

Zora Neale Hurston: A Brief Biography

Now lauded as the intellectual and spiritual foremother to a generation of black and women writers, Zora Neale Hurston's books were all out of print when she died in poverty and obscurity in 1960.

Born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, her family soon moved to Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black incorporated town in the United States. Her mother's death and father's remarriage led the outspoken Hurston to leave home at 14 and become a wardrobe girl in an all-white traveling Gilbert and Sullivan operetta troupe.

She completed her education at Howard University in Washington, D.C., while supporting herself at a variety of jobs from manicurist to maid. Heeding her mother's encouragement to "jump at de sun," she arrived in New York in January of 1925 with \$1.50 in her pocket. Two years later, Hurston had not only published four short stories, but also become one of the most popular and flamboyant artists of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance.

As the only black scholar at Barnard College, Hurston studied with the pioneering anthropologist Dr. Franz Boas. His encouragement, combined with a stipend of \$200 a month and a car from patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, allowed Hurston to complete much of her anthropological work in the American South. Her lifelong fascination with collecting, recording, and broadcasting the daily idiomatic communication of Negroes informed her seven books and dozens of stories, articles, plays and essays.

This passion also led to tension in her romantic relationships. Hurston married and divorced three husbands and, at age 44, fell in love with 23-year-old Percy Punter. When he asked her to forsake her career to marry him, she refused because she "had things clawing inside [her] that must be said." She fled to Haiti as an attempt to "smother [her] feelings" for him. She wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in seven weeks "to embalm all the tenderness of [her] passion for him."

Despite the novel's 1937 publication, Hurston's lifelong struggle for financial security continued throughout the 1940s. Once, she even pawned her typewriter. The largest royalty any of her books ever earned was \$943.75. Since most were published during the Depression, she paid her bills through story and essay sales, advances on the books, and two Works Progress Administration jobs with the Federal Writers' Project.

Through the 1950s Hurston remained devoted to writing, but white publishers rejected her books, in part because black literature was no longer considered as marketable. Other complications followed, and her health seriously declined. Her anticommunist essays and denunciation of school integration increasingly alienated her from other black writers. After a stroke in 1959, Hurston reluctantly entered a welfare home where she died penniless on January 28, 1960. Her grave remained unmarked until novelist Alice Walker erected a gravestone in 1973.