

RAMSTEIN & VOGELWEH LIBRARIES

HAPPY BIRTHDAY

ZORA NEALE HURSTON!

Celebrate her birthday and legacy this month with the 86 FSS Libraries!



Zora Neale Hurston was a cultural anthropologist, ethnographer, folklorist, dramatist, and novelist; one of the most preeminent writers of 20th-century literature, she is particularly known for her incredible work documenting the lives of African Americans, folklore, history, and culture in the American South. Born to formerly enslaved parents and grandparents, Zora and her family moved from Notasulga, Alabama to Eatonville, Florida at a young age. One of the first incorporated African American communities in the United States, her father was not only an Eatonville minister, but also served as mayor for three terms. For Zora, Eatonville was always her true hometown and much of her early work describes her love of nature and the Florida landscape; the community would greatly influence her anthropological and ethnographic research, as well as her short stories and plays as an adult. An imaginative child, she embraced her gift of storytelling, creating her own unique identity that would later manifest in her documentation of American Southern folklore, culture, and history.

After the death of her mother, Zora moved from her beloved hometown to several different places, eventually leading to Nashville -- where she discovered a love of theater while working as a maid for a production company -- and finally to Baltimore, where she attended Morgan College. Following graduation in 1918, she enrolled at Howard University, where she became interested in anthropology and writing, co-establishing *The Hilltop*, Howard's student newspaper. In 1920, Zora earned her associate degree and before enrolling at Barnard College of Columbia University (becoming the only Black student there) published her second short story in *Opportunity* entitled "Drenched in Light"; centering on Eatonville, this piece won second prize in the journal's literary contest. In 1925, Zora finished her BA in Anthropology and moved to New York City, where she won more literary awards -- becoming one of the most noteworthy writers of the Harlem Renaissance -- and meeting longtime friend and colleague, Langston Hughes. At the encouragement of the "father of anthropology" Franz Boas, she also began original anthropological research to preserve heritage through fieldwork.

Zora traveled back to the South in 1927 to conduct her research -- collecting folktales, songs, and stories -- including that of Cudjoe Kazzola Lewis of Africatown, Alabama, the last survivor of the *Clotilda* (the final slave ship to [illegally] enter the US) and the community established by the formerly enslaved Africans. These recordings of the last presumed survivor of transatlantic slavery preserved invaluable information about life before and after enslavement, as well as Africatown's fight against the legacy of slavery in the United States. When publishers requested Zora change Lewis's original words from his distinct vernacular to a more "respectable" dialect, she refused. While the work remained unpublished, her stance ensured the collected narratives remained intact in their vital, original form; *Barracoon* was published in 2018, long after her death. The oral narratives collected in *Barracoon* contributed to the discovery of the largely still intact *Clotilda* in the Mobile Bay delta just three years ago.

"I have the nerve to walk my own way, however hard, in my search for reality, rather than climb upon the rattling wagon of wishful illusions." -- Zora Neale Hurston

During the late 1920s and early 1930s, Zora worked under her advisor Franz Boas, as well as a problematic and controlling literary patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, as she documented African American folklore, songs, and oral narratives, writing several fiction and nonfiction pieces while traveling throughout the South. Her fieldwork also included an interest in hoodoo and she spent time with a priestess in New Orleans. Zora collected hundreds of folktales across the region, but this manuscript was not published until 2001 (*Every Tongue Got to Confess*) when a copy was found at the Smithsonian archives in a collection of papers of Boas's friend, William Duncan Strong. After the complicated and controlling relationship with Mason ended in 1931, Zora struggled financially, particularly as the United States entered the Great Depression era. Her play *The Great Day* closed due to a lack of producers in 1932. She then staged *From Sun to Sun* (1933) and *All De Live Long Day* (1934) which featured a cast of actors from her hometown of Eatonville. Similar to her work combining anthropological research and storytelling in many of her previous publications, these plays also merged two of her other interests: theater and folklore.

While Zora was blending all of her writing interests -- fiction, anthropology, folklore, and drama -- her financial struggles began to worsen. In 1933, she was evicted from her apartment the same day her novel (*Jonah's Gourd Vine*) was accepted for publication. The autoethnographic African American folktale collection *Mules and Men* (featuring her hoodoo research) was published in 1935. Zora was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship and in 1936 traveled to Haiti and Jamaica where she continued her research in hoodoo (*Tell My Horse* was published in 1938) and started writing her most famous work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* -- which she finished in only seven weeks -- published in 1937. After her time in Haiti and Jamaica, Zora returned to the United States where she worked for the Works Progress Administration until 1939. However, she never received proper financial compensation or royalties for her published work and research.

The last decade of Zora Neale Hurston's life was marked by poverty, struggle, and poor health. During the 1950s, Zora made ends meet by periodically selling her writing to different magazines and finding employment as a maid. After being evicted from her home, she worked as a librarian at Patrick Air Force Base, then as a substitute teacher for the Lincoln Academy, but was unable to maintain these positions. In 1958 she moved to the St. Lucie County Welfare Home after suffering several strokes. Zora died on January 28th, 1960 from hypertensive heart disease and was buried in an unmarked grave at a segregated cemetery, Garden of Heavenly Rest in Fort Pierce, Florida. Her possessions were scheduled to be burned following her death but Zora's manuscripts were saved at the last moment by her friend Patrick DuVal; this invaluable work, along with other materials collected by Zora's friends, were donated to the University of Florida. In 1973, the novelist and poet Alice Walker (the first African American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Color Purple*) and literary scholar Charlotte D. Hunt found what they believed to be Zora's unmarked grave in the-then overgrown and nearly abandoned cemetery. Walker placed a marker over the spot with the inscription: Zora Neale Hurston "A Genius of the South".

YOU CAN CHECK MANY BOOKS BY & RELATED TO ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S WORK AT THE 86 FSS LIBRARIES:

