**Hurston and Her Other Works**

Zora Neale Hurston's writing career took off when Charles S. Johnson published her early short stories, which featured characters altogether unlike those of her contemporaries. Delia Jones from "Sweat" (1926) uses her wits to outsmart her abusive, unfaithful husband. Missie May from "The Gilded-Six Bits" (1933) reclaims her sexuality after bearing a child within her marriage. These women diverged from prevailing stereotypes for black women in fiction: the overweight mammy, the tragic mulatto, the promiscuous Jezebel.

This complexity deepens in Hurston's novels. The omniscient narrator of her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934), neither indulges nor condemns its errant protagonist, the preacher John Buddy Pearson. (Hurston drew from her parents' tumultuous history for inspiration here, but the adaptation was far from literal.)

Like *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *Jonah's Gourd Vine* refuses to dismiss black speech as gibberish. Both novels are steeped in folklore, recorded in dialect, and drenched in poetry. Referring to her first novel, Hurston wrote: "What I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or a woman do such-and-so, regardless of his color."

She continued to explore this interest in her later novels. *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939) blends the Old Testament prophet with the Moses of black folklore to imagine a powerful account of slavery and freedom. Similarly, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) chronicles the story of two white Florida "crackers" who are deeply in love and deeply at odds.

Hurston wanted black Americans to turn within to find their cultural and spiritual center: "[U]nless some of the young Negroes return to their gods, we are lost." For her, these gods dwelt in the music, dance, and stories of folk culture. The two collections of folklore she published in her lifetime were remarkable, as no other writer was trying to do what she was doing.

*Mules and Men* (1935) was the first great collection of black American folktales and hoodoo material from New Orleans, including over sixty-five folktales, such as "How Jack Beat the Devil," "Why Women Take Advantage of Men," and "The Talking Mule." Her second collection, *Tell My Horse* (1938), gives an eyewitness account of the mysteries of voodoo in Haiti and Jamaica. The appendix includes Negro songs, another lifelong love of Hurston's.

Her unconventional 1942 autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road,* consciously blurs the line between fact and fiction. She completed the book while employed as a story consultant for Paramount Studios in Los Angeles. She barely mentions her first marriage and never mentions her second. She makes no reference to the Great Depression, the two World Wars, or her politics.

Hurston continued writing until her death, even though publishers rejected several novels. She died without finishing her last, an ambitious work that would have reimagined the life of Herod.

During her forty-year writing career, she wrote more than fifty short stories and essays, many plays, and, in her last decade, a series of articles for the *Pittsburgh Courier* about the sensational trial of Ruby McCullum, a black woman charged with the murder of her white lover, a prominent doctor.

Hurston's lonely, little-noticed death does not diminish her. Always a deeply spiritual woman, she wrote in *Dust Tracks on a Road* that "nothing is destructible; things merely change forms. When the consciousness we know as life ceases, I know that I shall still be part and parcel of the world."