

# ZORA NEALE HURSTON

b. January 7, 1891

d. January 28, 1960

*“Mama exhorted her children at every opportunity to ‘jump at de sun.’ We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground.”*

American author and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston was a principal figure in the Harlem Renaissance. She is the author of “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” a book heralded as “one of the most poetic works of fiction by a black writer in the first half of the 20th century, and one of the most revealing treatments in modern literature of a woman’s quest for satisfying life.”

Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black town to be incorporated in the United States, and a source of much of her writing. Her mother was a schoolteacher and her father was a Baptist preacher, farmer and mayor.

When her mother died in 1904, Hurston was sent to Jacksonville, Florida. Working as a maid for a traveling theatrical company, she ended up in Baltimore and attended high school by claiming to be a decade younger. She adopted 1901 as her birth year.

Hurston attended Howard University and, in 1928, became the first African-American woman to graduate from Barnard College. She went on to do graduate work in anthropology at Columbia University.

During her time in New York, Hurston was a mainstay of the Harlem Renaissance, an African-American cultural movement. Hurston befriended and collaborated with notable figures such as poet Langston Hughes and entertainers Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith. In 1935, she published “Mules and Men,” an anthology of African-American folklore.

Hurston traveled to Haiti and Jamaica for research on a Guggenheim Fellowship. During her travels, she penned what would later become her masterpiece: “Their Eyes Were Watching God” (1937). She wrote two more novels and an autobiography, “Dust Tracks on a Road” (1942).

Though she received awards for her work, Hurston never reaped financial benefit.

In her later years, Hurston wrote for newspapers. After medical and financial complications, she moved into a welfare home in Fort Pierce, Florida, where she died. She was buried in an anonymous grave.

In 1973, writer Alice Walker found an unmarked headstone in Fort Pierce and marked it as Zora Neale Hurston’s. Walker published an article that launched a revival of Hurston’s work. In 2005, Oprah Winfrey produced a film version of “Their Eyes Were Watching God,” starring Halle Berry.

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Their Eyes Were Watching God



With a Foreword by Edwidge Danticat

Zora Neale Hurston

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