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## ZORA NEALE HURSTON

by Theodore Pratt

For many years, when giving talks in Florida, I have pointed out that there is only one first-class native-born Florida author who has written any even small body of work about the state. Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, Philip Wylie, and all the others were born elsewhere and adopted the Florida scene. The exception was Zora Neale Hurston. Seldom, on inquiry, had any of the audiences ever heard of her or known any of her work. At that point I revealed to the white southern audiences that Zora was a Negro. As I announced this I looked around for the nearest exit. I never had to use the exit, and when I told this to Zora she roared with laughter.

On February 3, 1960, at age 52, Zora died in Fort Pierce, Florida, in poverty and obscurity.

She is a prime example of the excellent American writer who, in our smash-hit or virtually nothing kind of literary civilization, gets lost in the shuffle. Far more recognition should be given to such writers, and I ask permission to give this to Zora.

I regard her early books, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), and the Florida parts of *Mules and Men* (1939), depicting life in the turpentine camps, to be in the top rung of American writing, certainly as good as anything anyone has ever written about Florida. And take another look at those titles. They are as exceptional as the wonderful imagery she possessed and gave to her readers, as real as the hurricane - from the viewpoint of the Negro - which she pictured among her people in the vegetable raising district around Lake Okeechobee.

Zora not only could write but knew what she was writing about. Her autobiography, *Dust Tracks On A Road* (1942), won an Anisfield Award for better race relationships. She knew how to express herself. The peak of her economic career - and it was Mt. Everest rising from the plain - was the short period during which she worked as a writer at Paramount in Hollywood. When I asked her what she thought of California she wrote back, true to her native Florida, "I like my land lying down."



How did this girl, born (without her permission in possession of a black skin) in a backwoods Florida town, make a place for herself in the world? Her handicaps would seem to be almost insurmountable. Eatonville, her birthplace, is a remote community of a few hundred Negro people in north-central Florida, not far from Orlando. It is a place of dirt streets, incredibly colorful Negro cabins set beautifully beneath towering live oaks dripping with long beards of Spanish moss. It was the first incorporated Negro town in the United States and one of the very few which is entirely Negro.

Zora's father was a Baptist minister. He was able to augment her primary education to such an extent that she was able to work her way through two years at Howard University in Washington, D. C., by serving as a maid. Then she won a scholarship for two more years at Barnard College and became the second

Negro to be graduated from that school. During this period she supported herself by being secretary to Fannie Hurst. When she and Miss Hurst travelled and wanted to eat in restaurants from which Negroes were barred Miss Hurst introduced Zora, with an air of great mystery and vast importance, as "The Princess Zora," and there was never any difficulty, it being assumed that Zora must be royalty from the Far East.

After Barnard, Zora studied anthropology for three years, working under Dr. Franz Boaz, and for this work Morgan College at Howard conferred upon her the degree of Litt. D. She worked in the anthropological field off and on for most of her life. Her studies and reports on voodoo in the United States and Haiti are definitive on the subject, and one of them, when her research penetrated too far, nearly got her killed. Meanwhile she also wrote on general subjects, and her writings included novels. To live during this usually penurious period she taught at North Carolina College for Negroes. During these years she was also awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships and a Rosenwald Grant.

Zora was rather short and squat, and black as coal. She didn't look and sound much like a Doctor of Literature, but more as though she could do a good day's washing. She was filled with an effervescence for life seldom seen in the human race. She had an abrupt, explosive laugh that burst like a bomb. She always had some new idea or project she enthused over. Some she actually carried out. It was both exhilarating and tiring to be with her, for she caught you up in her ideas to the point of exhaustion she herself never seemed to feel.

She was absolutely and completely improvident. Saving what little money she ever earned was a repugnant idea to her. When she did save, it was to pay for some new project, such as an abortive one of mystery involving an expedition to Honduras, which she financed, and from which she returned flat broke. I never could find out just what that project was about. Probably it was one of the hare-brained kind she sometimes developed.

She couldn't help being sensitive of the color line, but her sensitiveness was of another kind than the usual. It was never bitter. She was always proud of being a Negro and once told me, she wouldn't be white for anything in the world. She wrote in her autobiography:

"My own circumference of life is there . . . . I give you all my

right hand of fellowship and love, and hope for the same from you. In my eyesight you lose nothing by not looking just like me . . . . You, who play the zig-zag lightning of power over the world, with the grumbling thunder in your wake, think kindly of those who walk in the dust. And you who walk in humble places, think kindly, too, of others. . . . Consider that with tolerance and patience, we godly demons may breed a noble world in a few hundred generations or so."

Zora not only preached this with some biting irony, but also carried it out gently in the life she loved to live with zest. Once, when she was visiting me and my wife at our Florida home and we had asked her to stay to dinner, while the meal was being prepared a white caller came to the door. Zora, seeing him before we did, stepped away so that the man would not see her. Afterward, we told her that she need not have done this. She said that she didn't want to take any chance of embarrassing us.

We did not always get on as well as that. After the Honduras debacle, she wrote to me from Miami that she did not have eating money, but she had the promise of a job in New York if she could raise the fare to get there. I sent her a few dollars and advised friends in Miami of her plight. They got together and raised enough for her fare. Instead of using it for the avowed purpose, she did not go, but remained in Miami. When I remonstrated with such behavior and scolded her, she wrote back that she had read, just at that time, that I was going through the trying process of having a book published. Because of this she understood why I was so testy, and she forgave me for being put out with her.

At the time I was prone to think that perhaps too many scholarships and fellowships and grants might have been given her, generating the conviction that others should support her, and that there should be a limit to such grants. Perhaps. I don't know. I got over my aggrievement when I learned, with amusement, that she had gone to work in a Miami Beach house as a domestic, and that her employers one day had found out who she was by reading an article she had written in a copy of *The Saturday Evening Post* on their living-room table.

Then I remembered how, one day, she had shown a single spark of defeatism over her color; she had told me she had written an article but she didn't think that *The Saturday Evening*

Post would buy one from a Negro. I told her that was the only stupid thing I had ever heard her say. Because of it I wouldn't write a note to The Post for her, for if I did and her article was accepted she might, even erroneously, have some question in her mind. She was to send it to them and find out for herself. The Post bought that article and others.

Commercial writing, however, did not consistently appeal to Zora, because she didn't care enough about making money. Still filled with ideas and schemes rarely based upon getting rich, she drifted to the Fort Pierce area of Florida. During her two last years she earned a precarious living as a substitute teacher at Lincoln Park Academy there, and contributed to the local Negro paper, *The Chronicle*. Then she had a stroke that halted work on a new book she was writing. She spent the last months of her life in a county home.

Her funeral at a tiny Negro funeral home in Fort Pierce was attended by over 100 people, sixteen of them white. The mourners overflowed the small hall out onto the porch and then into the yard. There was a little printed program entitled "Funeral Rites of the late Zora Neale Hurston," which offered a brief biography, the order of the service, and the names of the pallbearers and flower girls, who were some of her students. Expenses were paid by contributions, many from those who never knew her.

The local Negro population did not need a white Florida writer to be there to speak an appreciation to tell them who Zora Neale Hurston was. She was someone they may not have understood too well but they knew she had pulled herself up by her bootstraps and done something not many white people ever do.

The wonderful understanding of Negroes for the human race, born perhaps of their necessity to tolerate it, was never better expressed than at Zora's funeral when these people, among whom she had lived so briefly, nevertheless stood by one of their own. The editor of the paper for which she worked said, "Zora Neale went about and didn't care too much how she looked. Or what she said. Maybe people didn't think so much of that. But Zora Neale, every time she went about, had something to offer. She didn't come to you empty."

The minister said, "When people learned I was going to preach about her they asked me, 'What can you find to say?'"

Well, I can find a lot of things. They said she couldn't become a writer recognized by the world. But she did it. The Miami paper said she died poor. But she died rich. She did something."

The main hymn sung at the service was "He'll Understand and Say Well Done," an exact appraisal of the situation. The single jarring thing, and that meant reverently, was the way they dressed her, in a short frilly pink dressing-gown with frothy pink mules on her feet, an incongruous garb for one so real and earthy. I can hear Zora herself commenting on it and saying she wouldn't be caught dead in such an outfit. I am sure she would have added her favorite statement, as she loved to roar gleefully, "I ain't got but two things to do - stay black and die!"

She has achieved her purpose, part of it with some magnificent writing. She is out of circulation and all her books are out of print. One cannot be rectified. The other should be.