

# Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston

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Traces previously unexplored aspects of the career of the influential African-American writer, citing the historical backdrop of her life and work while considering her relationships with and influences on top literary, intellectual, and artistic figures. 60,000 first printing. Valerie Boyd is arts editor at *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*. Her articles, essays, and reviews have appeared in *Book, Ms.*, *The Oxford American*, *The Washington Post*, and *African-American Review*. She lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

#### Chapter One: Sky Blue Bottoms

There was never quite enough for Zora Neale Hurston in the world she grew up in, so she made up whatever she needed.

In her father's house, on five acres of land in central Florida, young Zora lacked no material comforts. She had eight rooms to roam; a large yard carpeted with Bermuda grass; plenty of playmates; seven siblings; ample amounts of yellow Octagon laundry soap for bathing; two big chinaberry trees for climbing; enough leftover boiled eggs to use as hand grenades on other children; and all the home-cured meat, garden-fresh collard greens, and Mama-made cornbread she could eat.

But Zora had other needs. She needed to know, for instance, what the end of the world was like -- "whether it was sort of tucked under like the hem of a dress," as she once wrote, or if it was just "a sharp drop-off into nothingness." One summer day around 1900, when she was about nine years old, Zora decided she ought to walk out to the horizon and see.

She asked a friend, a schoolmate named Carrie Roberts, to go with her. The next morning, bright and soon, Zora and Carrie were to meet by the palmettos near Zora's house to begin their journey to the edge of the world. Daunted by the daring of the thing, Carrie came to tell Zora she couldn't go. That perhaps they should wait until they were big enough to wear long dresses and old enough to stay out past sundown without earning a spanking. Zora pleaded with her friend, but she refused to go. They fought, and Zora went home, she wrote decades later, "and hid under the house with my heartbreak." Still, she recalled, "I did not give up the idea of my journey. I was merely lonesome for someone brave enough to undertake it with me."

Zora decided to put off her trip until she had something to ride on. Then, she reasoned, she could go alone. "So for weeks I saw myself sitting astride of a fine horse," she would remember. "My shoes had sky-blue bottoms to them, and I was riding off to look at the belly-band of the world."

The summer, lush with the fragrance of Florida oranges and the cries of the mockingbirds, surrendered to fall. Then Christmas-time came.

A few days before Christmas that year, Zora's father -- John Hurston, a preacher and carpenter -- did something unusual. After dinner, he pushed back from the table and asked his children a question. What did they want Santa Claus to bring them? Zora's oldest brothers wanted baseball outfits, she recalled in her autobiography years later. Her younger brothers wanted air rifles. Her big sister wanted patent leather pumps and a belt.

Then it was Zora's turn.

"I want a fine black riding horse with white leather saddle and bridles," I told Papa happily.

"You, what?" Papa gasped. "What was dat you said?"

"I said, I want a black saddle horse with..."

"A saddle horse!" Papa exploded. "It's a sin and a shame! Lemme tell you something right now, my young lady; you ain't white. Riding horse!! Always trying to wear de big hat! I don't know how you got in this family nohow. You ain't like none of de rest of my young'uns."

"If I can't have no riding horse, I don't want nothing at all," I said stubbornly with my mouth, but inside I was sucking sorrow. My longed-for journey looked impossible.

"I'll riding-horse you, Madam!" Papa shouted and jumped to his feet.

For sassing her father, Zora was bound for a spanking. But she beat her father to the kitchen door and outran him.

Zora got a doll for Christmas. "Since Papa would not buy me a saddle horse," she remembered, "I made me one up."

Within the elastic bounds of her imagination, Zora became an adventurer, taking frequent jaunts on her fictitious saddle horse. "No one around me knew how often I rode my prancing horse," she recalled, "nor the things I saw in far places."

This was a harbinger of events to come.

Zora's mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, understood her daughter's singular needs -- or at least her need to make up the things she did not, could not, have. So Lucy tried to give her baby girl plenty of dreamtime. Zora often found refuge -- a place to read and think and listen to her "inside urges" -- in her mother's room. There, she also found a welcome retreat from her father, who seemed to believe it was his job to break Zora's impudent spirit, before it was broken -- inevitably, he felt, and much more harshly -- by the lurking white world.

So Lucy and John Hurston saw Zora's prodigious imagination differently. In fact, they saw a lot of things differently. It hadn't always been that way.

When Lucy Ann Potts and John Hurston started courting, in the early 1880s, they only had eyes for each other. The way Zora Hurston told the story, the way it was always told to her, the first time John saw Lucy was on a Sunday morning in Notasulga, Alabama.

Notasulga is a blink of a town, just six miles north of the more famous Tuskegee, located in

eastern Alabama not far from the Georgia border. Despite its diminutiveness (fourteen square miles), Notasulga straddles two counties, Macon and Lee. It is a town surrounded by creeks -- creeks with names like Red, Wolf, Chinquapin, Chowocle, and Uphapee.

John grew up "over the creek," Hurston once wrote. If she knew which one, she didn't say. What she did say, though, was that being an over-the-creek Negro was the same, in any other town, as being from the wrong side of the railroad tracks. Over-the-creek Negroes were notoriously poor: they lived from hand to mouth and from one white man's plantation to another. But what made others regard them with such disdain was that they also seemed poor in pride, living in rundown conditions with no apparent ambition to better themselves.

John Hurston, however, ached with ambition. So he found his way to Macedonia Baptist Church, on the right side of the creek, and his eyes lighted on Lucy Potts, who sang treble in the choir. Pecan brown and all of ninety pounds, Lucy must have seemed to John the perfect complement to his two hundred pounds of high-yellow muscle. John's golden skin, gray-green eyes, powerful build, and handsome features weren't lost on Lucy, either. By the time John started sneaking her love notes hidden in the pages of the Baptist hymnal, Lucy had already asked her neighbors about him, already knew his name and his over-the-creek pedigree.

John's parents, Alfred and Amy Hurston, both had known slavery. Alfred had been born in Georgia and Amy in Alabama. By 1880, just seventeen years after Emancipation, they'd made a home for themselves and their nine children -- ranging from six-month-old Alfred Jr. to eighteen-year-old John -- on the Lee County side of Notasulga. That year, Alfred and Amy reported their ages as forty-six and thirty-eight. A census taker identified Alfred as a mulatto, which might explain why John's skin was "bee-stung yaller," as Lucy put it. (The Notasulga rumor mill provided another explanation: that John himself was a mulatto, the bastard son of a certain white man.)

Lucy's parents, Richard and Sarah Potts, also had been born into slavery, both in Georgia. After freedom came, they settled in the neighboring state of Alabama. Richard Potts had managed to become a landowner in Notasulga, and in 1880 the sixty-five-year-old farmer's household included his fifty-year-old wife, their four children, and two grandchildren. Lucy was the Potts's youngest child. So, perhaps understandably, the relatively well-to-do Potts family was not pleased when Lucy announced she was marrying John -- an over-the-creek Negro five years her senior.

Despite her parents' opposition, on the second day of February in 1882, Lucy left the Potts's farm and set out for her wedding -- alone. Convinced that Lucy was throwing herself away and disgracing the family by marrying John, Sarah Potts refused to attend the wedding. Most of the family followed suit, declining to witness Lucy's "great come-down in the world." Seeing his daughter's determination, though, Richard Potts decided he didn't want Lucy walking the two miles by herself. So he hitched up his wagon and carried her to the small ceremony, where Lucy and John were married by the Rev. J. Pollard. The bride had just turned sixteen a little more than a month earlier, on December 31. On New Year's

Day, the groom had turned twenty-one.

On their wedding night, the young couple basked in the beguiling glimmer of first love. In her novel *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, Hurston evoked the evening this way:

When [Lucy] rode off beside John at last she said, "John Buddy, look lak de moon is givin' sunshine."

He toted her inside the house and held her in his arms infant-wise for a long time. "Lucy, don't you worry 'bout yo' folks, hear? Ahm gointer be uh father and uh mother tuh you. You jes' look tuh me, girl chile. Jes' you put yo' 'pendence in me. Ah means tuh prop you up on eve'y learin' side."

John took Lucy to the only home he could provide at that time -- a small cabin on a white man's plantation in Notasulga, where the young couple worked as sharecroppers. Lucy and John were not invited to settle on her parents' five acres. Richard Potts might have been more welcoming to the couple, but it wasn't solely up to him. Sarah Potts would have none of John Hurston. She never got over losing Lucy to "dat yaller bastard" -- her way of referring to her son-in-law for many years to come.

Once, a few years after her wedding night, Lucy had a craving for some of the clingstone peaches on her parents' farm. Her yearning was so intense, she walked for miles to get a few. Creating a makeshift basket, Lucy was holding the corners of her apron with one hand and picking peaches with the other when her mother saw her and ordered her off the place.

Her mother's persistent opposition aside, Lucy soon settled into her new life with John and immediately got down to the business of making babies. In November 1882, just nine months after John and Lucy said their vows, Lucy gave birth to their first child -- a boy they named Hezekiah Robert, a mouthful of a name that his siblings would soon reduce to "Bob." A second son, Isaac, was born ten months later, but he didn't survive early childhood. Two more healthy sons followed -- John Cornelius and Richard William.

When, in December 1889, Lucy finally gave birth to a girl, Sarah Emmeline -- named for Lucy's mother and older sister -- John was delighted. For several years, he had wished for a daughter. So when Sarah finally arrived, a bit underweight but healthy, John was joyous. He doted on his daughter, changing her, washing her diapers, and coochie-cooing her every move. When Sarah was old enough to express her wishes, they didn't go unheeded. "What was it Papa's girl-baby wanted to eat? She wanted two dolls instead of one? Bless her little heart!"

If John's first-born daughter was his favorite child, his second daughter was to be his least favorite. "It seems that one daughter was all that he figured he could stand," Zora Hurston once wrote. Apparently John wanted "plenty more sons, but no more girl babies to wear out shoes and bring in nothing."

Nature, however, gave John little say in the matter. When Lucy's water broke on January 7, 1891, John was out of town.

No other adults were around, either. It was hog-killing time, and most folks were off helping neighbors butcher and pack away meat for the rest of the year. As every farmer knew, the optimal time for the slaughter was between December and February, but the coldest days were the best ones. Since they had no refrigerators, farmers had to rely on frigid temperatures to keep their freshly butchered meat from spoiling before they could pack it with preserving salt. A crisp, cold day like this one was perfect for the ritual. That Tuesday morning, whole families had bundled up and trudged off to assist their neighbors. There was enough work for everyone: the men would kill and cut, the children would fetch buckets of water to clean the meat, and the women would salt it down and pack it away. They would withhold a bit from storage, though, and cook it right then, repaying their neighbors' kindness with dinner and a mess of meat to take home.

As her Notasulga neighbors relished one another's company and savored their freshly killed feast, Lucy struggled with the eager-for-life child demanding release from her womb.

From the beginning, Zora was ahead of her time. Lucy knew she was due soon, but she didn't expect the baby to come so suddenly. The way Zora told the story -- "this is all hearsay," she warned -- Lucy sent one of her older children to find Aunt Judy, the midwife, who had gone to a hog-killing in a neighboring town. But Lucy's ready-for-the-world baby girl could not wait. She rushed out on her own, and all Lucy could do was lie there, too weak to reach down for the newborn. Lucy's only consolation was the child's cacophonous cries, which let her know the baby at least had healthy lungs.

A neighbor, a white man, was passing through, perhaps to drop off some fresh meat to Lucy and her children, as Hurston later speculated, or perhaps in search of Negroes to help with his hogs. The baby's plentiful lungpower compelled the man to push the door open to see what all the fuss was about. Once he saw what the situation was, "he took out his Barlow knife and cut the navel cord," Zora was to write, "then he did the best he could about other things." When the midwife arrived, the baby had been sponged off and was resting quietly in her mother's arms.

The white man got no thanks from Aunt Judy for his act of heroism. The midwife "grumbled for years about it," Zora once said. "She complained that the cord had not been cut just right, and the belly-band had not been put on tight enough. She was mighty scared I was going to have a weak back, and that I would have trouble holding my water until I reached puberty. I did."

Within a few days, the baby had been named Zora Neal Lee Hurston, according to the family record page of the Bible that Lucy and John passed down to future Hurstons. Exactly where the name came from is a minor mystery. "Lee" might have been a nod to the county in which the child was born; "Neal" and "Zora" are harder to figure. Perhaps, as Hurston later wrote, a friend of Lucy's, a Mrs. Neal, contributed her name to the mix and

chose the newborn's unusual first name. "Perhaps she had read it somewhere," Hurston once mused, "or somebody back in those woods was smoking Turkish cigarettes." In any case, Zora never used the name "Lee." And, if the family Bible is accepted as gospel, somewhere down the line, she must have added the final "e" to "Neal," having found the name in need of some embellishment.

For the birth and naming of his second daughter, John Hurston was absent. He had become a fairly successful carpenter by now and was often away on business. Then, too, John had begun to want more than the Notasulga life could offer him. So he occasionally left his wife and children at home while he explored life beyond eastern Alabama's cramping borders. At the time of Zora's birth, he had been away for months.

The way the story goes, the way Zora always heard it, when John got the news that he was the papa of a new baby girl, he threatened to cut his own throat.

The threat was never a serious one, of course, just John's histrionic way of responding to what he considered bad news. Still, when she was a full-grown woman, Zora Hurston said of her father: "I don't think he ever got over the trick he felt that I played on him by getting born a girl, and while he was off from home at that."

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#### Other Books

*Community Boundaries and Border Crossings*. Through the overarching interconnected themes of community boundaries and border crossings, this collection explores issues of diaspora, trans-nationality, cultural hybridity, home, and identity that are central to ethnic women writers.

???. "The Inside Light": New Critical Essays on Zora Neale Hurston. Ed. Deborah G. Plant. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2010. 33-52. Print. Boyd, Valerie. *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*. New York: Scribner, 2003. Print."