

Book Review: Zora Neale Hurston's Final Decade

By Brenda M. Greene

"Never mind that she died with her books out of print and was buried in an unmarked grave, Hurston and her literary contributions were destined to be central to the canon of African American, American and women's literature." (Moylan 161)

A spirited and soulful writer, Zora Neale Hurston, writer, anthropologist and folklorist created a legacy of novels, short stories, plays, folklore and essays. Refusing to succumb to the traditional mores of society, she charted new directions for her life and life's work. However, she died in obscurity in Fort Pierce, Florida in 1960. Alice Walker's essay, "In Search of Zora Neale Hurston" was a defining moment in lifting Hurston from obscurity and reviving interest in a writer who has since become part of the canon of literature. Deborah Moylan's research on Hurston is the most recent scholarship on providing the public with a fuller and more in-depth understanding of Zora, a woman who some have called a spirit warrior.

In *Zora Neale Hurston's Final Decade*, Virginia Lynn Moylan, an educator and independent scholar, convincingly writes of the complexities and paradoxes of the last ten years of Hurston's life. Moylan's research recounts how this proud independent Black woman who emerged during the Harlem Renaissance defied all obstacles in her determination to succeed, no matter the challenges, financial and physical. Using interviews from friends, students, colleagues, editors, agents, never-before-published

letters, and archival materials, Moylan constructs a narrative that begins with the scandal that drove Hurston from New York City in 1948 to Florida where she wrote and taught until her death after a debilitating illness. Although this scandal had a great impact on Hurston's reputation and career, Moylan's research fills in gaps that reveal that during her final decade, Hurston continued to write, teach, and work and was surrounded by friends and people who respected and loved her. In conducting her research, Moylan wants to "set the record straight."

The book is structured around defining moments for Hurston, the various trajectories that her life took as she engaged in research and writing on her political and philosophical views which included southern politics, the sensational trial of Ruby McCollum, a wealthy black woman who murdered her white lover, Brown vs. the Board of Education, unions, the exploitation of immigrant migrant workers, the depiction of blacks in film and publishing and a work that was the subject of her last manuscript, the life and career of Herod, the ruler of Judea from 40 B.C.E. to 4 B.C.E.

Beginning with the scandal that had a devastating impact on Zora's personal and professional life, Moylan takes the reader on a journey that chronicles how Hurston's life embodied the struggle of the writer's life in unimaginable ways. The opening lines of the first chapter in the book, "In Hell's Basement: Harlem, 1948-1949" depict the odds that faced Hurston.

Hurston's nightmare began Monday, September 13, 1948 with an unexpected knock on the door of her rented room at West 112th Street in Harlem. Charles Scribner's Sons' publication of her fourth and latest novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, was only a month away, and her immediate

concern was its success. But that concern vanished when she opened the door to a New York City police detective who had come to arrest her on one of the most vilest charges imaginable- child molestation. (39)

Hurston maintained her innocence and the case was dismissed. Because it involved minors, the proceedings should have been kept confidential, but after the successful launch and favorable reviews of her latest novel, *Seraph*, a court reporter leaked the story to two black newspapers, which ran the stories. Moylan, describes this series of events as a “public lynching that “. . . devastated (Zora) almost to the point of suicide.” In a letter written to Carl Van Vechten, Hurston wrote, “No acquittal will persuade some people that I am innocent. . . All that I have believed in has failed me. I have resolved to die.”

Despite this painful and emotional travesty, Hurston survives for she is a woman who lives life fully and has the ability to pick up and continue her life’s work. This is a guiding principle depicted in Moylan’s book. Building on the legacy created by the previous biographers of Hurston, Robert Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography*, University of Illinois Press, 1977, Valerie Boyd, *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, Scribner, 2003, and Deborah Plant, *Zora Neale Hurston: A Biography of the Spirit*, Praeger, 2007, Moylan helps the reader to gain more insight into Hurston’s personality, character and philosophical views.

The reader learns of her controversial stance on Brown vs. the Board of Education. While Hurston did not advocate segregation she questioned a court order that forced races which had been segregated for centuries to suddenly mix. In her view, this

was “not only socially risky but an egregious abuse of the Court’s power.” 138. She would have preferred a gradual process for the “forcing of black students to attend white educational institutions that excluded and devalued black culture and robbed black children of traditions and self-esteem.” Her words, “The conveyance of cultural values and traditions, the quality and commitment of caring educators and administrators and the involvement of parents and the community all help determine the success of our students and schools,” (145) speak to the strong belief that she had with respect to the education of black children.

It is clear that Hurston did not shy away from political and social controversy. She challenged the ways in which Northern democrats used legislation to garner black votes when they knew that the legislation would be vetoed by Southerners, she exposed the ways in which immigrants were exploited by the Sugar Corporation, and she critiqued the stereotypical ways in which the publishing and film industries portrayed Blacks.

In Moylan’s contextualization of Hurston’s life during its final decade, we come to a new understanding of the carefree and proud, independent and determined woman who vowed to tell her stories in the way and manner in which she chose, who refused to be dictated to and to succumb to the mores and rituals of others, and who insisted that she was in control of her writing and personal life. As Moylan points out, Hurston may have died in obscurity, but the final decade of her life was anything but obscure. This is a must read for those who want an expanded view and a deeper understanding of the inner, social and political life of a complex writer and woman.

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