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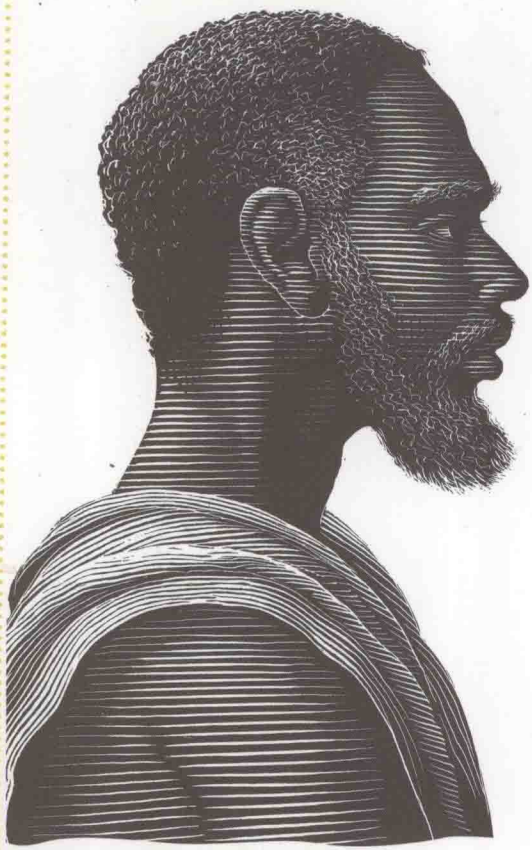

Zora Neale Hurston

AUTHOR OF *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

A Novel

HARPERPERENNIAL MODERNCLASSICS

MOSES, MAN OF THE MOUNTAIN

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

WITH A FOREWORD BY
DEBORAH E. MCDOWELL
SERIES EDITOR: HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.

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She *Was* the Party

by Valerie Boyd

Zora Neale Hurston knew how to make an entrance. On May 1, 1925, at a literary awards dinner sponsored by *Opportunity* magazine, the earthy Harlem newcomer turned heads and raised eyebrows as she claimed four awards: a second-place fiction prize for her short story "Spunk," a second-place award in drama for her play *Color Struck*, and two honorable mentions.

The names of the writers who beat out Hurston for first place that night would soon be forgotten. But the name of the second-place winner buzzed on tongues all night, and for days and years to come.

Lest anyone forget her, Hurston made a wholly memorable entrance at a party following the awards dinner. She strode into the room—jammed with writers and arts patrons, black and white—and flung a long, richly colored scarf around her neck with dramatic flourish as she bellowed a reminder of the title of her winning play: *"Colooooooor Struuckkkk!"* Her exultant entrance literally stopped the party for a moment, just as she had intended. In this way, Hurston made it known that a bright and powerful presence had arrived.

By all accounts, Zora Neale Hurston could walk into a roomful of strangers and, a few minutes and a few stories later, leave them so completely charmed that they often found themselves offering to help her in any way they could.

Gamely accepting such offers—and employing her own talent and scrappiness—Hurston became the most successful and most significant black woman writer of the first half of the twentieth century. Over a

Author photograph by Carl Van Vechten, courtesy of the Van Vechten Trust

career that spanned more than thirty years, she published four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, numerous short stories, and several essays, articles, and plays.

Born on January 7, 1891, in Notasulga, Alabama, Hurston moved with her family to Eatonville, Florida, when she was still a toddler. Her writings reveal no recollection of her Alabama beginnings. For Hurston, Eatonville was always home.

Established in 1887, the rural community near Orlando was the nation's first incorporated black township. It was, as Hurston described it, "a city of five lakes, three croquet courts, three hundred brown skins, three hundred good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools, and no jailhouse."

In Eatonville, Zora was never indoctrinated in inferiority, and she could see the evidence of black achievement all around her. She could look to town hall and see black men, including her father, John Hurston, formulating the laws that governed Eatonville. She could look to the Sunday schools of the town's two churches and see black women, including her mother, Lucy Potts Hurston, directing the Christian curricula. She could look to the porch of the village store and see black men and women passing worlds through their mouths in the form of colorful, engaging stories.

Growing up in this culturally affirming setting in an eight-room house on five acres of land, Zora had a relatively happy childhood, despite frequent clashes with her preacher-father, who sometimes sought to "squinch" her rambunctious spirit, she recalled. Her mother, on the other hand, urged young Zora and her seven siblings to "jump at de sun." Hurston explained, "We might not land on the sun, but at least we would get off the ground." ▶

"In Eatonville, Zora was never indoctrinated in inferiority, and she could see the evidence of black achievement all around her."

She *Was* the Party *(continued)*

Hurston's idyllic childhood came to an abrupt end, though, when her mother died in 1904. Zora was only thirteen years old. "That hour began my wanderings," she later wrote. "Not so much in geography, but in time. Then not so much in time as in spirit."

After Lucy Hurston's death, Zora's father remarried quickly—to a young woman whom the hotheaded Zora almost killed in a fistfight—and seemed to have little time or money for his children. "Bare and bony of comfort and love," Zora worked a series of menial jobs over the ensuing years, struggled to finish her schooling, and eventually joined a Gilbert & Sullivan traveling troupe as a maid to the lead singer. In 1917, she turned up in Baltimore; by then, she was twenty-six years old and still hadn't finished high school. Needing to present herself as a teenager to qualify for free public schooling, she lopped ten years off her life—giving her year of birth as 1901. Once gone, those years were never restored: from that moment forward, Hurston would always present herself as at least ten years younger than she actually was.

Apparently, she had the looks to pull it off. Photographs reveal that she was a handsome, big-boned woman with playful yet penetrating eyes, high cheekbones, and a full, graceful mouth that was never without expression.

Zora also had a fiery intellect, an infectious sense of humor, and "the gift," as one friend put it, "of walking into hearts." Zora used these talents—and dozens more—to elbow her way into the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, befriending such luminaries as poet Langston Hughes and popular singer-actress Ethel Waters.

Though Hurston rarely drank, fellow writer Sterling Brown recalled, "When Zora was there, she *was* the party." Another friend remembered Hurston's apartment—furnished by donations she solicited from friends—as a spirited "open house" for artists. All this socializing didn't keep Hurston from her work, though. She would sometimes write in her bedroom while the party went on in the living room.

> "'When Zora was there, she *was* the party.'"

By 1935, Hurston—who'd graduated from Barnard College in 1928—had published several short stories and articles, as well as a novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, and a well-received collection of black Southern folklore, *Mules and Men*. But the late thirties and early forties marked the real zenith of her career. She published her masterwork, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, in 1937; *Tell My Horse*, her study of Haitian Voodoo practices and Caribbean culture, in 1938; and another masterful novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, in 1939. When her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, was published in 1942, Hurston finally received the well-earned acclaim that had long eluded her. That year, she was profiled in *Who's Who in America*, *Current Biography*, and *Twentieth Century Authors*. She went on to publish another novel, *Seraph on the Suwanee*, in 1948.

Still, Hurston never received the financial rewards she deserved. (The largest royalty she ever earned from any of her books was $943.75.) So, when she died on January 28, 1960—at age sixty-nine, after suffering a stroke—her neighbors in Fort Pierce, Florida, had to take up a collection for her February 7 funeral. The collection didn't yield enough to pay for a headstone, ▶

She *Was* the Party *(continued)*

however, and Hurston was buried in a grave that remained unmarked until 1973.

That summer, a young writer named Alice Walker traveled to Fort Pierce to place a marker on the grave of the author who had so inspired her own work. Walker found the Garden of Heavenly Rest, a segregated cemetery at the dead end of North Seventeenth Street, abandoned and overgrown with yellow-flowered weeds.

Back in 1945, Hurston had foreseen the possibility of dying without money—and she'd proposed a solution that would have benefited her and countless others. Writing to W. E. B. Du Bois, whom she called the "Dean of American Negro Artists," Hurston suggested "a cemetery for the illustrious Negro dead" on one hundred acres of land in Florida. "Let no Negro celebrity, no matter what financial condition they might be in at death, lie in inconspicuous forgetfulness," she urged. "We must assume the responsibility of their graves being known and honored." Du Bois, citing practical complications, wrote a curt reply discounting her argument.

As if impelled by Hurston's words, Walker bravely entered the snake-infested cemetery where the writer's remains had been laid to rest. Wading through waist-high weeds, she soon stumbled upon a sunken rectangular patch of ground that she determined to be Hurston's grave. Unable to afford the marker she wanted—a tall, majestic black stone called "Ebony Mist"—Walker chose a plain gray headstone instead. Borrowing from a Jean Toomer poem, she dressed the marker up with a fitting epitaph: "Zora Neale Hurston: A Genius of the South."

"Hurston was buried in a grave that remained unmarked until 1973 . . . [when,] wading through waist-high weeds, Alice Walker stumbled upon a sunken rectangular patch of ground that she determined to be Hurston's grave."

Valerie Boyd is the author of the award-winning Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston. *Formerly the arts editor at the* Atlanta Journal-Constitution, *she is a professor at the University of Georgia's Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication.*

Lines of Descent/ Dissenting Lines

by Deborah E. McDowell

If a people's myths are the fullest expression of its spirit and culture, nowhere is this more evident than in African Americans' appropriation of the story of Moses, the myth of the Israelites' exodus from Egyptian bondage. As Albert Raboteau writes in *Slave Religion*, "the symbols, myths and values of Judeo-Christian tradition helped form the slave community's image of itself." White colonists also identified with this tradition, seeing "the journey across the Atlantic to the New World as the exodus of a new Israel from the bondage of Europe into the promised land of milk and honey." But the colonists' Promised Land was the slaves' Egypt, a reversal made palpable and immortal in such spirituals as "Go Down Moses," "Oh Mary, Don't You Weep," and in the countless refigurations of the Mosaic myth throughout African American literature, oral and written.

A selective list would include Frances E. W. Harper's "Moses: A Story of the Nile," Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Ante-Bellum Sermon," James Weldon Johnson's "Let My People Go," Robert Hayden's "Runagate, Runagate," Margaret Walker's "Prophets for a New Day," and Martin Luther King's famous last sermon, "I See the Promised Land," delivered on the eve of his assassination. Punctuated with references to Pharaoh and Egypt, the sermon builds to its now famous crescendo: "I've been to the mountaintop," "I've seen the promised land," and the resounding prophecy: "We as a people will get to the promised land."

Thus, when Zora Neale Hurston turned

to retelling the Exodus story in *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, she was building on a mountain of a tradition and anticipating its perpetuation. Very early in her literary career, Hurston established her fascination with rewriting the sacred myths of the Judeo-Christian tradition in African American terms and idioms. She saw and manipulated the possibilities that Old Testament stories held for chronicling the movements in the sluggish odyssey of black Americans toward emancipation in the United States. Her play, *The First One*, submitted to the *Opportunity* magazine contest in 1926, mocked the myth of Ham, seized by proslavery advocates as the biblical justification of chattel slavery in the United States. In 1934, she published "The Fire and the Cloud" in the September issue of *Challenge* magazine, edited by Dorothy West. A two-page story in the form of an exchange between a world-weary Moses and an inquisitive lizard, "The Fire and the Cloud" is a synopsis of the trials and triumphs of Moses's leadership, which is at its end. His newly dug grave on Mount Nebo is ready to receive him.

Appearing in that same issue of *Challenge* was a letter to the editor from Arna Bontemps in which he dismissed the doomsayers who had dug an early grave for the Harlem Renaissance "younger writers." The Exodus myth ready at hand, Bontemps denied that the writers were "washed up" and "old before our time. . . . We left Egypt in the late twenties and presently crossed the Red Sea. Naturally the wandering in the wilderness followed. The promised land is ahead." *Moses, Man of the Mountain* might well be seen as Zora Neale Hurston's "promised land," if we take that to mean a realization of her artistic and intellectual ▶

powers. It is certainly proof that she was far from "washed up" as a writer.

To claim that this badly flawed novel is a realization of Hurston's artistic power would be, to many, to claim a bit too much. Her contemporaries thought little of it and few scholars now attend to it, choosing, instead, to focus almost all their attention on *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. In his omnibus review in the January 1940 issue of *Opportunity*, Alain Locke offered faint praise for the novel's sustained "characterization and dialogue" but decided that it lacked "vital dramatization," "genuine folk portraiture," substituting "caricature" instead. In the August 5, 1941, issue of *New Masses*, Ralph Ellison surveyed "Recent Negro Fiction," concluding that only Richard Wright and Langston Hughes had taken Negro fiction beyond the narrow confines that bound it in the 1920s. He commended Richard Wright's *Native Son* and *Uncle Tom's Children* for "overcoming the social and cultural isolation of Negro life and moving into a world of unlimited intellectual and imaginative possibilities." He praised Hughes's fiction for its "awareness of the working class and socially dispossessed Negro and his connection with the international scheme of things." Turning to *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Ellison noted that, although it "possess[ed] technical competence, [it] retain[ed] the blight of calculated burlesque." He offered his ultimate assessment: "For Negro fiction [*Moses, Man of the Mountain*] did nothing."

By this point in Hurston's career, the orthodoxies such as those Locke and Ellison imposed on black writers had come to be

expected. Locke tended to reserve especially harsh judgments for the women writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Jessie Fauset was a favorite target. Locke described her novel *Comedy, American Style* (1933) as "too mid-Victorian for moving power today." He also criticized Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* for "failing to come to grips with the motive and social document fiction." Even if we grant Locke's assumption that "social documentation" constitutes the *sine qua non* of black fiction in the thirties, we would have to conclude that he works with a narrow definition of the "social" in judging Hurston's fiction to be lacking in this regard. That in *Moses* Hurston casts her own social concerns in the terms of antiquity and eschews the urban realism that Wright perfected doesn't mean that she shows no concern for contemporary social issues and how they might be addressed in fiction. She simply offers no easy pieties and tidy solutions. She astutely saw in Wright's work, to which her own was often invidiously compared, pat and unexamined solutions to complex and monumental social ills. For example, in her review of Wright's *Uncle Tom's Children* (1938), she criticized the solution he offered throughout the thirties and forties: "the PARTY–state responsibility for everything and individual responsibility for nothing, not even feeding oneself." In writing this, she doubtless had Wright's novella *Fire and Cloud* in mind. In this piece, Wright tries to reconcile his religious heritage with the teachings of Marxism by fashioning a solution for a community suffering from famine and the grip of Jim Crow. The novella centers on Dan Taylor, the ▸

spiritual leader of his community, also described as "Moses, leading his people out of the wilderness and into the Promised Land." Taylor comes to see the futility of old-time religion against the repressive white power structure and, at the story's end, leads the community in a mass interracial march to City Hall.

Hurston's own story, "The Fire and the Cloud," might be read as a short answer to Wright's version, as well as a preface to *Moses, Man of the Mountain*. The novel goes on to question whether liberation is ever achieved through a single charismatic leader. In *Moses*, Hurston explores and at times critiques the idea of a religious leader who mediates between an oppressed people and God, the state, or any other Presence. She also liberates her pen from what Harold Cruse refers to, in a different context, as the "literary religion of socialist realism." Without doubting that fiction has real power in the world, Hurston seems loath, as Wright does not, to use her fiction to "lead" her readers toward any pat solution to the continuing problem of racism and oppression.

Throughout, Hurston's novel dramatizes and critiques the terms and problematics of liberation. After Moses has led the Israelites to Canaan, he seems to question the wisdom of any people's dependence on a single leader, or deliverer, concluding that "No man may make another free. Freedom was something internal. . . . All you could do was to give the opportunity for freedom and the man himself must make his own emancipation." However, in passing the mantle to Joshua, he explains, "You can't have a state of individuals. Everybody just

can't be allowed to do as they please." The chosen people must not "take up too many habits from the nations they come in contact with." Thus, he preserves the idea of one leader even while asking, "How can a nation speak with one voice if they are not one?" Finally, though, it is precisely Moses's "one voice" that does speak for the people.

Hurston transfers her critique of the "Big Voice" from *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to *Moses*. And from her first novel, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, she transfers her dramatization of the complex relationship between religion and gender. In all three novels, the "Big Voice" is synonymous with the male voice. While the opening of *Moses* is promising in its attempt to establish a triadic parallel between ancient Hebrew slavery, Negro slavery, and female oppression, that parallel is not sustained throughout the novel. In the opening scene, the persecution of the Hebrew male babies is connected (as if through the umbilical cord) to the suffering of their mothers. The one cannot be considered apart from the other, as the public world of male power intrudes into and controls the fruit of women's bodies. And while Moses's mother, Jochebed, fights the law of the state by not permitting her husband to kill her son, in the end that disobedience is not sustained.

The "place" of women in this narrative of patriarchy's origins is to be followers, and the places in which they figure in the novel are perhaps its most troubling. While one is simply tempted to write these passages off, or to read them as throwbacks to "the Gilded Six Bits" and harbingers of *Seraph on the Suwanee* (in both of which works ▶

Hurston's feminist bite seems toothless), here, in *Moses*, these passages seem to coincide not so much with any feminist ambivalences on Hurston's part but rather with the very substance of one of the most sacred and revered narratives Hurston attempts to tell. In retelling the Pentateuch—said to have been written by Moses under divine inspiration—Hurston positions herself in a narrative in which women are marginalized and oppressed. The various feminist critiques of biblical authorship and authority inscribing the law of the father are by now familiar, and it is not simply reading Hurston backward to suggest that she found much about this tradition to decry. We remember Janie's comment to Jodie in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, "sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks his inside business," but in *Moses*, it is only the great liberator who talks to God face to face. Implied in that image of talking face to face with God is a logic of equality, of the horizontal, a transgressive logic that runs throughout Hurston's work. However, that same face-to-face conversation is man to man. Although a woman's voice opens the text, speaking the anguish of childbirth, women's voices and desires are hushed and trivialized throughout, subordinated to the greatness of the male.

Moses is advised by a series of men in decreasing hierarchical order. Mentu, the stableman, whom Moses makes his servant, advises him on the strategies of warfare that lead Moses to celebrated success as a conqueror. But it is Jethro, Moses's father-in-law, who is, next to God, the Voice, the man to whose authority Moses most often