

**“The Harlem Renaissance: Rebirth of African American Arts”  
Westbury Arts Remembers  
Zora Neale Hurston  
1891 - 1960  
Author, Anthropologist, and Folklorist**



**Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Carl Van Vechten Collection**

*“Sometimes, I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry,” Hurston wrote in 1928. “It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company!” Zora Neale Hurston*

Zora Neale Hurston’s journey went from a segregated childhood in Eatonville, Florida to becoming one of the most revered Black authors during the Harlem Renaissance, and then largely forgotten until interest in her story was revived in 1975, fifteen years after her death, by the author Alice Walker. A life’s journey that was both circuitous and complex.

Eatonville was a rural community, six miles north of Orlando, that was established by freedmen in 1887 as the nation’s first incorporated Black township. It was a place where

African Americans found some autonomy and freedom even though it was segregated. Eatonville was a community that provided African Americans the opportunity to live as they desired unrestricted by Southern white society. The liberating spirit of self-determination is very evident in the writings of Eatonville's "favorite daughter," Zora Neale Hurston. Valerie Boyd, a writer on the Zora Neale Hurston Official website, said:



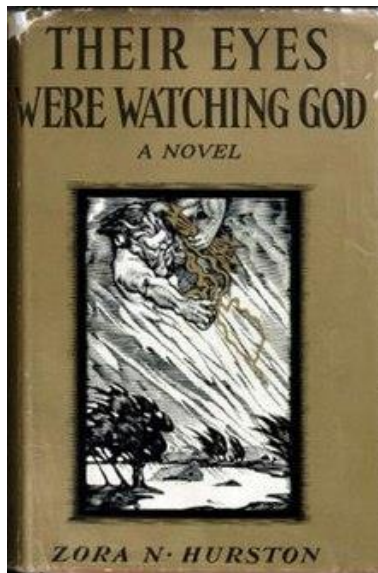
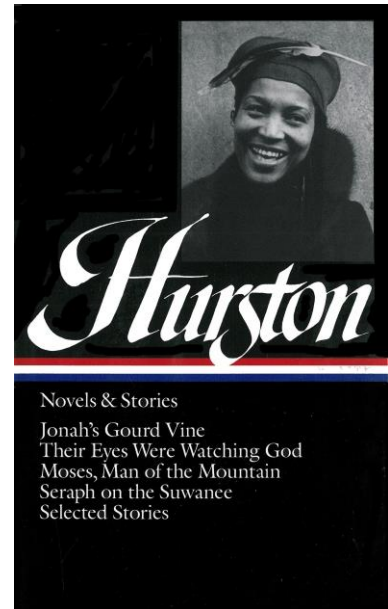
“In Eatonville, Zora was never indoctrinated in inferiority, and she could see the evidence of black achievement all around her. She could look to town hall and see black men, including her father, John Hurston, formulating the laws that governed Eatonville. She could look to the Sunday Schools of the town's two churches and see black women, including her mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, directing the Christian curricula. She could look to the porch of the village store and see black men and women passing worlds through their mouths in the form of colorful, engaging stories.” Stories that Zora, as a trained anthropologist, sought to record and preserve.

Hurston was the fifth of John and Lucy Hurston's eight children. Her father was a carpenter, Baptist preacher, and the Mayor of Eatonville and her mother, a former schoolteacher. Hurston's childhood was a happy one until the death of her mother in 1904 when Zora was just thirteen years old. Her father remarried and Zora's "rambunctious spirit" resulted in frequent clashes with her stepmother, who she described as, "Bare and bony of comfort and love." Hurston struggled to finish her high school education, working at menial jobs, but soon left home and joined a traveling theater company. In 1917 she ended up in Baltimore, 26 years old, and still hoping to continue her education. She lied about her age and registered as a 16-year-old saying she was born in 1901. Not only was she able to earn her high school diploma but she continued to represent herself as 10 years younger for the rest of her life. In 1920 she graduated from Howard University with an Associate degree and won a scholarship to Barnard College to study anthropology. After graduating from Barnard in 1928, she pursued graduate studies in anthropology at Columbia University until 1930.

Hurston arrived in New York City's Harlem neighborhood in the mid 1920s. She became a fixture in the area's thriving art scene, with her apartment becoming a popular spot for social gatherings. Valerie Boyd, in her biographical essay notes that, "Zora ...had a fiery intellect, an infectious sense of humor, and 'the gift,' as one friend put it, "of walking into hearts." Hurston used these talents to nudge her way into the Harlem Renaissance of the 20s, befriending such luminaries as poet Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and popular singer/actor Ethel Waters.

Hurston's novels, short stories, and plays often depicted African American life in the South. Many were based upon her childhood memories of Eatonville. She established herself as a literary force with her accurate accounts of the African American experience. Hurston received acclaim early in her career for her short stories, many of which were published in the National Urban Leagues' *Opportunity* Magazine. In May of 1925, she received four literary prizes from *Opportunity*: a second-place fiction prize for her short story "Spunk," a second-place award in drama for her play *Color Struck*, and two honorable mentions. From 1921 until 1951, more than 50 short stories, plays, and essays were published, some posthumously. Many of her tales had female heroes which was unusual for that time.

Hurston wrote four full length novels including *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Man of the Mountain* (1939) and *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948).



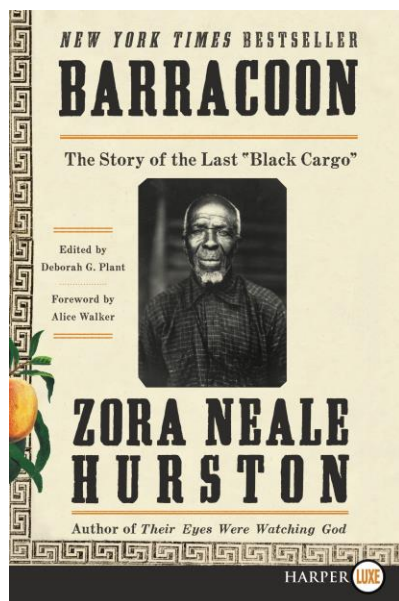
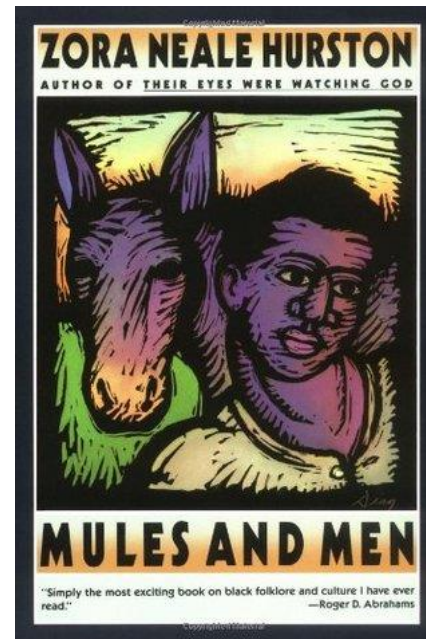
The most famous of these was *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and it proved to be Hurston's masterwork and is now considered one of the most important and enduring novels of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a Southern love story told with humor and poignancy. However, some readers in the 1930s and '40s, both Black and white, rejected its strong black female protagonist, its use of idiomatic language and sexual explicitness. This book, along with Hurston's others, was soon "out of print" and forgotten until 1973, when, as mentioned above, Alice Walker rediscovered it. Walker published an essay titled, "Looking for Zora", in *Ms. Magazine* in 1975. In that article, she described how the Black community's general rejection of Hurston was like "throwing away a genius". Walker is also quoted as saying, "There is no book more important to me than this one." In 2005 Oprah

Winfrey released a movie based upon Hurston's novel starring Haille Berry. All this attention attracted new readers who found, according to Virginia Heffernan writing in the *New York Times*, "...a forceful, erotic, well-wrought story about a black woman by a black woman, and academics in newly formed African-American studies departments had particular need for it." Though it was controversial in its time, later generations of readers, especially women, have found its message empowering.

Zora Neale Hurston's anthropological studies primarily examined southern black culture and folklore. Starting in 1926 with the publication of *Possum or Pig*, she added "Cudjoe's Own Story of the African Slaver" (1927), "Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas"

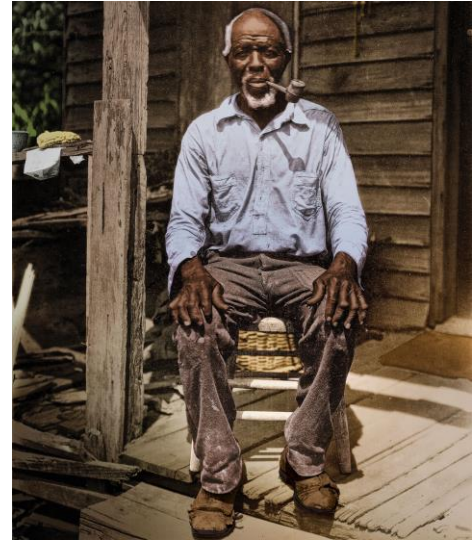
(1930), "Hoodoo in America" (1931), *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938). *Mules and Men* is said to be the first major collection of stories from Black America's folk world. Hurston returned to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida and recorded the oral histories, sermons, and songs, dating back to the time of slavery. Much of what she wrote about she remembered hearing when she was a child. With this collection, she was able to preserve the humor and wisdom that is an important, as well as beautiful part of American culture. In the book's introduction, Hurston explains why she returned to study the folklore of her hometown:

"I hurried back to Eatonville because I knew that the town was full of material and that I could get it without hurt harm or danger. As early as I could remember it was the habit of the men folks particularly to gather on the store porch of evenings and swap stories. Even the women folks would stop and break a breath with them at times. As a child when I was sent down to Joe Clarke's store, I'd drag out my leaving as long as possible in order to hear more."

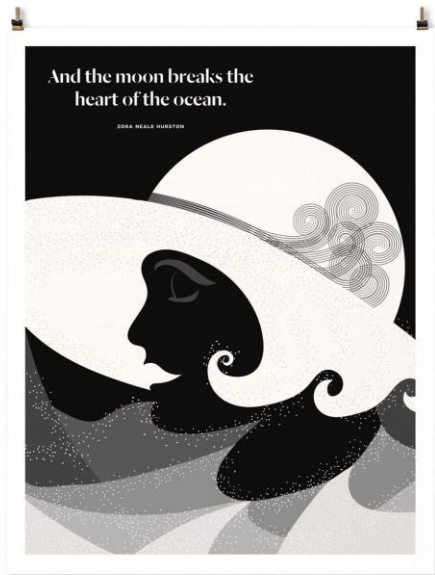


Zora Neale Hurston had interviewed a man named Cudjoe Lewis in 1927 for her anthropological study, "Cudjoe's Own Story of the African Slaver." She returned in 1931 to Africatown, Alabama (3 miles North of Mobile) and spent three months learning more about the life of the eighty-six-year-old former slave. Cudjoe was believed to be the last living person who was born in Africa and was kidnapped and brought to America on a slave ship. He was captured, at the age of 19, and transported here, along with 150 other captives, aboard the *Clotilda*, the last ship ever to engage in the transatlantic slave trade. The story of the *Clotilda* was yet another horrible chapter in America's shameful history of human slavery. A group of plantation owners, on a bet that they could get away with it and with the complicity of a Maine seafaring family, conspired to smuggle a cargo of captured Africans to the United States. Even though, at the time of this voyage in 1860, international slave trade had been prohibited in the U.S. for 52 years. While slavery was still legal within the U.S. until the 13th Amendment was passed in 1865, Congress had prohibited the foreign importation of slaves in 1808.

The result of Hurston's research was a 117-page manuscript titled, *Barracoon, or the Last Black Cargo*. In the Atlantic slave trade, captured individuals were temporarily transported to and held at detention centers called barracoons along the coast of West Africa, while they awaited transportation across the Atlantic. Hurston narrated the text in Lewis's voice, who describes his childhood in Africa, the Middle Passage, the five years he spent enslaved, and his post-emancipation life. Chronicling, thanks to Lewis's "remarkable memory," his cultural traditions, games, folktales, religious practices, and day-to-day activities. Written exactly how it was told, Lewis described what it was like to arrive on a plantation where no one spoke his language and could explain to him where he was or what was going on.



"We doan know why we be bring 'way from our country to work lak dis," he told Hurston. "Everybody lookee at us strange. We want to talk wid de udder colored folkses but dey doan know whut we say."



Viking Press rejected the *Barracoon* manuscript, citing Hurston's preservation of Lewis' distinct dialect. Viking wanted conventionally "respectable" language instead. But Hurston did not consider removing Lewis' own words, and so she moved on — unable to find a company willing to partner with her and execute her vision. It was not until some 87 years later, in 2018, that this important historical saga was published by Amistad Press. Hurston's insistence on writing in the vernacular was controversial and aroused discomfort among others in the Black community. The playwright Ntozake Shange explains that Hurston's language "always made black people nervous because it reflects rural diction and syntax -- the creation of a different kind of English. She was criticized by some of her

contemporaries, including Richard Wright, author of *Native Son* who wrote that she "cynically perpetuated a minstrel tradition meant to make white audiences laugh."

While Hurston was a prolific writer and a prominent personality during the Harlem Renaissance, she never was adequately rewarded financially. The largest royalty she ever earned from one of her books was \$944.00. Hurston was never able to live off her writing, and took side jobs as a teacher, librarian, house cleaner, and even manicurist to stay afloat. Because Hurston's books did sell well during her lifetime, when she retired to Fort Pierce, Florida in her 60s, she struggled with health problems and financial concerns. Having no family nearby, she entered a county nursing home, where she died from complications of a stroke in 1960 at the age of 69. Although her neighbors took up a collection to pay for her funeral, there was not enough money for a headstone. In 1972, Alice Walker located Zora's unmarked grave and had a headstone erected which said:



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

Although, Hurston's work was not widely known during her life, in death she ranks among the best writers of the 20th century.

**"I have the nerve to walk my own way, however hard, in my search for reality, rather than climb upon the rattling wagon of wishful illusions."**

**- Letter from Zora Neale Hurston to Countee Cullen**

*Biographies compiled and arranged by Stan Turetsky, a founding member of Westbury Arts in celebration of Black History Month.*

## LEARN MORE

1. *The New Yorker*, "A Society of One - Zora Neale Hurston, American Contrarian" by Claudia Roth Pierpont February 10, 1997  
<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/02/17/a-society-of-one>
2. National Women's History Museum, "Zora Neale Hurston, 1891-1960," by Arlisha R. Norwood, NWHM Fellow | 2017

<https://www.womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/zora-hurston>

3. Biography, "Zora Neale Hurston Biography (1891–1960)," by Biography.com Editors updated: 1/29/21.  
<https://www.biography.com/writer/zora-neale-hurston>
4. The Official Website of Zora Neale Hurston  
<https://www.zoranealehurston.com/>
5. *New York Magazine*, "The Last Slave" (the story of Cudjo Lewis)  
<https://www.vulture.com/2018/04/zora-neale-hurston-barracoon-excerpt.html>
6. University of Central Florida, Zora Neale Hurston Digital Archive  
<http://chdr.cah.ucf.edu/hurstonarchive/>
7. The Scholar and Feminist Online, Published by The Barnard Center for Research on Women, "Zora Neale Hurston's Essays: On Art and Such" by Cheryl A. Wall  
<http://sfonline.barnard.edu/hurston/printcwa.htm>
8. Grab the Labels, "Dust Tracks on a Road by Zora Neale Hurston"  
<https://grabthelapels.com/2017/04/03/dust-tracks/>

## HEAR MORE

1. Reading from *Barracoon* narrated by Robin Miles.  
[https://soundcloud.com/harperaudio\\_us/barracoon-by-zora-neale-hurston?in=harperaudio\\_us/sets/amistad](https://soundcloud.com/harperaudio_us/barracoon-by-zora-neale-hurston?in=harperaudio_us/sets/amistad)
2. Reading Mules and Men  
<https://www.zoranealehurston.com/resource/reading-mules-and-men/>
3. Library of Congress Digital Collections Florida Folklife from the WPA Collections, 1937 to 1942, Zora Neale Hurston <https://www.loc.gov/collections/florida-folklife-from-the-works-progress-administration/?fa=contributor:hurston,+zora+neale&fi=name&q=hurston,+zora+neale>

## SEE MORE

1. Zora Neale Hurston-- "Sweat"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dSP0Y-000jM>

2. Zora Neale Hurston: "Heart with Room for Every Joy"  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7k1ozpwiQIM>

3. Hurston Biography  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GjU1f-nF5R0>