

# Imitation of Life

By Ariel Schudson

“Imitation of Life” (John M. Stahl, 1934), based on Fannie Hurst’s acclaimed novel, was a defining moment in the history of women in film and a watershed moment for African-American casting in Hollywood. While its narrative reveals how problematic the representation and depiction of people of color was in 1934, this film manages to go further than many others in tackling racial issues by casting actual women of color in dynamic roles.

In “Imitation of Life,” Delilah Johnson and her daughter Peola come to live with Bea Pullman and her daughter Jessie as boarders. Both Delilah and Bea are struggling single mothers but they jointly create a pancake business based on an old family recipe of Delilah’s. The film continues to utilize visual and thematic “Aunt Jemima” connotations for Delilah, which undermines the character’s larger potential as a stereotype-transcending role. She becomes the primary cook, serves as house “nurturer,” and even continues to work for Bea though she owns a significant percentage of the business. On the other hand, Bea and Delilah maintain a deep friendship and the shared experience of difficult daughters tightens that bond.

Bea’s daughter Jessie not only made a point to demoralize Peola when they were young girls but as a young adult she busily interrupts her mother’s romances. Delilah’s daughter Peola bears the brunt of being mistreated by Jessie while struggling with her own biracial identity. Her final decision upon her own coming of age is to “pass” as white, and she makes every effort to detach herself from Delilah. The film is a melodrama, so not all is resolved happily, especially for women of color. This is one of the more salient features of this film and why it still works today. The depictions of Delilah and Peola are far more complex than those of Bea and Jessie. That is what makes this film worthy of study and why it is as riveting now as it was in 1934. It is a woman’s story and a woman wrote it.

Writer Fannie Hurst was born in Hamilton, Ohio in 1889 to a family of Jewish immigrants. Fannie Hurst’s writing was certainly not “one size fits all,”



*Publicity poster depicts a scene between Rochelle Hudson and Claudette Colbert. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Online Collection.*

and many felt it was too “corny,” referring to her as the Queen of the Sob Sisters. That said, she “sobbed” all the way to the bank. By 1925, she and Booth Tarkington were the highest paid writers in the US. Hurst may not have been the Darling of the Literati, but she certainly was popular with the common folks. While critics grumbled, the public read and adored her. In a career spanning over fifty years, she wrote seventeen novels, nine volumes of short stories; three plays, numerous articles, and had 33 filmic adaptations of her written works, which featured performers from Doris Day and Frank Sinatra to John Garfield and Joan Crawford.

The most popular of her writings is, of course, “Imitation of Life,” originally published in 1933, and adapted for the screen multiple times. This first film version from 1934 stars the lustrous Claudette Colbert as Bea and the indisputably talented Louise Beavers as Delilah.

Prior to this film, Beavers was primarily cast in “mammy” roles. In “Imitation of Life,” Beavers edged beyond that image, becoming one of the first African American actresses to give a “non-Mammy” performance in a studio film. By playing Delilah alongside Colbert’s Bea, they created an interracial female team, unlike anything audiences had seen before. Giving an African American woman a dynamic role that was dramatically on par with a star such as Colbert was unheard of at this time, and Beavers’ portrayal of Delilah is solid and powerful, complex and rich. While her depiction is not entirely unproblematic, the intimacy established

between her and Colbert is manifest. Their teamwork as actors mirrors their character arcs, reflects the bond that Bea and Delilah have created as entrepreneurs, single mothers, and as women who age together and raise children.

In an equally groundbreaking casting choice, another African American actress, Fredi Washington, played the role of Delilah's racially mixed daughter Peola. While the "aunt Jemima/nurturer" image of Delilah's contains a myriad of tired archetypes for women of color that are still relied on today, the character of Peola was presented to the audience as an in-your-face reminder of the kind of landscape that exists *offscreen*. Casting Fredi Washington was not only bold, it was smart. A young black woman struggling with her racial identity on-screen is a critical piece of film history, especially for Hollywood in 1934. Even in 21st Century filmmaking, thoughtful biracial discourse and intelligent representations of women of color are difficult to find in studio pictures. "Imitation of Life" and Fredi Washington's performance now seem like abandoned side roads of cinema.

The "passing" discourse central to "Imitation of Life" is undoubtedly why Chief of the Production Code Administration Joseph Breen was suspicious of this film, rejecting the original script for implicit "miscegenation;" yet the film eventually received certification. In the subsequent 1959 version (directed by Douglas Sirk), they cast a biracial Jewish/Hispanic actress, Susan Kohner, to play Peola, evading any vigorous or challenging casting opportunities.

Based loosely on reality, "Imitation of Life" was inspired by a trip to Canada that Fannie Hurst had taken with close friend and Harlem Renaissance author, Zora Neale Hurston. While these ladies may not have followed the same narrative as Bea and Delilah, it is safe to say that the treatment suffered during the voyage struck Hurst in such a manner that she felt motivated to write a novel based upon the experience. Using a central female friendship as the platform to discuss racial identity and feminist ideology, Hurst created a story that was both emotionally appealing and politically significant.

But this was par for the course for Hurst, who was more than just a writer. She was befriended by Eleanor Roosevelt, and supported the New Deal and chaired a national housing committee from 1936-1937. Hurst raised funds for WWII refugees and was a delegate to the World Health Organization in 1952. She also volunteered with a group called the Friendly Visitors, women who regularly worked in a New York women's prison. Once, in 1962, Fannie tangled with Supreme Court Justice Arthur Goldberg. He stated, "It is time that we evaluated women on merit and fitness for a job." She retorted, "Time sir! You are a half century too late!"

Fannie Hurst's success is undeniable. Films like "Young at Heart" (Gordon Douglas, 1954), "Humoresque" (Jean Negulesco, 1946), and "Imitation of Life" show that her writing has the ability to be adapted to charming and enjoyable film work. While the taste for melodrama may have lessened over time, Hurst's ability to catalyze real emotion and make an audience feel for a character remains altogether genuine. And in an environment where much modern filmic content has a certain level of smarminess or "ironic nudging" there is something very fresh and *real* about a woman who just wanted to tell a good old-fashioned tear-jerker tale.

Fannie Hurst's life and all she managed to do with it makes her a marvel. What a treasure it is that we can say she is part of our history of women in film.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

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