

## The Significance of Zora Neale Hurston

Black women in America do not write fantasy or speculative fiction. That's not a true statement, but do you know the woman that made sure it was a lie? She is arguably the first black person published in fantasy ever, and her name is Zora Neale Hurston. In a letter to Countee Cullen, renowned writer and poet, Zora says "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." This quote is the first thing featured prominently on [Zora Neale Hurston's Official Website](#).

Hurston was born in Alabama in 1891, the fifth of eight children to a former-schoolteacher mother and a carpenter-preacher father. As a toddler, Hurston and her family relocated to the first all-black incorporated town in the United States, Eatonville, Florida. The novel that her name is forever tied to is set in a place similar to Eatonville. On a warm, cloudy, and windy day in 1937 Haiti — 46 years after being born — she penned the masterpiece, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, after working on it feverishly for seven weeks. But, by the time she published in 1937, the Harlem Renaissance had become one of the Great Depression's casualties.

And the book flopped. It received criticism from all levels. Some said it lacked a political message, others proclaimed that it lacked meaning when the black plight was all about ascribing meaning to everything. Then there were the critics that insisted it was too flowery, too flowy, too artsy for a black-woman-writer. Zora's fiery intellect and infectious humor had earned her as many foes as friends in the Harlem Renaissance including Langston Hughes and Ethel Waters. And although she was known for her sobriety, she was also known for bringing the party with her wherever she went. Hurston published her autobiography, *Dirt Tracks on the Road*, in 1942 to much acclaim. The 57-year-old writer was featured in numerous national publications.

She went on to publish one more novel in 1948, *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Despite becoming a well-known author, Zora never received the financial benefits of

success. During her career she had to work as a maid to keep herself afloat. She died of a stroke in 1960 at the age of 69. Her neighbors in Fort Pierce, Florida took up collection for her funeral arrangements and Zora laid in an unmarked grave until 1973. Her last home in Fort Pierce, Florida is now a museum.

In the summer of 1973, a young writer named Alice Walker (author of *The Color Purple*) traveled to Fort Pierce to pay her respects to the literary genius that had inspired her. Walker found Hurston's gravestone in an unattended segregated cemetery. She cleaned back the overgrown vines and waist high weeds, and put a plain gray headstone bearing the words — "Zora Neale Hurston — Genius of the South". The tragedy of Zora laying in anonymity for almost 30 years was forecasted by non-other than Zora in a letter to W.E.B DuBois in 1945: "Let no Negro celebrity, no matter what financial condition they might be in at death, lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness... We must assume the responsibility of their graves being known and honored."

I have been influenced by Zora Neale Hurston's dedication to life and the written word. Zora fought a world much different than the one I battled, fiercer in so many ways, and still produced some of the most groundbreaking literature of her time. Even though there were no accolades and there was no financial payout. She did it for the love of the words and I can only respect that. Zora is the reason that I believe little black girls from the south have a chance. Little black girls like me. And not just a chance to be heard, but a chance to be the best. I can only pray that Zora's spirit is resting in the ultimate peace knowing that the combination of her pen, mind, and tenacity have shaped a generation. I bet she could never have imagined her impact while writing through the storm in that tiny Haitian room. May her grave and life be forever honored.

## Top Five Zora Neale Hurston Quotes

"Love makes your soul crawl out from its hiding place."

“Grab the broom of anger and drive off the beast of fear.”

“I do not weep at the world, I am too busy sharpening my oyster knife.”

“If you are silent about your pain, they’ll kill you and say you enjoyed it.”

“No matter how far a person can go, the horizon is still way beyond you.”