

Zora Neale Hurston
1903 - 1960

by L. Margaret Pomeroy

Zora Neale Hurston was born January 7, 1903, in Eatonville, Florida. Using her personal heritage and southern background she became a noted African-American folklorist and writer. When Hurston was sixteen, she traveled to New York City with a theatrical company. While there, she studied anthropology at Columbia University and then traveled to Haiti as an ethnologist to study voodoo. In 1931 she worked with Langston Hughes on the play *Mule Bone*. Hurston's writing peaked in the mid 1930s when she wrote books, drama, stories, and essays, becoming a prominent figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Probably her most acclaimed work was published in 1937, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The novel, rooted in her hometown of Eatonville, was deeply personal.

In the last twenty years of Hurston's life she published only two books, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, her autobiography, and *Seraph on the Sewanee*. Although the later drew positive reviews, its release was overshadowed by a young boy's accusations of sexual abuse. Although the charges could not be substantiated, a black tabloid sensationalized the story. Hurston became depressed, believing her own people had been turned against her. She wrote to Carl Van Vechen, "My race has seen fit to destroy me without reason, and with the vilest tools conceived of by man so far." (*Renaissance*, p.170) Zora Neale Hurston declined after these events and wrote only rarely. She died in Fort Pierce, Florida on January 28, 1960, three months after she became a ward of the Lucie County welfare home. Thirteen years after her death, a young Alice Walker would travel to Florida to locate her grave and place a marker on it. Walker could only afford a plain gray marker, but she had it engraved with an epitaph taken from one of Jean Toomer's poems: "Zora Neale Hurston: 'A Genius of the South.' "

Sources used:

"Hurston," *Encyclopedia of Literature* (1995 ed.), 571.

Watson, Steve. *The Harlem Renaissance*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1995.