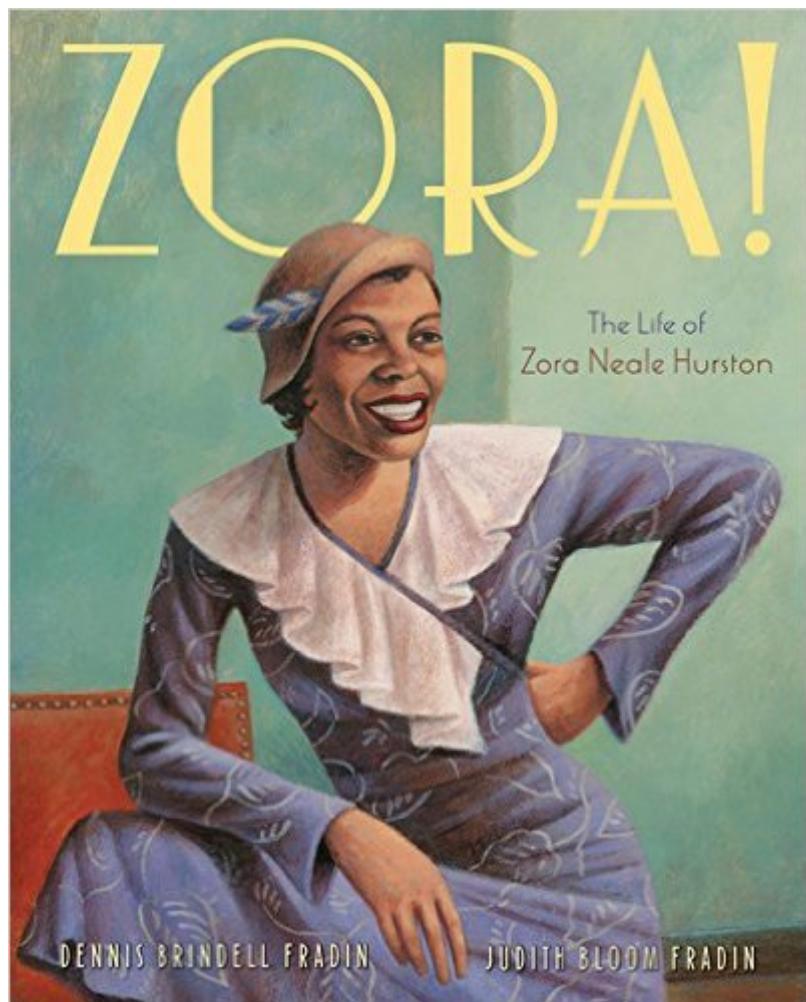


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Zora!: The Life Of Zora Neale Hurston



Synopsis

Zora Neale Hurston was confident, charismatic, and determined to be extraordinary. As a young woman, Hurston lived and wrote alongside such prominent authors as Langston Hughes and Alain Locke during the Harlem Renaissance. But unfortunately, despite writing the luminous work *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, she was always short of money. Though she took odd jobs as a housemaid and as the personal assistant to an actress, Zora often found herself in abject poverty. Through it all, Zora kept writing. And though none of her books sold more than a thousand copies while she was alive, she was rediscovered a decade later by a new generation of readers, who knew they had found an important voice of American Literature.

Book Information

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Age Range: 10 - 12 years

Grade Level: 5 - 7

Customer Reviews

Before this book was published, I was offered a copy for review, but when I agreed I was told that no more copies were available. However, I recently obtained a copy. Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was an African-American folklorist, anthropologist, and author, born in Notasulga, AL, the fifth of eight children of John Hurston and Lucy Ann Hurston (née Potts). Her father was a Baptist preacher, tenant farmer, and carpenter, and her mother was a school teacher. When she was three, her family moved to Eatonville, Florida, one of the first all-black towns to be

incorporated in the United States. Her father later was elected as mayor of the town. In 1904, Hurston's mother died, and her father remarried to Matte Moge who sent her away to a Baptist boarding school in Jacksonville, FL. From there, Hurston worked at several different jobs, attended a number of educational institutions, and decided to become a writer. In 1921, Hurston wrote a short story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," which qualified her to become a member of Alaine Locke's literary club, The Stylus. She also studied anthropology and conducted ethnographic research in the United States, the Caribbean, and Central America. For a time beginning in 1925, she lived in New York City and participated in the Harlem Renaissance along with Langston Hughes, Alain Locke, Wallace Thurman, and many others. By the mid-1930s, Hurston had published several short stories and the critically acclaimed *Mules and Men* (1935), a groundbreaking work of literary anthropology documenting African-American folklore from timber camps in North Florida. Unfortunately, despite writing the luminous work *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her best-known novel, in 1937, Hurston was always short of money and often found herself in abject poverty. None of her books sold more than a thousand copies while she was alive and her work slid into obscurity for decades, she was rediscovered a decade after her death by a new generation of readers and many of her titles have been reissued in recent years. This biography by husband and wife team Dennis and Judith Fradin, who have written a number of superbly researched biographies for young readers, begins with Hurston as a middle-aged woman working as a maid to make ends meet, goes back to chronicle her story from birth, and then moves on to discuss the remainder of her life. It is copiously illustrated with wonderful black and white photographs throughout. However, little is said of her basic conservatism. She was an outspoken anti-communist and generally objected to the New Deal, supporting the 1952 presidential campaign of Senator Robert A. Taft. Also, she opposed the Supreme Court ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case of 1954, saying that if separate schools were truly equal (and she believed that they were rapidly becoming so), educating black students in physical proximity to white students would not result in better education. And she criticized preferential treatment for African-Americans as if "a whole system must be upset for me to win." For those who are into studying Black History Month, this book would make a good resource.

Zora is/was a fascinating woman who lived a dramatic and engaging life. With her, you always want to read more. The writing isn't as polished as it could be, but it was a good read anyway. Her zest for life and willingness to "do whatever it takes" to get by under the circumstances is inspiring.

Although I haven't read any of Zora Neale Hurston's original work, I was fascinated by this upcoming biography for young people of the celebrated African-American novelist of the Harlem Renaissance. Written by veteran nonfiction writer Dennis Fradin (he's published over 200 nonfiction books!) and his wife Judith, this book tells the story of an extraordinary woman who knew she was special from an early age. She grew up in the unique all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, where she was unaware of racism and grew up so self-confident that she believed the moon followed her wherever she went. From her childhood on, she loved to tell stories, and had a wonderful imagination. While a student at Howard University, Zora was accepted into their literary group and had her first work published. From the beginning, her work featured realistic dialogue, with the characters speaking in a dialect modelled on the real people she had grown up with. When she was in her thirties, she moved to New York City to try to make it as an author, with \$1.50 in her pocket, "no job, no friends, and a lot of hope." There she befriended important writers such as Langston Hughes and became recognized for her work as an anthropologist as well as a writer. The book points out that despite the recognition she received during her lifetime for her books and folklore work, Zora remained poor, and even had to take a variety of "day jobs," including work as a librarian, maid, personal assistant, waitress, college drama teacher and even as a Hollywood script consultant. By the end of her life in 1960, all her works were out of print; in the 1970's, they were rediscovered by a new generation of African-American writers, including Alice Walker, and her books have now been republished. In fact her most popular work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, has sold more than 5 million copies, and is used in many high schools as part of the curriculum, as well as being made into a movie produced by Oprah Winfrey and starring Halle Berry. This is a great biography to recommend for kids from 9-14 years old, and provides plenty of information for those school biography reports. Her incredibly varied life, in which she achieved some fame, but little financial success, is a remarkable testament to her persistence and her spirit, and the book does an excellent job of portraying the different sides of her life, both the complicated personal (she was married and divorced three times) and professional aspects of her story. The book is abundantly illustrated and also includes many quotes from Zora Neale Hurston's own writings, which give the text a real flavor of the author particularly for young people who may not read her books until high school. Back matter includes an excerpt from one of her folktale collections, a timeline, source notes, and a bibliography.

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