

## **The Life and Times of Zora Neale Hurston**

**The 1890s** Zora Neale Hurston born January 15, 1891 in Notasulga, Alabama. Jim Crow laws codified. John Hurston, Zora's father, is elected mayor of Eatonville, Florida, in 1897.

**The 1900s** Hurston's mother dies in 1904; her father remarries months later. First anti-lynching bill introduced in Congress. It never gets out of committee. W. E. B. DuBois publishes *The Souls of Black Folk*.

**The 1910s** Hurston leaves Florida, lives in Tennessee, and finishes her high school education in Baltimore. World War I begins in 1914, and ends in 1919. Ku Klux Klan reborn in Georgia, 1915.

**The 1920s** Nineteenth Amendment gives women the right to vote. Hurston receives degree from Howard University and moves to New York. Busboy Langston Hughes sneaks poet Vachel Lindsay three poems and hangs up his dishrag for good.

**The 1930s** Lippincott publishes Hurston's first two novels: *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. During the worst years of the Depression, over 25% of the labor force is unemployed. FDR launches Federal Writers' Project.

**The 1940s** Hurston writes *Dust Tracks on a Road* in California. America enters World War II after attack at Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. The war ends in 1945. Jackie Robinson debuts for the Brooklyn Dodgers. President Truman signs orders to end military segregation and federal hiring discrimination.

**The 1950s** *Miami Herald* article "Famous Negro Author Working as a Maid" embarrasses Hurston. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, school segregation is ruled unconstitutional. Rosa Parks refuses to give up her bus seat to a white man.

**The 1960s** Hurston dies on January 28, 1960, of "hypertensive heart disease," and is buried in an unmarked grave in a segregated cemetery. Martin Luther King, Jr. delivers "I Have A Dream" speech, 1963. Congress passes Civil Rights Act, 1964.

## **Harlem Renaissance: The Era**

F. Scott Fitzgerald coined the term "Jazz Age" to reflect an era of ragtime, jazz, stylish automobiles, and uninhibited young women with bobbed hair. But this decade also marked the Harlem Renaissance—the artistic, political, and cultural birth of the "New Negro" in literature and art.

Scholars rightly have trouble with the term "Harlem Renaissance." Although the great northward migration led many African Americans to Harlem, a similar renewal was also happening in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC, especially through the influence of Louis Armstrong's and Duke Ellington's jazz. Most of the literary Harlemites were not from New York, nor did they depict Harlem life in their writing—least of all in their fiction. In addition, the decade is not really a renaissance so much as a creative outpouring, a reframing of how Negro artists chose to convey their African *and* American heritage. This stance was no longer one of apology or defeat, but rather of assertion and pride.

The beginning of the period most closely coincides with Benjamin Brawley's 1918 book *The Negro in Literature and Art in the United States*. Alain Locke's 1925 anthology *The New Negro* later synthesized a Negro vision of all the arts, featuring sections on art, music, dance, sculpture, drama, and poetry. He argued that "for generations in the mind of America, the Negro has been more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended, to be 'kept down,' or 'in his place,' or 'helped up,' to be worried with or worried over, harassed or patronized, a social bogey or a social burden."

Despite still-flourishing Jim Crow laws, many white New York writers, publishers, and patrons rallied behind Negro writers and intellectuals, who in turn vociferously protested injustice and racism. As a result, an environment was created where many talented black painters, sculptors, singers, and writers flourished *as artists*-something new for the grandchildren of American slavery.

Harlem nightclubs and salons also provided opportunities for musicians, actors, writers, and poets to mingle, especially at the mixed parties hosted by Carl Van Vechten. At these gatherings, Hurston first met longtime friends such as Fannie Hurst and Langston Hughes. As a popular member of the Harlem elite, Hurston was known for her Eatonville folktales, her radical behavior, her controversial opinions, and her audacious hats.

Though Hurston's fiction can still be usefully read in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, most of her work was published after its heyday.

*"It was a period when every season there was at least one hit play on Broadway acted by a Negro cast. And when books by Negro authors were being published with much greater frequency and much more publicity than ever before or since in history."* — Langston Hughes *The Big Sea*

#### Harlem Renaissance: Hurston's Circle

Zora Neale Hurston wrote that New York City was a "long step for the waif of Eatonville," but the support and criticism of several intellectuals, artists, and patrons helped her become one of the movement's most vivacious and controversial personalities.

One of America's most popular and highly paid writers of the 1920s and '30s, **Fannie Hurst** (1889-1968) published more than eighteen novels, including *Imitation of Life*. She originally hired Hurston as a secretary, but they soon became friends. On their frequent trips

together they defied Jim Crow laws by eating in restaurants together, but Hurston was often forced to sleep in a separate hotel.

Like Hurston, poet **Langston Hughes** (1902-1967) lived in Harlem in the 1920s, published in Alain Locke's *The New Negro*, worked on the journal *Fire!!*, and received awards from *Opportunity*. When he accompanied Hurston on one of her Southern folklore-collecting trips, he encouraged her to seek the assistance of his patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason. Hurston's close friendship with Hughes ended after a long dispute over their collaborative play, *Mule Bone*.

Hurston considered **Charles S. Johnson** (1893-1956) "the root" of the entire Harlem Renaissance. As editor and founder of the magazine *Opportunity*, he published several of her early stories, including "Sweat." Hurston began a correspondence with him while she was still a student at Howard University in Washington, DC. He emphatically encouraged her to move to New York, a decision that profoundly affected her career.

**Charlotte Osgood Mason** (1854-1946) was already the "Godmother" of Hughes and Alain Locke when she met Hurston. Under Mason's patronage, Hurston published her first anthropological pieces but was forbidden to publish anything else. The one-year contract Hurston signed in 1927 was eventually extended until 1931.

Some argue that no white person contributed more to the Harlem Renaissance than **Carl Van Vechten** (1880-1964). As a photographer, writer, and patron of the arts, he promoted the careers of many artists, including Hughes and Hurston. His 1926 novel, *Nigger Heaven*, split the Harlem elite. His photo collections at Yale and Howard universities remain important to this day.