

# Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960)



# Eatonville



- Born in 1891 in Eatonville, Florida (first acknowledged African American township in U.S.)

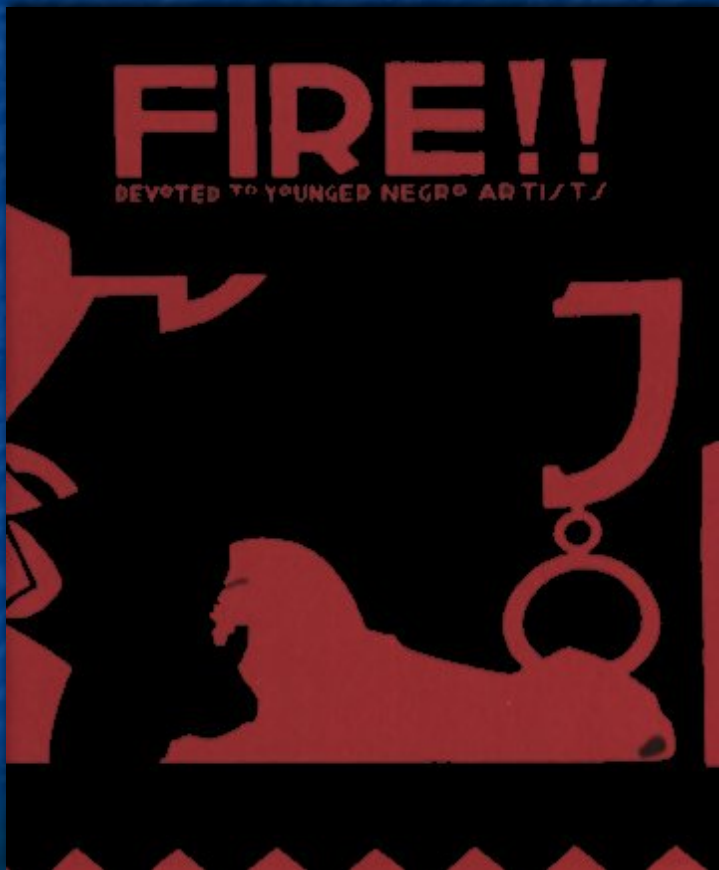
# Education



- Attended Howard University
- Earned a B.A. in Anthropology from Barnard College in 1927
- Studied under famous Columbia University anthropologist Franz Boas for 2 years as a graduate student



# Harlem Renaissance



- Harlem Renaissance in full swing when Hurston is in New York
- First piece of fiction, “Spunk,” published in *The New Negro* anthology in 1925
- Along with Langston Hughes and others, published literary magazine “Fire!”
- “Niggerati”

# Folklore Collector



- After college, traveled through the South collected black folktales (late 1920' s)
- Went to Haiti on a Guggenheim Fellowship to study Voodoo (mid 1930' s)

# White Patronage



- During this period (late 1920s-mid 1930s), supported by a wealthy white patron of the arts, Charlotte Osgood Mason
- Controversy surrounding Mason's patronage



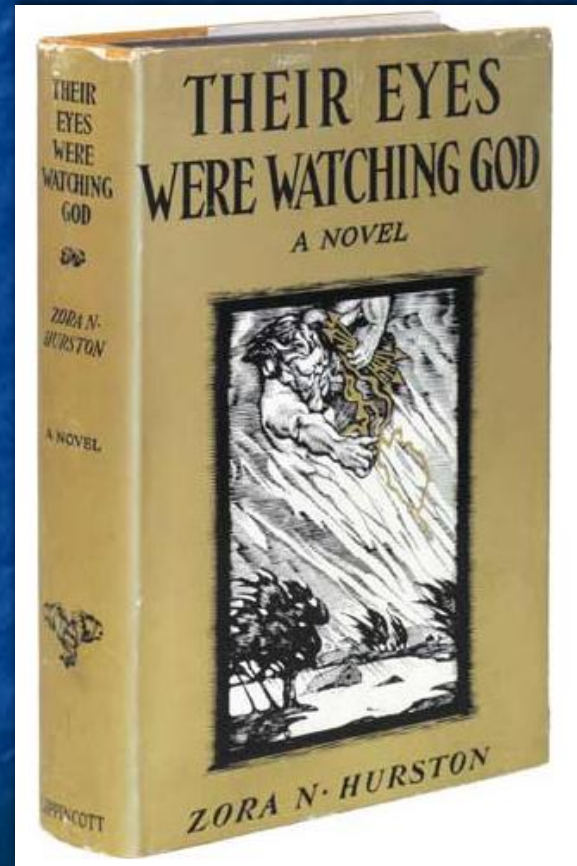
# Mules and Men



- Collection of African American folklore published in 1935

# Their Eyes

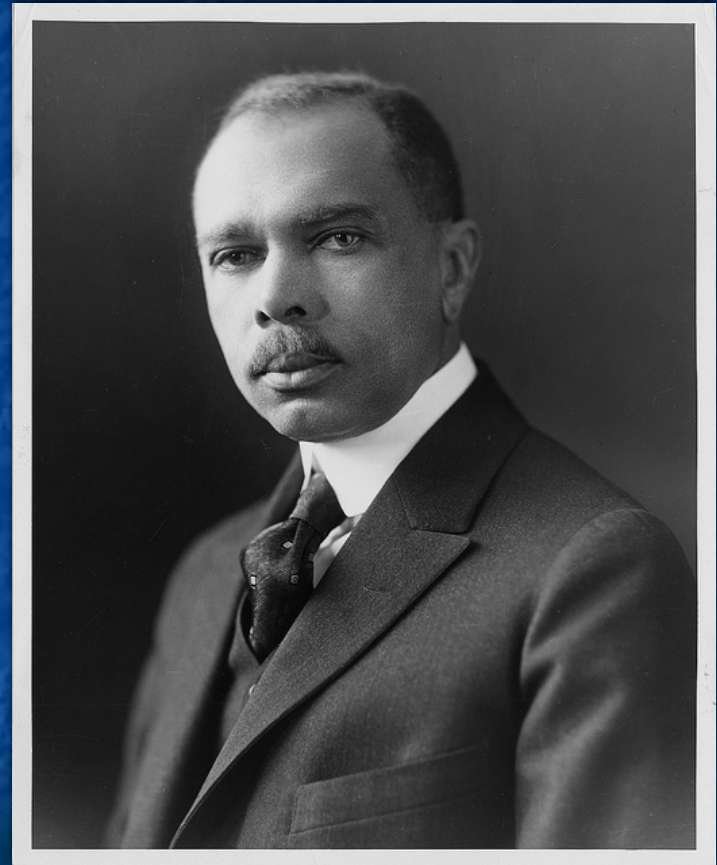
- Published in 1937
- Written quickly while she was living in Haiti
- Popular, but controversial





# Use of Dialect

- Black intellectual and writer James Weldon Johnson argued in 1923 that new black writers should “break away from . . . the limitations of Negro dialect.”
- Saw dialect as “an instrument with but two full stops, humor and pathos.”
- Nine years later, Johnson asserts that “the passing of traditional dialect as a medium for Negro poets is complete.”



# Instructions for Negro Writers

(George S. Schuyler, 1929)



- We will not accept any stories that are depressing, saddening or gloomy. Our people have enough troubles without reading about any. We want them to be interested, cheered, and buoyed up; comforted, gladdened, and made to laugh.
- Nothing that casts the least reflection on contemporary moral or sex standards will be allowed. Keep away from the erotic! Contributions must be clean and wholesome.



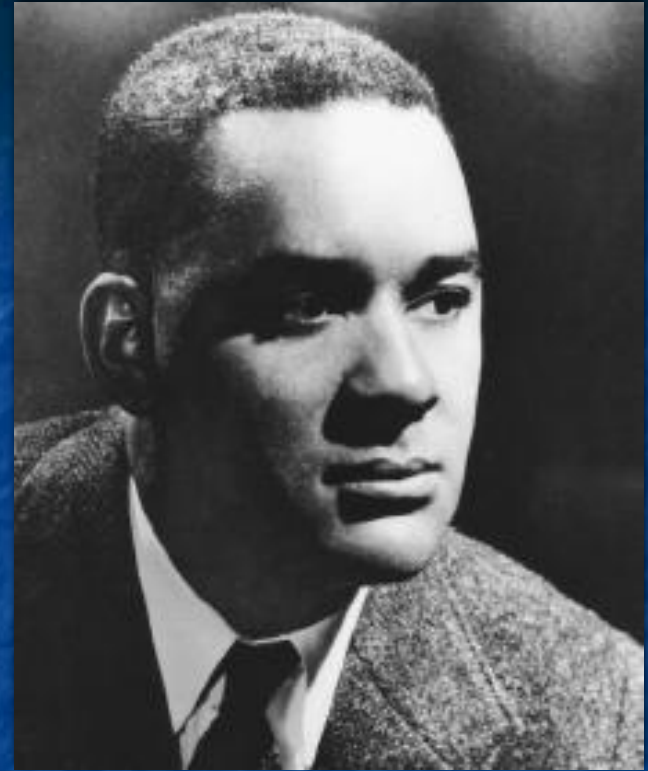
# Instructions (cont.)

- Stories must be swiftly moving, gripping the interest and sweeping on to a climax. The heroine should always be beautiful and desirable, sincere and virtuous. The hero should be of the he-man type, but not stiff, stereotyped, or vulgar. The villain should obviously be a villain and of the deepest-dyed variety: crafty, unscrupulous, suave, and resourceful



# Richard Wright

- In *The New Masses*, Richard Wright wrote that the novel did for literature what minstrel shows did for the theater--made white folks laugh:
  - ... The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is "quaint," the phase which evokes a piteous smile on the lips of the "superior" race



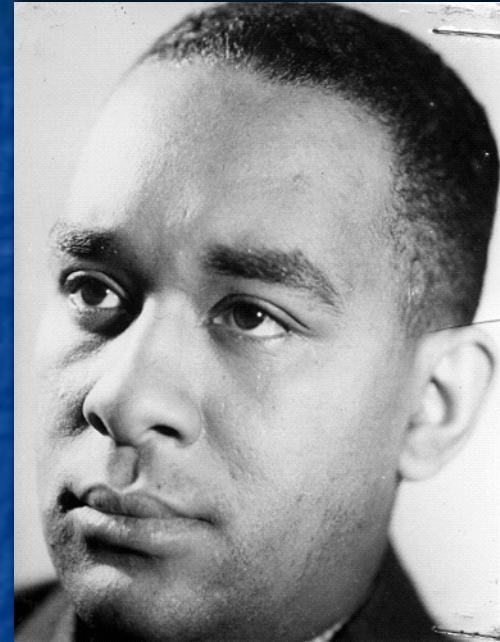
# Hurston/Wright Debate



- Hurston opposed the sort of social realism used by Wright--the idea that racism had reduced black people to beings who only react to an omnipresent racial oppression, whose culture is “deprived” and whose psyches are “pathological”



# Hurston/Wright Debate



- Hurston believed that Wright stood at the center of “the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low down dirty deal”
- Wright found Hurston’s writing “counter-revolutionary”-- didn’t depict evils of oppression and racism

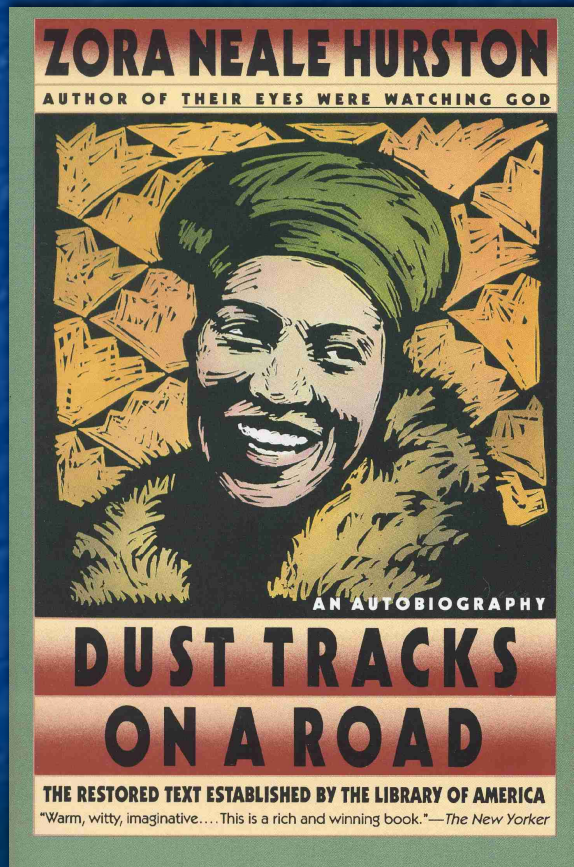


# Hurston/Wright Debate



- Hurston replied that she wrote novels, “not treatises on sociology”
- Declared her first novel a manifesto against the “arrogance” of whites assuming that “black lives are defensive reactions to white actions”

# Later Writings



- Popular autobiography: *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)
- Four novels altogether
  - *Jonah's Gourd Vine* (1934)
  - *Their Eyes* (1937)
  - *Moses, Man of the Mountain* (1939)
  - *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948)
- Two collections of folklore, numerous stories, plays



# Later Years



- During and after WWII, difficult years
- Lost popularity (partly because of her conservative politics)
- Worked as a substitute teacher and a maid in the last years of her life



# Later Years, cont.



- Suffered a stroke in the late fifties
- Died in a Florida welfare home in 1960
- Buried in an unmarked grave



# Hurston Revival

- Popularity revived largely through the efforts of Alice Walker
- *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (first published as a Ms. Magazine essay in 1975)
- Hemenway biography came out in 1977

