey han'."" (pg. 103)

Bess confesses to Porgy the obsessions that rule her: ""W'en I tek dat dope, I know den dat I ain't yo' kin'. An' w'en Crown put he han' on me dat day, I run tuh he like water. Some day dope comin' agin. An' some day Crown goin' put he han' on my t'roat. It goin' be like dyin' den. But I gots tuh talk de trut' tuh yuh. W'en dem time come, I goin' tuh go."" (pg. 134)

Michelle says

I didn't read it in this book; I read it in "Famous plays of the 1920s" but it's not on good reads. I adore this play; I couldn't get enough of it while reading it and now that I'm through, I'm wishing there were more pages! Crown, Porgy, Bess-- love tension at its best!
