

Zora Neale Hurston 1891-1960

Early Life

She was born January 7, 1891 in Alabama, the fifth of eight children. She moved with her family to Eatonville, FL when she was still a toddler.

Eatonville, established in 1887, was a rural community near Orlando. It was the nation's first incorporated black township, founded and governed by blacks.

Father – John Hurston, served as mayor of Eatonville for three terms. He was a preacher and a carpenter.

Mother – Lucy Potts Hurston, was a church director and former teacher.

Because Zora grew up in Eatonville, she was never indoctrinated in inferiority. She could see the evidence of black achievement all around her.

Zora had many clashes with her father. However, her mother was very encouraging. She would tell Zora, "Show your shine, jump at the sun, never say never." But she died when Zora was only 13.

Her father remarried quickly, a woman much younger than he was. She and Zora didn't get along. They even got into a fistfight. Zora then left Eatonville and spent the next years working a series of menial jobs, including one as a manicurist.

She ended up in Baltimore in 1917 when she was 26. She had never finished high school, so she lied and said she was 16 in order to qualify for free public schooling. She never added those ten years back to her life.

She attended Howard University, and published her first story in 1921, "John Redding Goes to Sea," in Howard's literary magazine, *The Stylus*. She continued to publish stories, and her work caught the eye of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, writers involved in the Harlem Renaissance, a movement in the 1920s to celebrate and express pride in their race. The movement allowed artists to move away from imitating whites. She transferred to Barnard College and received a scholarship in anthropology. She received her BA in 1928. Dr. Franz Boas, a celebrated professor of Anthropology at Barnard, took Hurston under his wing and arranged for her to get a fellowship to go south and collect folklore.

Adulthood

She was actually married three times. She first married Herbert Sheen in 1927 (she modeled Tea Cake in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* after him, and supposedly he was the man she always loved). But she didn't live with him very long, and they divorced after three years. Her second husband was Albert Prize. He was 23 and she

was 48. That marriage lasted less than a year. Her last husband was James Pitts, which also lasted less than a year. She said marriage “will only widen my hips and narrow my life.” She also said she grew bored of each of her husbands, and felt they held her back.

She combined her love of anthropology and writing. She studied anthropology in the south (Florida and New Orleans), and in the Caribbean. She also became interested in the study of voodoo, and published “HooDoo in America” in the *Journal of American Folklore* in 1931.

She wrote a play together with Langston Hughes called *Mule Bone*. But they argued over who owned the text. She tried to sell it under only her name. It ruined their friendship, and the play wasn’t published in its entirety until 1991.

In 1932 she returned to Eatonville, and published “The Gilded Six Bits.” The story caught the eyes of publishers, who asked her if she had written any longer works. She immediately began working on a novel.

Her first novel, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, was set in a town much like Eatonville. It focused on two characters based on her own parents. This was followed by *Mules and Men* (1935), based on her studies in the south. Next came *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Tell My Horse* (1938), *Moses: Man of the Mountain* (1939), and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942 – a grossly inaccurate autobiography).

While *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was her most popular work, many of her peers criticized her use of the black vernacular. In the book she incorporates the black vernacular into the standard literary idiom. She takes the two linguistic extremes and merges them, which is simply genius. She proves that the black dialect has the capacity to carry a tale. She also writes a black female character who is sensual, sexual, and has the will to self-determination, something unheard of in African American literature of the time. This book is the ultimate claim to selfhood. It explores how we love each other, and how we violate one another. It examines how we make culture, and how we celebrate it.

The largest royalty she ever earned was \$943.75. She couldn’t make a living as a writer, so she also worked as a librarian, teacher, and domestic worker.

She evaded race as a significant aspect of identity in American society, since she didn’t grow up experiencing racism. She also didn’t overtly focus on the large issue of women’s rights. She was concerned with interpersonal relationships. She wanted to know why people treated each other the way they did. In taking this focus, she did touch on larger societal issues, but in a very personal way.

Later Life

She grew more conservative over time. Other African American writers criticized her. She had three novels rejected in five years.

Her last work was *Seraph on the Suwanne*, published in 1948. It was her poorest quality work. It was published soon after she had been accused of molesting a ten-year-old boy. The accusations were completely false. All charges were dropped. But black newspapers ran with the story, even though it wasn't true. She was out of the country at the time the molestation supposedly took place. This incident shook her to her core, as she felt betrayed by her own community.

She left New York and moved to Belle Grade, FL. She joined the Bell Grade Inter-Racial Council. At age 61 she took a job as a maid. When her employer found out who she was, the press was contacted. She then got more offers to publish her work.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown vs. Board of Education* got Zora into more trouble. She disagreed with integration. She felt that black kids didn't need to sit next to white kids to be educated. She felt that integration meant learning only white history and culture, and that African American history would be lost in the process. She was scorned for this, and accused of being out of touch. She then moved to a trailer and took odd jobs. In 1958 she took a job writing a column for a Fort Pierce paper, and moved into a small house. Her health declined, and she suffered a stroke. She entered a welfare home, and died January 28, 1960. She was 69. She was buried in an unmarked grave. At the time of her death, all of her books were out of print.

In 1973, a young Alice Walker sought out her grave and paid to have a gravestone added. She had it engraved "Zora Neale Hurston, A Genius of the South, 1901 - 1960" (honoring Zora's wish to keep those ten years off her life).