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978-0-521-67095-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston

Loverlie King

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*The Cambridge Introduction to
Zora Neale Hurston*

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a key text in African American literature. Its author Zora Neale Hurston has become an iconic figure for her literary works and for her invaluable contribution to documenting elements of black folk culture in the rural south and in the Caribbean. This introductory book designed for students explores Hurston's artistic achievements and her unique character: her staunch individualism, her penchant for drama, her sometimes controversial politics, her philosophical influences and her views on gender relations. Loverlie King explores Hurston's life and analyzes her major works and short stories. Historical, social, political, and cultural contexts for Hurston's life and work, including her key role in the development of the Harlem Renaissance, are set out. The book concludes with an overview of the reception of Hurston's work, both in her lifetime and up to the present, as well as suggestions for further reading.

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

For My Baby Sister

Earnestine (Tiny) Cassandra King

Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xiii
1 Life	1
2 Contexts	14
3 Works	36
<i>Jonah’s Gourd Vine</i> (1934)	36
<i>Mules and Men</i> (1935)	47
<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> (1937)	52
<i>Tell My Horse</i> (1938)	61
<i>Moses, Man of the Mountain</i> (1939)	68
<i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i> (1942)	74
<i>Seraph on the Suwanee</i> (1948)	87
Short stories	96
4 Critical reception	105
<i>Jonah’s Gourd Vine</i> (1934)	107
<i>Mules and Men</i> (1935)	110
<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i> (1937)	112
<i>Tell My Horse</i> (1938)	114
<i>Moses, Man of the Mountain</i> (1939)	116
<i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i> (1942)	118
<i>Seraph on the Suwanee</i> (1948)	120
<i>Suggestions for further reading</i>	126
<i>Index</i>	130

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Lovalerie King

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This volume introduces Hurston and her works in a manner that makes evident her full engagement with life and her continuing significance to African American women's literature, African American literature, American history and literature, cultural anthropology, and gender studies. She is one of very few African American women writers whose work most college students will experience during her or his undergraduate career. In the tradition of African American women writers, her name is as familiar as that of Toni Morrison and Alice Walker; yet she died in relative obscurity – a staunch individualist to the very end. Since Alice Walker and others rescued Hurston from literary oblivion in the 1970s, several scholars have produced works focusing on her life, work, philosophy, politics, and critical reception.¹

This volume, intended for general readers, is divided into four sections: Life, Contexts, Works, and Critical Reception. The chapter on Hurston's life places the author in her historical, social, and political milieu. Beginning with her early life as a precocious child in the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, the chapter charts Hurston's intimate relationships, educational experiences, participation in the Harlem Renaissance/New Negro Movement, post-Renaissance activities and, finally, decline, death, and cultural resurrection. It examines significant life-shaping events and experiences, such as her premature exit from home following her mother's death and her father's remarriage, her arrival in Harlem just as the New Negro Movement was heating up, her marriages, the love affair of her life with Percival Punter, studying with famed anthropologist Franz Boas, her (sometimes problematic) association with patron Charlotte Osgood Mason, the never-ending struggle to secure financing for her literary endeavors, and her travels and fieldwork.

Long before she became a trained anthropologist, Hurston drew on her capacities for entertaining and storytelling to weather some difficult adolescent and early adult years. Later, her particular genius revealed itself in the ability to combine skills acquired during formal education and fieldwork with her natural talent for storytelling and performance. Chapter 1 also provides information about Hurston's strong tendencies toward drama and the dramatic,

Cambridge University Press

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Loverie King

Frontmatter

[More information](#)x *Preface*

even as the formal development of her skills in that arena often took a backseat to other demands on her creative energies for several reasons, including the strong individualist spirit that undermined collaborative endeavors. Finally, the chapter sheds light on Hurston's place in the "historiography" of black womanist/feminist thought and action. Thus, the information in chapter one presents Hurston as a multi-faceted woman living her "several lives" (as much as possible) on her own terms. Overall, readers should obtain from this chapter a general understanding of the highs and lows of Hurston's life and literary career.

Chapter 2 considers historical, social, political, and cultural contexts for Hurston's life and literary production. Hurston came of age during a period that has come to be known as the *nadir* for African Americans in terms of economic and political progress; yet, Hurston recalls her youth (until the age of thirteen) in insular Eatonville, Florida, as a happy time of relative prosperity. The chapter begins with a look at some of the events and circumstances occurring during the decades preceding Hurston's birth, including the Civil War, the abolishment of slavery, Radical Reconstruction, and the rise of white supremacist terror groups. It continues with some consideration of Jim Crow segregation in the late nineteenth century along with a generally regressive political climate in terms of rights and privileges for African Americans. The chapter also recounts African America's collective and individual responses to the increasingly hostile social and political climate. It calls attention to competing ideologies and discourses of womanhood that influenced Hurston's explorations of black female sexuality and her focus on gender relations throughout her fiction. Politically conservative, Hurston often wrote against the grain and suffered the negative criticism of her contemporaries as a result; the choices she made in her professional life reflect the independent spirit that was evident from early childhood.

Chapter 3 introduces readers to Hurston's substantial body of published fiction; the objective here is to show, among other things, how Hurston's work celebrates – at an organic level – the tradition of African American literature that began with oral forms brought from Africa to the New World. Note is taken of the fact that Hurston's production was outstanding during that period, particularly because she was neither white, nor male, nor affluent; she published seven books and scores of essays, short stories, and plays between the 1920s and the time of her death in 1960. The chapter also notes posthumously published and variously edited volumes of her work, though Hurston's best-known and most widely taught work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, serves as the centerpiece. Readers are treated to several vantage points from which to experience the novel and to understand its relevance to several academic fields and disciplines.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67095-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston

Loverie King

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface xi

Discussions of Hurston's shorter works highlight recurring themes and issues, with special attention to some of her most often anthologized short stories. Overall, the chapter assists in a better understanding of Hurston's works at the level of plot, character, narrative, and structure.

The fourth chapter, "Critical Reception," provides readers with an overview of factors influencing how Hurston's work has been read and understood both during her life and since her death, with the bulk of the chapter focusing on the latter period. Hurston's somewhat mixed (and often hostile) early reception has been a recurring issue in scholarship on her life and work; contemporaneous reviews often diverged along racial and/or political lines. Other factors, such as target audience demographics, and the patronage upon which a number of authors relied played a role in what was published and how it was received. While the same factors continue to influence literary production, contemporary criticism of Hurston's work tends to focus much more on her artistry and on the ways that her body of work appeals to a variety of area studies and disciplines, including English and Literary Studies, African American Studies, Gender Studies, Anthropology, and History. While the chapter's primary objective is to survey a variety of critical perspectives on Hurston's work, it also provides analysis that helps readers understand how context and the development of literary and critical studies have contributed to the vast difference between her contemporaneous and contemporary receptions. The hope is that readers will emerge with a stronger appreciation for the role historical context plays in the forms and nature that literature and criticism take, and also with a full appreciation of Hurston's unique and valuable contributions to American literature and culture. A list of suggested readings for further study rounds out this volume on one of the world's major wordsmiths.

Note

1. These include, for example, Robert E. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Chicago and Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1977, 1980); N. Y. Nathiri, *Zora!: Zora Neale Hurston, A Woman and Her Community* (Orlando, FL: *The Orlando Sentinel*, 1991); Ayana L. Karanja, *Zora Neale Hurston: The Breath of Her Voice* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999); Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* (New York: Scribner's, 2003); Deborah G. Plant, *Every Tub Must Sit on Its Own Bottom* (Urbana, IL and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995); and Carla Kaplan, ed., *Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters* (New York: Doubleday, 2002).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-67095-1 - The Cambridge Introduction to Zora Neale Hurston

Lovalerie King

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Abbreviations

<i>DTOAR</i>	<i>Dust Tracks on a Road</i>
<i>JGV</i>	<i>Jonah’s Gourd Vine</i>
<i>MMOTM</i>	<i>Moses, Man of the Mountain</i>
<i>MAM</i>	<i>Mules and Men</i>
<i>SOTS</i>	<i>Seraph on the Suwanee</i>
<i>TMH</i>	<i>Tell My Horse</i>
<i>TEWWG</i>	<i>Their Eyes Were Watching God</i>