

Zora Neale Hurston

(January 7, 1891 to January 28, 1960: writer, anthropologist, folklorist and documentary filmmaker)

Zora Neale Hurston, trailblazer for the empowerment of Black women and prolific author, was born on January 7, 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama. She was the descendant of slaves on both sides of her family. Her father, John Hurston and her paternal grandfather were Baptist preachers. Before being recruited and ordained a minister, John Hurston was also a sharecropper and then a carpenter. Hurston's mother, Lucy Ann Potts Hurston, was a schoolteacher. Hurston was the 5th of 8 children.

When she was three years old, in 1894, Hurston's family moved from Alabama to Eatonville Florida. This move had a tremendous impact on her life. Since she was so young when she moved there, Hurston often credited Eatonville as her place of birth. The town also served as the setting of many of her writings.

Eatonville was one of the first Black incorporated towns in America. As such, Hurston often referenced the vibrancy and self-sufficiency of the Blacks who lived independently and separately from the Whites in neighboring townships. Eatonville also contributed to Hurston's views on racial segregation and government assistance programs.

Hurston spoke of Eatonville with a sense of pride and cherished nostalgia. Her writings and discussions of her life there, describe how her upbringing imbued her with a sense of racial pride and self-sufficiency. In her opposition to the Supreme Court's 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education, she once said, that she would not bow low before the white man and that Negro schools were on their way to being equal to white institutions. In short, Hurston saw no need for integration or for any of the New Deal programs for Blacks.

An interesting fact: Hurston was a Republican, which put her at ideological odds with many of her contemporaries and friends. Hurston wrote an essay where she critiqued Richard Wright's "Native Son." Her views also contradicted those of her close friends, Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen. Hughes and Cullen were Communists who also supported the Soviet Union.

Hurston's academic and professional careers were marked by excellence. She obtained college and professional degrees from Morgan State, Howard University and Barnard of Columbia University. In the latter instance, Hurston was the first Black woman to matriculate and graduate from Barnard/Columbia.

Hurston moved to Harlem in the 20s to attend Barnard. Her move coincided with the height of the Harlem Renaissance. The roaring 20s bore witness to Harlem serving as the Mecca of Black culture. Hurston was surrounded by greatness, her friend circle consisted of such literary giants as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and James Baldwin.

This time in Harlem proved pivotal to Hurston's development as a writer; it would provide the foundation for her to achieve greatness in her own right. The late 20s and 30s bore witness to Hurston at her most prolific. During this time, she traveled throughout the Deep South, Haiti and Jamaica, where she conducted anthropological studies on their spiritual practices of Hoodoo and Vodoun. It was also during this time that she started writing her most seminal work: "Their Eyes Were Watching God."

Another pivotal novel that she wrote during that time was "Baraccaoon." The novel was posthumously published in 2018, but not before extensive debate as to whether it was plagiarized. Some say that it was, while others claim that Hurston added additional material about the subject of the novel: Cudjoe Kazzola Lewis.

Illegally shackled to the innards of the slave ship Clotilda, it was said that in 1860, Lewis was the last known survivor of the slave trade. Barraccaoon was not the only work on Lewis's life at the time. The book as a work remained distinguishable from others on Lewis, in that Hurston depicted his life in Bante, Africa, prior to his enslavement. Again, whether the work was plagiarized in part or in whole has yet to be resolved. However, the significance of the work remains undeniable.

As a champion for the empowerment of Black women, even at a time where such talk was unfathomable, Hurston was also a maverick and non-conformist. She lived life on her own terms, which oftentimes put her at odds with her romantic partners and spouses. Records reveal that she had three significant relationships: two resulted in marriage and one served as the inspiration for one of her most iconic characters, Tea Cake. Both of Hurston's marriages lasted less than a year; both ended in divorce.

The 40s and 50s bore witness to Hurston writing and struggling personally and financially. In 1943, after years of separation, her divorce from her second husband became final. In 1947, she moved to Honduras, where she did the research and writing for "Seraph on the Suwanee." She completed and published this novel the subsequent year. Although Hurston continued to write throughout the fifties, she eventually became cash strapped and worked as a maid in Florida. The toll would prove heartbreaking and unbearable.

Some say that it was Hurston's libertarian beliefs that led to her death at 69. Records reveal that she died alone and destitute at the St. Lucie County Welfare Home of hypertensive heart disease. It was said that her friends gathered far and wide to pay for her funeral. Despite these overtures, her remains were also said to be buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida. They remained there until 1973, which was when Alice Walker wrote an essay for "Ms." Magazine: "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston." It was at this time, that Walker: would then procure a tombstone in the graveyard where Hurston was purportedly buried; she would also re-introduce the world to Hurston's great works and writings.

To say that Hurston was a prolific writer over the years would be an understatement. To date, she has been credited with at least 50 short stories, plays, an autobiography, ethnographies

and many essays. Hurston's work went largely unrecognized until after her death. Again it was Alice Walker, who re-introduced the literary world to Hurston's works and her immeasurable contributions to the culture. A woman whose life, words and impact would influence many generations of creatives to come.

Selected Notable Works:

- "Sweat" (1926) (short essay)
- "How it Feels to be Colored Me" (1928) (essay)
- "Hoodoo in America" (1931) (published in the Journal of American Folklore)
- "The Gilded Six Bits" (1933)(short essay)
- "Jonah's Gourd Vine" (1934) (novel)
- "Mules and Men" (1935) (non-fiction)
- "Their Eyes Were Watching God" (1937) (novel)
- "Tell My Horse" (1938) (non-fiction)
- "Moses, Man of the Mountain" (1939) (novel)
- "Dust Tracks on a Road" (1942) (autobiography)
- "Seraph on the Suwanee" (1948) (novel)
- "What White Publishers Won't Print" (Negro Digest, 1950)
- Baracoon: The Story of the Last Black Cargo (2018)
- Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Stories from the Harlem Renaissance (2020)

References and Additional Reading

- Zora Neale Hurston Wikipedia Page,
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zora_Neale_Hurston
- National Women's History Museum,
<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/zora-hurston>
- The Official Website of Zora Neale Hurston,
<https://www.zoranealehurston.com/>
- Zora at Barnard
<https://barnard.edu/zora-neale-hurston-at-barnard>
- Fort St. Lucie's Website, timeline of Zora Neale Hurston's Life
<https://cityoffortpierce.com/412/Timeline-of-Zora-Neale-Hurston>