Meet Zora Neale Hurston



In 1973 the writer Alice Walker traveled to Fort Pierce, Florida, to visit Zora Neale Hurston's grave. What Walker found looked "more like an abandoned field" than a cemetery, she said. There among the waist-high weeds and yellow wildflowers was a large sunken rectangle—Hurston's grave. Walker ordered a headstone for the grave site.

"I wanted to mark Zora's grave so that one day all our daughters and sons would be able to locate the remains of a human mountain in Florida's and America's so frequently flat terrain," Walker explained.

Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, one of the first incorporated black towns in the United States. There her family found a refuge from much of the racism of the late 1800s and early 1900s. Her father worked as a Baptist preacher and served as the town's mayor. Her mother, who taught her to read, was a great source of encouragement.

Only thirteen when her mother died, Hurston spent the next two decades working as a waitress, a manicurist, and a maid, while trying to get a high school education. At age sixteen, she joined a traveling theatrical group that brought her to New York City during the Harlem Renaissance. Finally Hurston enrolled in Howard University, then later Barnard College, where she earned a degree in anthropology. Hurston used her training to collect the folklore of Eatonville and other southern African American communities. She later used this material as a source for much of her writing.

Although considered an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston was a fierce individualist who resisted membership in any school of thought. Her ideas sometimes got her into trouble with fellow writers, and over the years, her popularity declined. Though she published widely, Hurston made little money from her books. By the time of her death, she was penniless.

Today, thanks to Walker and other admirers, Hurston's books are widely read, and she is remembered for her ability to capture the rich traditions and poetic speech of southern black culture. Her book *Mules and Men*, which includes folklore from black communities in Florida and Louisiana, is recognized as the first history of African American folklore written by an African American. Her most admired novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, a sensitive portrayal of a young black woman's progress toward realizing her identity and independence, has sold more than a million copies since its republication in 1969. *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing*, a final volume that includes a collection of Hurston's stories, folklore, and essays, was published in 1979.

"All clumps of people turn out to be individuals on close inspection."

"I am so put together that I do not have much of a herd instinct. Or if I must be connected with the flock, let *me* be the shepherd my ownself. That is just the way I am made."

"There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside you."

—Hurston

Zora Neale Hurston was born in 1891 and died in 1960.