Zora Neale Hurston had an unusual career for a black woman early in this century. She studied folklore by traveling around the American South and the West Indies, asking about local myths, legends, and traditional practices. She is considered one of the most important collectors ever of African American folklore.

Hurston was also remarkable in that she was the most widely published black woman of her day—the author of more than fifty articles and short stories as well as four novels, two books on folklore, an autobiography, and some plays. At the height of her success she was known as the “Queen of the Harlem Renaissance.” Yet all this did not bring financial security. Hurston was so desperately poor toward the end of her life that she died in a welfare home and was buried in an unmarked grave.

Grew up in Eatonville, America’s first black-governed city

Although Zora Hurston was born at a time of strong racial discrimination, she never felt bitter about being black, nor did she even feel disadvantaged. This was partly because she
recognized the richness of black culture, but it was also because she spent her early childhood in Eatonville. Situated in central Florida, Eatonville was the first self-governing all-black city, and it was a happy place for a child to grow up in. According to Hurston, it had "five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jail house."

Hurston's father, Reverend John Hurston, built a home on a large piece of lush land, and there he and his wife Lucy reared a family of eight children. Zora was a lively child, taking in all that was going on around her. She particularly loved to listen to the stories the neighbors told as they gathered on a shady porch, though she did not at the time realize the stories were folk tales.

This happy stage of Hurston's life ended at the age of nine, when her mother died. Within two weeks, her father had sent her away to school in Jacksonville. Zora had never been close to her father and when, within a short time, he remarried, their relationship became so bad that he tried to get the school to adopt his daughter.

No adoption took place, but Zora remained out of favor. When she was thirteen she was pulled out of school and sent to care for her brother's children. After similar work in other homes, she landed a job at the age of sixteen as personal maid to a white woman who was a member of a Gilbert and Sullivan theatrical troupe. The next eighteen months were among the happiest of Hurston's life as she traveled with the actors, feeling like part of their family. But she was determined to go back to school and get a thorough education, and with the help of her actress employer, she enrolled at Morgan Academy in Baltimore, Maryland.

**Enjoyed her role in the Harlem Renaissance**

When Hurston graduated from high school, her great ambition was to study at Howard University, and she enrolled there in 1918, having earned the money for her tuition by working as a waitress and manicurist. Money was to be a major problem during the next few years, since no one was supporting her, and after taking a course she would work for a while until she had enough to take the next one.

Hurston thoroughly enjoyed college life and began to write stories and articles. In 1921 she had her first success when one of her stories was published in Howard University's

![Zora Neale Hurston](image_url)
During this period, as well as writing stories, Hurston earned her living by working as personal assistant to the successful writer Fannie Hurst, and it was with Hurst's assistance that she enrolled at Barnard College on a scholarship. Hurston was Barnard's first black student, but as usual she settled in happily, graduating with a B.A. in 1928. Meanwhile, in 1927, she married Dr. Herbert Sheen, an old flame from Howard University, but their careers soon came into conflict and they divorced in 1931. That year also saw the breakup of her friendship with Langston Hughes because of a misunderstanding over a play they had written together.

**Lived as a talented anthropologist, died an unknown**

After graduating from Barnard, Hurston entered Columbia University, where she studied under Franz Boas, the leading anthropologist in North America. Boas quickly realized that Hurston's passion for black folklore and her personal knowledge of it made her the ideal person to collect material on African American culture. This led to the first of her collecting trips, which took her to the South.

The 1930s were a wonderful time for Hurston as she wandered around, making friends in towns and villages, asking questions, noting the results, and learning—always learning—about the ways of the people she met. Although she was a scholarly expert, she did not look like one, and this was the secret of her success as a collector. People accepted her as one of them and therefore chatted to her freely, even about secret religious rituals. In Haiti and Jamaica she learned far more about
the voodoo religion than any previous anthropologist had done.

Hurston discussed voodoo in *Tell My Horse* (1938). This was her fourth book. She had already published another book on folklore, *Mules and Men* (1935), as well as two novels, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and her masterpiece, *The Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). Most of her books were published in the 1930s and early 1940s, and this was also the period in which she embarked on a second marriage, though it did not last, partly because she was away traveling so much.

In the 1940s her mentor, Franz Boas, was dead, Hurston’s books were no longer bringing in large royalties, and she was finding it increasingly difficult to get her work published. Although she continued to write, the few articles she published did not bring in enough to live on. Never one to give in to despair, Hurston moved to Fort Pierce, Florida, in the 1950s. For a brief time she supported herself by going back to work as a maid, though she soon managed to get better jobs, working as a librarian and then as a substitute teacher. When in 1959 she suffered a stroke that made further work impossible, she moved into a welfare home, and there she died the following year, unnoticed by the world at large.

Nevertheless, neither Hurston nor her works have been forgotten, and a later generation has honored her memory. In 1973 the novelist and poet Alice Walker placed a marker in Fort Pierce at the place believed to be Hurston’s burial plot. The stone reads “Zora Neale Hurston, A Genius of the South.”