

# Zora Neale Hurston

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Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960) was a folklorist, anthropologist, ethnographer and novelist who often obscured her own life story as much as she sought to illuminate other people's life stories. She combined her incredible skill at drawing detailed life histories; with a remarkable ability to accurately reflect the language and cadences of those she studied, to produce extraordinary texts. However, her commitment to the voice of those she worked with, also meant that some of her finest work was not published until over half a century after her death.

*Barracoon: The Story of the Last Slave* is the story as told by Cudjo Lewis who was born Oluale Kossola and was the last known survivor of the *Clotilda*, the final slave ship to land on American soil. Hurston resolutely refused to anglicise the way Lewis spoke, causing publishers to shun the work while she was still alive, and yet there are many literary writers such as Mark Twain who also used dialects whose work did not meet the same fate. Her detailed interviews with Lewis began around the beginning of her anthropological fieldwork in the late 1920s after she had studied anthropology at Barnard College (a women's college affiliated with Columbia University) where in 1928 she became its first black graduate.

From there she went on to document folklore and other cultural and religious traditions traveling extensively throughout the south of the U.S, Haiti, Jamaica, the Bahamas and Honduras with support from among others The Guggenheim Foundation and Frank Boas. Her empathy for folklore and it's people in the South have led to the speculation that is why she claimed Eatonville, Florida (one of her field sites and her childhood home from age 3-13) as her birthplace even though she is now believed to have been born in Notasulga, Alabama.

Adept at working between disciplines, Hurston regularly turned her anthropological research into critically acclaimed literary masterpieces with works such as *Mules and Men* (1935) and *Their eyes were watching God* (1937) her most notable work. Indeed in her lifetime she was best known for her literary success and was a dynamic figure in the Harlem Renaissance. Ironically, though her life's work was defined by her drive to call to a wider attention the stories of the black people she wrote about using her 'spy-glass of Anthropology' (as she called it) she herself was dogged by poverty and isolation towards the end of her life. It was in 1975 that Alice Walker revitalised an interest in her numerous works and marked her grave with a tombstone. And again in 2018, yet another 'discovery' with the publication of *Barracoon: The story of the last slave* at a time when there is more public sympathy for Hurston's courageous choice to examine even the most difficult of stories, in the way that they have been told.

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