

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

AUTHOR OF THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD



A NOVEL

SERAPH ON THE SUWANEE

"A simple, colorfully written, and moving novel of life among the Florida Crackers." —*Saturday Review of Literature*

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ZORA NEALE HURSTON

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY HAZEL V. CARBY
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SERAPH ON THE SUWANEE

To
Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings
and
Mrs. Spessard L. Holland
With Loving Admiration

FOREWORD



On April 15, 1947, Zora Neale Hurston signed a contract with the publishing house of Charles Scribner & Sons for a novel concerned with life in Florida and entitled *The Sign of the Sun*. She had finally decided to leave J. B. Lippincott, the publisher of all her previous books, because the company had firmly dismissed her last two projects. Hurston had become disillusioned after Lippincott turned down her proposal for a novel about the black middle class, and she was openly depressed when it subsequently rejected a manuscript set in Eatonville, the town in which Hurston had grown up and which had provided such rich source material for the writing of *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Hurston felt that the new contract promised a new beginning. The obvious enthusiasm of the Scribner editors for her new novel about a Southern white family renewed her confidence in herself, and the \$500 advance enabled Hurston, at last, to finance the trip to Honduras that she had been planning for two years. She left in May and settled into the Hotel Cosenza, in Puerto Cortés on the north coast of Honduras, to write her novel and to plan an expedition into the mountains. As Hurston described this expedition to her editor at Scribner, Burroughs Mitchell, she hoped "to find a lost city . . . which travellers have heard about for two hundred years, but has not

as yet been seen.”¹ Hurston wanted her novel to be “good” so she could finance the journey that she felt was “burning [her] soul to attack.”²

Between May and November Hurston wrote and revised the novel for which, at various times, she had a number of titles, including *Sang the Suwanee in the Spring*, *The Queen of the Golden Hand*, *Angel in the Bed*, *Lady Angel with Her Man*, *Seraph with a Man on Hand*, *So Said the Sea*, *Good Morning Sun*, and *Seraph on the Suwanee River*. In January 1948, after three months of editorial hesitation, Scribner finally decided to go ahead with the book and asked Hurston to come to New York to work on more revisions. Her dreams of the lost city were left behind when she returned to a cold New York in February 1948. Worried that she had “been in the bush so many months,” Hurston warned Burroughs Mitchell “you might have to run me down and catch me and sort of tie me up in the shed until I get house-broke again.”³

Hurston aimed to make *Seraph on the Suwanee* “a true picture of the South.” She was delighted that Burroughs Mitchell was impressed with her use of Southern vernacular and idiom. In her previous novels and in the collection of folklore, *Mules and Men*, Hurston had established a reputation for her representation of black language and rhythms of speech. Though contemporary critics of Hurston’s work have granted her a privileged position in the African-American literary canon because of her sensitive delineation of black folk culture and black folk consciousness, particularly through language, Hurston’s own views are more complex and controversial. In writing about *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Hurston repudiated theories of the uniqueness of black linguistic structures.

I think that it should be pointed out that what is known as Negro dialect in the South is no such thing. Bear in mind that the South is the purest English section of the United States. . . . What is actually the truth is, that the South, up until the 1930’s was a relic of England. . . . and you find the retention of old English beliefs and customs, songs and

ballads and Elizabethan figures of speech. They go for the simile and especially the metaphor. As in the bloom of Elizabethan literature, they love speech for the sake of speech. This is common to white and black. The invective is practiced as a folk art from earliest childhood. You have observed that when a southern Senator or Representative gets the floor, no Yankee can stand up to him so far as compelling language goes. . . . They did *not* get it from the Negroes. The Africans coming to America got it from them. If it were African, then why is it not in evidence among all Negroes in the western world? No, the agrarian system stabilized in the South by slavery slowed down change . . . and so the tendency to colorful language that characterized Shakespeare and his contemporaries and made possible the beautiful and poetic language of the King James Bible got left over to an extent in the rural South.⁴

Hurston's opinions of the formative influences acting on the linguistic structures of the black folk may cause some discomfort to critics who valorize Hurston for preserving and reproducing in her work cultural forms that they argue are essentially and uniquely black. In *Seraph on the Suwanee* there are many phrases and sentences that evoke the language of Hurston's black figures in her previous work. Occasionally, the language is identical—whole phrases are lifted from the mouth of a black character in an earlier novel and inserted into the mouth of a member of the white Meserve family. The rhythm and syntax of Hurston's black folk haunt the reader throughout the novel.

Moreover, Hurston was concerned with establishing more than linguistic similarities between white and black in the South; she was actively trying to demonstrate her ideas of cultural influence and fusion in her novel. Kenny Meserve, the second son of Jim and Arvay Meserve, is trained as a musician by black Joe Kelsey. Hurston wrote a chapter, which the publisher later removed, on Kenny's success in New York, to explain this cultural exchange:

I felt I had to add a chapter on Kenny in New York to explain his success. Though no one to my knowledge has come right out and said it yet, we have had a revolution in national expression in music that is equivalent to Chaucer's use of the native idiom in England. Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* brought to a head that which had been in the making for at least a decade. There is no more Negro music in the U.S. It has been fused and merged and become the national expression, and displaced the worship of European expression. In fact, it is now denied, (and with some truth) that it never was pure Negro music, but an adaptation of white music. . . . But the fact remains that what has evolved here is something American.⁵

As a white musician playing black music, Kenny was intended to represent Hurston's conviction that black music was no longer an expression of black culture but had become a form of national expression.

However, *Seraph on the Suwanee* is not just a vehicle for Hurston's theories of the relation between black and white culture. The novel was also an attempt to realize two ambitions that she had been working toward throughout the forties. Hurston wanted to sell a novel to Hollywood and to see her fiction transformed into film. In 1942 she felt optimistic. "I have a tiny wedge in Hollywood," she wrote with excitement in a letter to Carl Van Vechten, a patron of black art and black artists; she went on to tell him that she had joined the Paramount writing staff. But in 1947 Scribner tried and failed to interest Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures in the novel.

Hurston's second ambition involved a challenge to the literary conventions of the apartheid American society in which Hurston lived—conventions she felt dictated that black writers and artists should be concerned only with representing black subjects. In the same letter she described how she had "hopes of breaking that old silly rule about Negroes not writing about white people."⁶ In the postwar 1940s Hurston was not the only black artist to confront the question of whether a racial art was also a segregated art, an art confined perma-

nently within the limits of differences. For all black people, the Second World War embodied the acute contradictions in mobilizing against the ideology of fascism abroad, on the one hand, and, on the other, living with the fascist practices of racism and segregation at home. For many it was an unresolved question of whether being an American and being a Negro were compatible or incompatible categories. For intellectuals, making a decision "whether it was better to be a 'Negro Artist' and develop a racial art or to be an American artist who was a Negro" was complex and contradictory.⁷ In literature these tensions are present in the conscious decisions made by some black writers to write for white magazines or to create white subjects in their fiction.

In the nine years between the publication of *Moses, Man of the Mountain* in 1939 and *Seraph on the Suwanee* Hurston concentrated her energies on writing nonfiction for white audiences. Her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, was published in 1942 and won the Ainsfield-Wolf Award, sponsored by the *Saturday Review*, for its contribution to "the field of race relations." Throughout the forties Hurston was a regular contributor of essays and reviews to magazines with a predominantly white readership. Of course she ran the risk of being positioned by these magazines as a "representative Negro" expressing "representative opinions," and she also invited, and received, heavy criticism from other black intellectuals for ignoring serious aspects of black life in order to pander to a white readership. But despite the risks and the controversy that her articles generated, Hurston seems to have sought and enjoyed her position as a conservative black spokesperson.⁸

However, it is important to remember that Hurston was not alone in her direct engagement with a white readership. Some magazines, like the *Saturday Evening Post*, regularly published work from a variety of black writers, and a significant number of black novelists, including Hurston, eventually published postwar novels about white characters. In 1947, Ann Petry published *Country Place* and Willard Motley published *Knock on Any Door*. Between 1946 and 1950 Frank

Yerby published five novels aimed at a mass-market audience: *The Foxes of Harrow*, *The Vixens*, *Pride's Castle*, *The Golden Hawk*, and *Floodtide*. In 1954 Richard Wright published his controversial novel *Savage Holiday*.⁹ White reviewers and critics often condemned black novels about black subjects for being narrowly conceived, for being overly political, and for being didactic. The term "protest fiction" was frequently used to describe novels by and about black people in order to suggest that somehow the practice of art had been compromised, if not contaminated, by the presence of political and ideological issues. The phrase "protest fiction" implied that fiction that was uncritical of the racialized structures of subordination at work in society somehow expressed universal, not partisan, values. When black authors created white characters in novels that were apparently not about racism or the suffering that resulted from a racist society, reviewers indirectly expressed their relief. A reviewer of *Country Place* in the *Atlantic Monthly* was glad that the novel "preaches no sermons, [and] waves no flags."¹⁰ In the paperback edition of Petry's novel, the publishers inserted a page entitled "About This Book" which explained that taking "the folksy, nostalgic front off 'Our Town'" was "a much more difficult task" than dealing with "the life of the Negro in our big Northern cities," the subject of Petry's first novel, *The Street*. Potential readers could safely retain their political illusions about the existence of democracy, for they were assured that Ann Petry was "a powerful American writer, unhampered by any one theme or hobby horse."¹¹ Writing about white people was thought by many white critics, reviewers, and publishers to require more literary skill, and more talent, than writing about black characters. In addition, being an author of a white novel could apparently resolve the contradiction of being both black and American.

Seraph on the Suwanee, a novel of a poor white family in Florida that gradually achieves upward economic and class mobility, was published in October 1948. Reviews on the whole were favorable if not overly enthusiastic, but Scribner

was unable to interest any book clubs in the novel's distribution. The initial sales of *Seraph on the Suwanee* were good, about three thousand in the first few weeks of publication, and because of the favorable reviews, Scribner ordered another two thousand to be printed. But the events that created controversy around the novel and shattered Hurston's optimism had nothing to do with the fact that Hurston was black and her characters white. On September 13, Hurston had been arrested on charges rising from allegations of sexual misconduct with a ten-year-old boy. She emphatically denied all charges, using her passport as evidence that she had been in Honduras at the time the immoral acts were supposed to have taken place. It must have absolutely astounded Hurston that *Seraph on the Suwanee* could become a tool in the publicity that was eventually generated from the allegations against her. On October 23 the national edition of the *Baltimore Afro-American* published a distorted and inaccurate version of the original allegations (allegations that were eventually proved to be totally false) under the banner headlines "Did She Want 'Knowing and Doing' Kind of Love?" and "Boys, 10, Accuse Zora." Above the article itself ran the two headlines "Novelist Arrested on Morals Charge," "Reviewer of Author's Latest Book Notes Character Is 'Hungry for Love.'" The story was salacious: It suggested that *Seraph on the Suwanee* advocated sexual aggressiveness in women and then used selected sentences from the novel as if they provided evidence of the author's immorality. Hurston's exploration of the sexual expectations and repressions of the novel's protagonists became, in the hands of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the means for crucifying her. She was literally tried and found guilty in the widely syndicated story and in a subsequent editorial, which appeared in the November 6 *Afro-American*, in which the paper defended itself against criticism of the front-page publicity granted to the case by arguing that "a hush-hush attitude about perversion has permitted this menace to increase."¹²

Charges against Hurston were not dismissed until March 14, 1949, and by then, as Robert Hemenway has argued, "the

damage had been done."¹³ Hurston felt betrayed by a fellow black person, a court reporter who had originally leaked the story to the press, and by a black newspaper that she referred to as "the *Afro-American* sluice of filth." This sense of betrayal led Hurston to contemplate and threaten suicide in a letter that she wrote to Carl and Fania Van Vechten:

All that I have ever tried to do has proved useless. All that I have believed in has failed me. I have resolved to die. It will take a few days for me to set my affairs in order, and then I will go. . . no acquittal will persuade some people that I am innocent. I feel hurled down a filthy privy hole.¹⁴

The letter seems to have been written as much from a feeling of hope that it could generate the assurance and support from friends that she needed as it was from a feeling of fear and despair that no one believed in her innocence. Hurston must have received the assurance that she sought for she did not kill herself, and she gradually recovered her enthusiasm for living and for writing. But, presumably because of the negative publicity generated by the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Hurston seems to have done little to publicly promote her novel herself. In many ways *Seraph on the Suwanee* was Hurston's most ambitious and most experimental novel to date. But while she regained her confidence and recovered her ambitions for her fiction in the manuscripts of three more novels, *Seraph on the Suwanee* was the last of her novels to be accepted for publication by any publishing house.

The relation between the themes of Petry's *Country Place* and Hurston's *Seraph on the Suwanee* are striking—both concentrate on complex questions of female sexuality and the sometimes violent conflict between men and women that arises from the existence of incompatible and gender-specific desires. Arvey Meserve grows up in a poor family in the turpentine town of Sawley at the turn of the century. As a young woman she is convinced that she isn't important to anyone, and she develops a secret fantasy life in which she

feels that she lives in mental adultery with her sister's husband. At twenty-one Arvay turns her back on the "sins of the world," and uses religious devotion as a mask, an escape from the pressures of "spinsterhood" into a space that represents the only legitimate, autonomous existence for a woman. Arvay successfully gets rid of all unwanted suitors by throwing so-called fits until Jim Meserve arrives and refuses to be so easily dismissed. In the first part of the novel, Jim establishes his power over Arvay through two acts of violence. He "cures" her fits by dropping turpentine in her eye and subsequently rapes her under the mulberry tree, a tree that is symbolic of Arvay's innocent childhood. As the novel progresses the successful gendering of each protagonist is dependent on the other. Arvay becomes "a slave" to her husband, Jim, while Jim measures and defines his masculinity entirely in relation to the extent to which he can take care of a woman. To Jim Meserve, all women are incapable of taking care of themselves, and, as they have no brains, a man, in order to become a true man, has to think for all women in his care. Readers of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* will be reminded of the pompous second husband of Janie, Jody Starks, who asserted that "Somebody got to think for women and chillun and cows," because they couldn't think for themselves.¹⁵ The difficulty for a feminist reading of *Seraph on the Suwanee* is that Jim Meserve, unlike Jody Starks, does not conveniently die so that his wife can get on with her life. In *Seraph* it is Arvay's expectations and desires that must be transformed to accommodate the demands of her husband.

Nevertheless, the sexual politics of *Seraph on the Suwanee* cannot be easily dismissed. The sexual ambiguity of Jim and Arvay's roles is, at times, intriguing. It is clear from Hurston's letters to her editor when she was writing about Arvay's doubts, fears, and lack of confidence that she was thinking about the men she had met who had been intimidated in their relationship with a woman who was a success in her own right. In response to her editor's unsympathetic response to the

character of Arvay, Hurston admitted that, at times, she got sick of her herself and then she asked:

Have you ever been tied in close contact with a person who had a strong sense of inferiority? I have and it is hell. . . . I took this man I cared for down to Carl Van Vechten's one night so that he could meet some of my literary friends, since he had complained that I was always off with them, and ignoring him. . . . What happened? He sat off in a corner and gloomed and uglified away, and we were hardly out on the street before he was accusing me of having dragged him down there to show off what a big shot I was and how far I was above him.¹⁶

Reviewers also became confused about whether Jim or Arvay was the seraph of the title—who exactly was the guardian angel, and who was the angel looking after? Frank G. Slaughter, in the *New York Times Book Review*, was convinced that Arvay set out to be the *Webster's* definition of a seraph: "One of an order of celestial beings conceived as fiery and purifying ministers of Jehovah." Herschel Brickell, in the *Saturday Review*, argued that it was "the hero, Jim Meserve," who played "the part of a 'fiery and purifying minister of Jehovah,' with sufficient success to make him seraphic."¹⁷

Arvay's discovery that she needs to be a mother to her husband long after her own children have grown is a vision of female fulfillment that is very different from, and more controversial than, the vision of female autonomy that Hurston created in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. But it is the very complexity and depth of Arvay's frustrated and unsatisfied desires that make *Seraph on the Suwanee* a very modern text, a text that speaks as eloquently to the contradictions and conflict of trying to live our lives as gendered beings in the 1990s as it did in 1948.

HAZEL V. CARBY

NOTES



1. Zora Neale Hurston to Burroughs Mitchell, September 3, 1947, Charles Scribner's Sons Archives, Author's File 3, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Libraries. I would like to thank Princeton University Libraries for permission to quote from the unpublished correspondence in this collection and to thank the library staff for their invaluable assistance.

2. Zora Neale Hurston to Burroughs Mitchell, July 31, 1947, *ibid.*

3. Zora Neale Hurston to Burroughs Mitchell, February 14 [1948], *ibid.*

4. Zora Neale Hurston to Burroughs Mitchell, October 2, 1947, *ibid.*

5. Zora Neale Hurston to Burroughs Mitchell, October, "Something Late," 1947, *ibid.*

6. Zora Neale Hurston to Carl Van Vechten, November 2, 1942, Carl Van Vechten Papers, James Weldon Johnson Memorial Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University. I would like to thank the Beinecke Library for permission to quote from personal correspondence and to acknowledge the invaluable assistance of the library staff.

7. See Ann Gibson, "Norman Lewis in the Forties," in *Norman Lewis: From the Harlem Renaissance to Abstraction*, May 10, 1989–June 25, 1989, New York: Kenkeleba Gallery, 1989, 9–23. Gibson argues, convincingly, that a number of black artists in the forties, including Romare Bearden, Harlan Jackson, Ronald Joseph, Norman Lewis, and Hale Woodruff, "decided it was better to be an American artist who was a Negro."

8. Robert E. Hemenway, "Ambiguities of Self, Politics of Race," in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1977), chap. 11, particularly pp. 288–89.

9. Willard Motley, *Knock on Any Door* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1947); Ann Petry, *Country Place* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1947); Frank Yerby, *The Foxes of Harrow* (New York: Dial Press, 1946);

The Golden Hawk (New York: Dial Press, 1947); *The Vixens* (New York: Dial Press, 1948); *Pride's Castle* (New York: Dial Press, 1949); *Floodtide* (New York: Dial Press, 1950); Richard Wright, *Savage Holiday* (New York: Avon, 1954).

10. John Caswell Smith, Jr., review of *Country Place*, *Atlantic Monthly*, November 1947: 178, 180.

11. "About This Book" in Ann Petry, *Country Place* (New York: New American Library, 1949).

12. Press clippings from the *Afro-American* (Baltimore), October 23 and November 6, 1948; the *Iowa Bystander* (Des Moines), dated October 21, 1948; and the *Ohio State News* (Columbus), October 23, 1948. The clippings are in the Charles Scribner's Sons Archives, Author's File 3.

13. Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 320.

14. Zora Neale Hurston to Carl and Fania Van Vechten, n.d., as quoted in Hemenway, *Zora Neale Hurston*, 321-22.

15. Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 66-67.

16. Zora Neale Hurston to Burroughs Mitchell, October 2, 1947, Charles Scribner's Sons Archives, Author's File 3.

17. Frank G. Slaughter, "Freud in Turpentine," *New York Times Book Review*, October 31, 1948:48, Herschel Brickell, "A Woman Saved," *The Saturday Review*, November 6, 1948:19.

Grateful acknowledgment is made to Princeton University Libraries, Charles Scribner's Sons Archives.