Zora Neale Hurston

Hurston, Zora Neale

Record Information

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Description:

Raised in Florida, Zora Neale Hurston was one of many African Americans who moved to New York City during the Harlem Renaissance. Much of her literary work drew upon her knowledge of African-American folk culture and rural life.

Best known for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Zora Neale Hurston was one of the most prolific authors of the Harlem Renaissance era. In addition to novels, Hurston published more than 50 short stories and essays, two books on African-American folklore, and an autobiography. Yet at the time of her death, she was all but forgotten by critics and peers. All of Hurston's writing was informed by her roots in the rural American South and by a love of African-American folk culture. The novelist Alice Walker, one of many African-American writers and scholars who helped refocus critical attention on Hurston's life, praised her writing for exhibiting the quality of "racial health—a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings."

Though she often gave conflicting reports about the place and date of her birth, ZoraNeale Hurston is thought to have been born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, a poor plantation town where her parents, John and Lucy Anne Hurston, worked as sharecroppers. The family soon relocated to Eatonville, in central Florida, the first town in the United States to be incorporated by African Americans. Hurston's father became the pastor of Zion Hope Baptist Church in nearby Sanford and later served three terms as Eatonville's mayor.
In Eatonville, Hurston grew up listening to the folktales, or "lies," as she called them, related by family members on the porch of their eight-bedroom home, which her father had built. Hurston displayed a wildness of spirit and a native curiosity that earned the

encouragement of her mother, a schoolteacher, to whom Hurston was very close as a child. Hurston attended the Hungerford School in Eatonville until the death of her mother in 1904, after which she enrolled at the Florida Baptist Academy, a boarding school in Jacksonville.

Hurston's relationship with her father had often been strained during her childhood, and she grew further apart from him when he remarried in 1905. Hurston quarreled incessantly with her stepmother and spent the next few years at the homes of several relatives in Florida and Tennessee, when she was not attending school in Jacksonville. In 1916, Hurston joined a traveling troupe that performed operettas by Gilbert and Sullivan, working as a personal maid to one of the actresses. After several months she departed the troupe in Baltimore, and found work as a domestic to support her studies at Morgan Academy (now Morgan State University).
Hurston earned her high school diploma in 1918 and enrolled at Howard University, in Washington, D.C. After completing her associate's degree in 1920, Hurston remained in Washington, and she soon found encouragement for her growing interest in writing. Alain Locke, a professor at Howard University, and poet Georgia Douglas Johnson introduced Hurston to many of the leading literary figures in what would become known as the Harlem Renaissance, including W. E. B. DuBois, Jean Toomer, Marita Odette Bonner, and Jessie Redmon Fauset.

Hurston's formal entry into the literary world of Harlem came in 1924, when Locke convinced her to submit her writing to Charles S. Johnson, the editor of the National Urban League's literary magazine *Opportunity*. Hurston moved to New York in 1925 and soon became a popular and influential figure in Harlem's literary circles. Her short stories began to appear regularly in *Opportunity*, and she published her first play, *Color Struck*, in the first and only issue of *Fire!!*, a literary magazine she helped to found with Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Gwendolyn Bennett.

In 1927, while a student at Barnard College, Hurston entered into a contract with Charlotte Osgood Mason, a wealthy white patron of the arts. Mason agreed to pay Hurston a monthly stipend of $200 and outfitted her with a motion-picture camera and an automobile. Thus equipped, Hurston left New York for the South, beginning a long period of travel during which she compiled research on African-American folk traditions. Her findings would form the basis of most of her literary work and provide a foundation for future research with the eminent American anthropologist Franz Boas, a professor at Columbia University in New York.

Hurston severed her contract with Mason in 1931. No longer inhibited creatively by someone else's support, she completed many of her most acclaimed works during the 1930s. She collaborated with Langston Hughes on the play *Mule Bone: A Negro Comedy* (1931), an ambitious though controversial drama drawn from her life in Eatonville. A series of misunderstandings between Hurston and Hughes over the authorship of the play eventually led to the end of their friendship. *Mule Bone* was later produced in 1991 to mixed reviews: Its use of authentic southern dialects was considered offensive by many African-American critics.
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n 1934, Hurston published her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, based on the life of her father. Hurston's first volume of folklore, *Mules and Men*, appeared in 1935 and contained much of the research gathered during her travels in the South. In 1937, she published her best-known work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Set in her childhood home of Eatonville, this novel depicts the life of Janie Crawford, a woman of unquenchable idealism and strength who seeks the fulfillment of her personal and romantic dreams.

Upon its publication, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* received harsh criticism from novelist Richard Wright for its lack of overt protest against racial injustice in the South. Much of the criticism leveled at Hurston during her lifetime stemmed from her often difficult relationships with fellow authors. Since its original publication, however, the novel has become a classic of African-American literature and an influential work for more recent female authors such as Alice Walker and Toni Cade Bambara.
In the final decades of her life, Hurston published two additional novels, *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) and *Seraph of the Sewanee* (1948). She also published a second collection of folktales, *Tell My Horse* (1938), and her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), which sold well and earned the Ainsfield-Wolf Award, though the book presented several misleading statements about her life.

Hurston's final years were marked by increasing health problems and poverty. She left New York in 1948 after being falsely accused on a morals charge by a former landlord. During the 1950s, Hurston lived in Florida and continued to write, producing two novels that were ultimately rejected by her publisher. She also embarked on a detailed biography of Herod the Great, which she continued to revise until her death. In 1959, Zora NealeHurston entered St. Lucia Welfare Home in Fort Pierce, Florida, where she died on January 28, 1960.

Upon her arrival in New York during the 1920s, Hurston flourished among the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance. Her natural exuberance and formidable abilities as a storyteller initially earned the respect and admiration of her peers. In some respects, however, she was ill suited to the growing climate of racial protest that characterized the works of her contemporaries. "I do not belong to that sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a lowdown dirty deal," she wrote in her 1928 essay "How It Feels to Be Colored Me." The publication of collected volumes of Hurston's short fiction and essays during the 1970s and 1980s led to a revival of critical and popular interest in her life and work, and she now stands as one of the most important authors to emerge from the Harlem Renaissance.

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