Hurston, Zora Neale (1891 - 1960)

Definition: Hurston, Zora Neale from The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

US writer. She was associated with the Harlem Renaissance. She collected traditional Afro-American folk tales in *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Tell My Horse* (1938). Among her many other works are the novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942).

Although her conservative philosophy of her later years alienated many of her contemporaries, she was a key figure for following generations of black women writers, including Alice Walker, who edited a collection of her writings, *I Love Myself When I Am Laughing* (1979).

Summary Article: Preserving the Black Folk Heritage: Zora Neale Hurston

From The SAGE Encyclopedia of African Cultural Heritage in North America

The career of Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960) spanned 30 years, in which she published four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, numerous short stories, and several essays, articles, and plays. Hurston's interest in anthropology is evident in her body of work, and she became a pioneer of African American ethnography, dedicating her life and work to preserving the Black folk heritage. Her eyes and ears were open to the rich life of Black folk heritage at a young age, growing up in Eatonville, a small town in Florida that was incorporated and governed by Black people. With African Americans coming from all over the South to Eatonville, this remarkable town was an endless source of stories, which led to Hurston's appreciation for the richness of Black culture through folklore and transforming it to art through fiction.

Discovering a Dual Vocation

Hurston began publishing short stories in the 1920s when she was an anthropology student at Barnard College. She was encouraged by Franz Boas, a Barnard professor and anthropologist, to do some fieldwork collecting stories, folkways, language, superstitions, music, and religious practices from African Americans migrating from the South to the North. Hurston collected the folklore from the years of 1927 to 1939, beginning in the South from 1927 to 1931; Jamaica, Haiti, and Bermuda from 1937 to 1938; Florida for the Works Progress Administration from 1938 to 1939; and the Honduras from 1946 to 1948. Hurston traveled from Mobile, Alabama, to Florida to New Orleans, Louisiana, gathering and recording tales, songs, games, customs, and voodoo rituals of rural southern Black America.

The collection of African American folklore gathered from her travels to the South ultimately became *Mules and Men*, the first great collection of African Americans' folk world. While living in South Florida, she met a group of West Africans traveling to Bermuda and became interested in their customs, folklore, and dancing. At that point, Hurston began to find herself and her history and made the links between African, African American, and African Caribbean folklore. Subsequently, she traveled to the Honduras, Bermuda, Haiti, and Jamaica collecting folklore of the African diaspora and published a detailed description of everyday life and rituals in *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*.

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When Hurston found herself at the height of the Harlem Renaissance, she realized that the folk material that she had heard and loved as child was part of an oral tradition that had been handed down from Africa and preserved throughout the era of enslavement. Soon, she found her artistic voice and set out to present and preserve the folk voice and expression through folklore. Hurston became known during the Harlem Renaissance for her humor, irreverence, and writing style. Her figurative language, storytelling abilities, and portrayal of Black culture made hers a distinctive voice.

For Hurston, there was a fine line between folklore and fiction. The theme of Black folk culture is prevalent in most of her work, including *Tell My Horse; Jonah's Gourd Vine; Moses, Man of the Mountain; and Every Tongue Got to Confess*, the third volume of folktales that she collected on her travels through the Gulf States in the late 1920s. This collection has nearly 500 folktales representing African American life in the South and represents a major part of Hurston's literary legacy.

In 1937, Hurston published a masterwork of fiction, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which drew heavily on Black folklore, history, culture, and language. Drawing material from her childhood and the historical relevance of the community of her upbringing, she wove Black folk culture as a thread throughout her work to demonstrate and represent communal life, oral traditions in folktales, riddles, and spiritual and blues music. Her rural 1930s stories were set in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida. Eatonville was originally incorporated as an African American town, a unique situation that had an impact throughout Hurston's life. This is where she received her earliest training in Black southern folktales, where she heard local storytellers tell their colorful stories of “lies.”

Hurston's mastery of the short story form is evident in a posthumous collection published in 1995 as *The Complete Stories*, in which she captures the rhythms of African American life and speech, paying tribute to the richness of Black vernacular while reflecting with humor, wisdom, and compassion on the trials and tribulations of the African American experience. As she continued to pursue her writing career, she began to add elements of drama and essay to her work and was soon a well-established creative force in the African American and literary communities.

**Hurston's Literary Legacy**

Hurston's stories represent Black culture in a folk-loric, poetic, and literary way. Her tales about the mythical figure High John De Conquer and the sketches “Mother Catherine” and “Uncle Monday” illustrate her interest in human motivation over social or political commentary. The stories “Drenched in Light” and “Magnolia Flower” also incorporate elements of folktale—the tragic love story and the evil grandmother. Hurston's fiction is grounded in folklore, which is central to stories such as “Cock Robin Beale Street” and “Possum or Pig.” In stories such as “Spunk,” “The Gilded Six-Bits,” and “The Conscience of the Court,” Hurston's use of metaphor and Black dialect augment her simple narratives, bringing her characters vibrantly to life. Biblical themes, another major feature of Hurston's work, appear in “The Seventh Veil” and “The Bone of Contention.”

The story “Cock Robin Beale Street” was published in a 1941 issue of *The Southern Literary Messenger*. Its main character, Uncle July, is a storyteller, and most of the other characters are animals personified. A morality tale, the story functions as a social commentary on race, class, and power while connecting the oral tradition as Uncle July tells a tale about his friend Cock Robin, who was murdered. Here, Hurston used the technique of a tale within a tale, assuming two narrative voices and filling the story with vernacular language.

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Included in *The Complete Stories* are seven previously unpublished stories, which are told in Hurston's unique vein of humor, the new urban sensibility, and the language of migrants to the city. Her “Story in Harlem Slang” is subtitled “Jelly's Tale” and has an especially oral character. Published in H. L. Mencken's *American Mercury*, it contained a glossary and illustrations by cartoonist Al Hirschfeld. An uncut version (“Now You Cookin’ With Gas”) was published after her death, as was “Book of Harlem,” the story of a southern migrant going to Babylon told in the biblical format of numbered verses. The “Story in Harlem Slang” is followed by a three-page glossary to explain the slang used. Hurston's emphasis on slang and the use of a first-person narrator in this story underscores the importance of the oral tradition in African American culture.

Harlem is also the stage set for “Book of Harlem.” In this story, Hurston experiments with language and style. She uses a mixture of biblical language and Harlem slang and goes even further to mix names, places, and events in the Bible, paralleling them to contemporary history. In both “Book of Harlem” and “Story in Harlem Slang,” Hurston's narrative voice does not differ from that of the characters in the stories and serves to mix bits and pieces of self-identity.

A number of Hurston's stories written between 1922 and 1934 show that she was well aware of urban relocation and the challenges faced by those attempting to start life anew in the North. In “The Book of Harlem,” “Monkey Junk,” and “She Rock,” the clash between urban language and a mock biblical tone, between the sacred and the profane, between the serious and the humorous, invokes the role and voice of the African American folk preacher challenged with the urban environment. The urban stories provide fuller insight into Hurston's commitment to the urban Black life and allow us to look at the evolution of the writer's skills as storyteller, as anthropologist, and as fiction writer from her early experiments to the height of the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston identifies the narrative voice in her last stories with the voice of the folk, thus achieving two goals: The African American experience is more directly and freshly conveyed, and Black vernacular speech becomes a literary language.

Zora Neale Hurston wanted to refute contemporary claims that African Americans lacked a distinct culture of their own. Her novels depict the unconscious creativity of the African American folk. They represent community members participating in a highly expressive communication system that taught them to survive racial oppression and, moreover, to respect themselves and their community.

What set Hurston apart from her contemporaries was that she took an interdisciplinary approach to her writing. For this reason, anyone wanting to learn more about her motivations and perspectives would do well to consult her entire body of work. Her focus on the experience of the poor and working-class people, expressed through dialect and rituals of speech and interaction, is fully evident in four novels, dozens of essays and short stories, various musical productions, and two full-length anthropological studies.

Evident in all of her remarkable accounts of the African American experience is Hurston's exceptional ability to craft a tale. Incorporating porch stories from her hometown and materials from her collecting excursions as a trained anthropologist, she succeeded not only in preserving the traditional dialects of people of African descent in the rural South and elsewhere, but also in recording the vibrancy of Black life and affirming Black folk culture with exuberance and pride.

See also *African American Vernacular English in Life Narratives; African Consciousness as Cultural Continuity; African Influences on African American Arts and Artists; African Linguistic and Communication Continuities in the Caribbean Diaspora; Animal Folk Tales; Signifying Monkey; Trickster*
Further Readings


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