



# Zora Neale Hurston



*It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. From barren brown stems to glistening leaf-buds; from the leaf-buds to snowy virginity of bloom. It stirred her tremendously. How? Why? It was like a flute song forgotten in another existence and remembered again. What? How? Why? this singing she heard that had nothing to do with her ears. The rose of the world was breathing out smell. It followed her through all her waking moments and caressed her in her sleep. It connected itself with other vaguely felt matters that had struck her outside observation and buried themselves in her flesh. Now they emerged and quested about her consciousness.*

— Their Eyes Were Watching God



## Quick Facts

- \* 1891-1960
- \* African-American novelist and anthropologist
- \* Key figure in the Harlem Renaissance

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# Zora Neale Hurston

## Biography continued

Though during her life Zora Neale Hurston claimed her birth date as January 7, 1901 and her birth place as Eatonville, Florida, she was actually born on that date in the year 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama. Within the first year or two of her life her family moved to all-black Eatonville, however, and this community shaped her life and her writing to a significant degree. John Hurston, the author's father, was a carpenter and a preacher and was several times elected mayor of their town. Her mother, Lucy, died in 1904. The young Zora didn't take very well to her new stepmother and left home to work for a traveling theatre company, then in 1917 attended Morgan Academy in Baltimore to finish high school. Hurston entered Howard University in 1920 and studied there off and on for the next four years while working as a manicurist to support herself. Her first published story appeared in Howard University's literary magazine in 1921 and she received recognition in 1925 when another story was accepted by the New York magazine *Opportunity*, edited by Charles S. Johnson. After she won second place in the *Opportunity* contest, Johnson and others, including Alain Locke, encouraged Hurston to move to New York.

In New York Hurston became part the New Negro movement -- later referred to as the Harlem Renaissance -- attending parties with other notable African American writers such as Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, and Arna Bontemps. Hurston apparently cut quite a figure in Harlem society, her hat perched jauntily on her head, as she regaled groups with her tales of Eatonville, Florida and shocked others with her outrageous behavior which included such social excesses as smoking in public. During her early years in New York Hurston worked as an assistant to writer Fanny Hurst and began taking classes at Barnard College. At Barnard she studied anthropology under the renowned scholar Franz Boas. Her particular interest was in the area of folklore, and her background in Eatonville provided her both with rich data for scholarly study and fine raw material for her writing. Over the next several years Hurston would travel in the south, interviewing storytellers in Florida and Hoodoo doctors in New Orleans, all of which would feed into her writing.



# Zora Neale Hurston

## Biography continued

One of Hurston's early works was the play *Mule Bone*, a comedy she wrote with Langston Hughes. Drawing from folk culture, Hurston and Hughes were trying to create an African-American comedy that did not depend on black stereotypes but came out of black rural life. Sadly, the authors had a misunderstanding over who owned the text of the play and their friendship was damaged beyond repair. The play itself was not published in its entirety until 1991. Hurston's first published book, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, was a fictional work set in a small all-black Florida town which focused on the lives of two people remarkably like her parents. In her second book, *Mules and Men*, Hurston published what she found in her trips in the south. She worked for a number of years on this book until it was both highly expressive of the cultures she was writing about and geared toward a popular reading level. This is no turgid academic text and outshines her later anthropological work *Tell My Horse*. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is generally considered to be Hurston's most powerful novel.

Alice Walker writes of it, "There is no book more important to me than this one" (Hemenway xiii). It is the story of Janie Crawford, a woman who defines the parameters of her life and loves in opposition to the small-town mores of Eatonville. *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston's third novel, is a compelling rewriting of the biblical book of Exodus in the style of African-American southern vernacular. *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston's autobiography, has proved to be the most enigmatic of her works. In what Robert Hemenway describes as "a [sometimes] discomfiting book," Hurston seems to evade race as a significant aspect of identity in American society, advocating instead "a personal transcendence of racial realities" (Hemenway 281). This text displays a conservatism in the author which increased with time. The last of her works that was published in her lifetime, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, which focuses on the marriage of a white couple, seems a long stretch from her roots in Eatonville.

From Darwin Turner's early and scathing criticisms of her work to Hemenway's balanced praise and Alice Walker's enthusiasm, Zora Neale Hurston has been the subject of intense critical attention since her "re-discovery" in the late 'sixties. The most prolific African-American woman writer of her time or earlier, the power of her imagery and the richness of the culture which she brings to life through her writings have found her enthusiastic new audiences in recent years. Hurston herself was unable to make a living from her writings and worked as a teacher, a librarian and a domestic in order to earn her livelihood.



# Zora Neale Hurston

## Biography continued

She spent her later years in Florida, continuing to write articles which were published in various local and national venues and three additional novels which were rejected for publication. Her death in 1960 in a welfare home went largely unnoticed by the world and she was buried in an unmarked grave. In 1973, during a time when Hurston's eminence was finally being recognized, Alice Walker placed a marker in the field where Hurston lay. The gravestone reads:

“ “  
**Zora Neale Hurston**  
**“A Genius of the South”**  
**1901 [sic] -- 1960**  
**Novelist, Folklorist**  
**Anthropologist**  
” ”

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*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937).

*Tell My Horse* (1938).

*Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939).

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