

ZORA NEALE HURSTON

AUTHOR OF THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD



AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD

"Warm, witty, imaginative, and down-to-earth by turns, this is a rich and winning book by one of our few genuine, Grade A folk writers."

—*The New Yorker*

DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD



ZORA NEALE HURSTON

WITH A NEW FOREWORD BY MAYA ANGELOU

SERIES EDITOR: HENRY LOUIS GATES, JR.



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DUST TRACKS ON A ROAD

FOREWORD



There is an eerie, sometimes pathetic, oftentimes beautiful urge that prevails in Black American lore, lyrics and literature. The impulse, simply put, is to tell the story . . . to tell one's own story . . . as one has known it, and lived it, and even died it.

From 1619, with the off-loading of nineteen Africans at Jamestown, Virginia, until this age of innocuous television series featuring Black characters, a large number of white writers have felt they were not only capable but called upon to write the "Black person's story."

It is rather astounding that so many noninformed, or at best partially informed, yet otherwise learned personages have felt and still feel that although they themselves could not replicate the grunts, moans and groans of their Black contemporaries, they could certainly explain the utterances and even give descriptions, designs and desires of the utterers. Black Americans often have found themselves in disagreement with many who have cavalierly drawn their portraits.

Langston Hughes captured the protest in his poem "Note on Commercial Theatre":

You've taken my blues and gone—
You sing 'em on Broadway

. . . And you fixed 'em
So they don't sound like me.
Yes, you done taken my blues and gone.

You also took my spiritual and gone.

. . . But someday somebody'll
Stand up and talk about me,
And write about me—
Black and Beautiful—
And sing about me,
And put on plays about me!
I reckon it'll be
Me myself!

Yes, it'll be me.

Zora Neale Hurston chose to write her own version of life in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. Through her imagery one soon learns that the author was born to roam, to listen and to tell a variety of stories. An active curiosity led her throughout the South, where she gathered up the feelings and sayings of her people as a fastidious farmer might gather eggs. When she began to write, she used all the sights she had seen, all the people she had encountered and the exploits she had survived. One reading of Hurston is enough to convince the reader that Hurston had dramatic adventures and was a quintessential survivor. According to her own account in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, a hog with a piglet and an interest in some food Hurston was eating taught the infant Hurston to walk. The sow came snorting toward her, and Zora, who had never taken a step, decided that the time had come to rectify her reluctance. She stood and not only walked but climbed into a chair beyond the sow's inquisitive reach.

That lively pragmatism which revealed itself so early was to remain with Hurston most of her life. It prompted her to write and rewrite history. Her books and folktales vibrate with tragedy, humor and the real music of Black American speech. In a letter to a friend, she wrote that she wanted to "show a

Negro preacher who is neither funny nor an imitation puritan ramrod in his pants. Just the human being and poet he must be to succeed in a Negro pulpit." Thus, her first novel, *Jonab's Gourd Vine*, published in 1934, clearly told the story of John Hurston, her father, who could build houses, uproot trees, fight victoriously, love women and preach the color blue out of the sky.

Hurston was born in Eatonville, Florida, the only incorporated, all-Black town in America. Her father, with whom she rarely shared a peaceful hour, had been the town's alderman, three times its mayor, and had written many of the laws in the late 1800s, which are still observed in the 1990s.

In this autobiography Hurston describes herself as obstinate, intelligent and pugnacious. The story she tells of her life could never have been told believably by a non-Black American, and the details in even her own hands and words offer enough confusions, contusions and contradictions to confound the most sympathetic researcher.

Her mother, whom she seemed to have pitied but only glancingly loved, died when Hurston was nine years old. Her father remarried, and the antipathy between them was exacerbated by the presence and actions of a thick-skinned and malicious stepmother. Hurston found her first personal power at the expense of her father's wife.

The primeval in me leaped to life. Ha! This was the very corn I wanted to grind. Fight! Not having to put up with what she did to us through Papa! . . . If I died, let me die with my hands soaked in her blood. I want her blood, and plenty of it. That is the way I went into the fight, and that is the way I fought it. . . .

She scratched and clawed at me, but I felt nothing at all. In a few seconds, she gave up. I could see her face when she realized that I meant to kill her. She spat on my dress, then, and did what she could to cover up from my renewed fury. She had given up fighting except for trying to spit in my face, and I did not intend for her to get away.

This puzzling book was written during 1940 and 1941 but for the most part deals with the early part of the twentieth century. Hurston, who claimed to have been born in 1901, but whose records show her birth year was a decade earlier, most certainly lived through the race riots and other atrocities of her time. However, she does not mention even one unpleasant racial incident in *Dust Tracks on a Road*. The southern air around her most assuredly crackled with the flames of Ku Klux Klan raiders, but Ms. Hurston does not allude to any ugly incident.

Her silence over these well-known issues gives rise to many questions: Why did Hurston write *Dust Tracks on a Road*? Whose song was she singing? And to whose ears was she directing her melody? Is this book a tale or a series of tales meant to appease a white audience? Does Hurston mean to show herself as a sleeping princess who will awaken to grandeur with the slightest kiss from a white prince?

Hurston does imply that the nicest people she met in her youth were whites who showed her kindness. It was a white man, who, discovering her mother in labor, delivered Hurston into the world and afterward took a proprietary interest in her. Hurston recalls how the kindly crusty old man took the eight-year-old Black girl fishing and gave her advice that might have been William Shakespeare's from the mouth of a Faulknerian Polonius.

He called me Snidlits, explaining that Zora was a hell of a name to give a child.

"Snidlits, don't be a nigger," he would say to me over and over. "Niggers* lie and lie! Any time you catch folks lying, they are skeered of something. Lying is dodging. People with guts don't lie. They tell the truth and then if they have to, they fight it out. You lay yourself open by lying. The other fellow knows right off that you are skeered of him and he's more'n apt to tackle you. If he don't do nothing, he starts to looking down on you from

then on. Truth is a letter from courage. I want you to grow guts as you go along. So don't you let me hear of you lying. You'll get 'long all right if you do like I tell you. Nothing can't lick you if you never get skeered."

*[Hurston's footnote.] The word *Nigger* used in this sense does not mean race. It means a weak, contemptible person of any race.

That was a knowledge not given to many southern Black girls—or boys for that matter. In fact, few southerners of any race or sexual persuasion would have deduced that the old white man meant anything other than "don't be Black, if you possibly can, for your greater good and the general wealth and welfare of everyone, be or at least act white."

Two white women whom Hurston describes as gracious and beautiful gave her candies, clothes and books to read. She says of them:

They had shiny hair, mostly brownish. One had a looping gold chain around her neck. The other one was dressed all over in black and white with a pretty finger ring on her left hand. But the thing that held my eyes were their fingers. They were long and thin, and very white, except up near the tips. There they were baby pink. I had never seen such hands. It was a fascinating discovery for me. I wondered how they felt. . . .

First thing, the ladies gave me strange things, like stuffed dates and preserved ginger, and encouraged me to eat all that I wanted. Then they showed me their Japanese dolls and just talked. . . .

Is it possible that Hurston, who had been bold and bodacious all her life, was carrying on the tradition she had begun with the writing of *Spunk* in 1925? That is, did she mean to excoriate some of her own people, whom she felt had ignored or ridiculed her? The *New Yorker* critic declared the work a "warm, witty, imaginative, rich and winning book by one of our few genuine grade A folk writers."

There is, despite its success in certain quarters, a strange

distance in this book. Certainly the language is true and the dialogue authentic, but the author stands between the content and the reader. It is difficult, if not impossible, to find and touch the real Zora Neale Hurston. The late Larry Neal in his introduction to the 1971 edition of *Dust Tracks on a Road* cited, "At one moment she could sound highly nationalistic. Then at other times she might mouth statements which in terms of the ongoing struggle for Black liberation were ill conceived and were even reactionary."

There is a saying in the Black community that advises: "If a person asks you where you're going, you tell him where you've been. That way you neither lie nor reveal your secrets." Hurston had called herself the "Queen of the Niggerati." She also said, "I like myself when I'm laughing." *Dust Tracks on a Road* is written with royal humor and an imperious creativity. But then all creativity is imperious, and Zora Neale Hurston was certainly creative.

MAYA ANGELOU

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CHAPTER 1



MY BIRTHPLACE

Like the dead-seeming, cold rocks, I have memories within that came out of the material that went to make me. Time and place have had their say.

So you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life.

I was born in a Negro town. I do not mean by that the black back-side of an average town. Eatonville, Florida, is, and was at the time of my birth, a pure Negro town—charter, mayor, council, town marshal and all. It was not the first Negro community in America, but it was the first to be incorporated, the first attempt at organized self-government on the part of Negroes in America.

Eatonville is what you might call hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick. The town was not in the original plan. It is a by-product of something else.

It all started with three white men on a ship off the coast of Brazil. They had been officers in the Union Army. When the bitter war had ended in victory for their side, they had set out for South America. Perhaps the post-war distress made their

native homes depressing. Perhaps it was just that they were young, and it was hard for them to return to the monotony of everyday being after the excitement of military life, and they, like numerous other young men, set out to find new frontiers.

But they never landed in Brazil. Talking together on the ship, these three decided to return to the United States and try their fortunes in the unsettled country of South Florida. No doubt the same thing which had moved them to go to Brazil caused them to choose South Florida.

This had been dark and bloody country since the mid-1700's. Spanish, French, English, Indian, and American blood had been bountifully shed.

The last great struggle was between the resentful Indians and the white planters of Georgia, Alabama, and South Carolina. The strong and powerful Cherokees, aided by the conglomerate Seminoles, raided the plantations and carried off Negro slaves into Spanish-held Florida. Ostensibly they were carried off to be slaves to the Indians, but in reality the Negro men were used to swell the ranks of the Indian fighters against the white plantation owners. During lulls in the long struggle, treaties were signed, but invariably broken. The sore point of returning escaped Negroes could not be settled satisfactorily to either side. Who was an Indian and who was a Negro? The whites contended all who had Negro blood. The Indians contended all who spoke their language belonged to the tribe. Since it was an easy matter to teach a slave to speak enough of the language to pass in a short time, the question could never be settled. So the wars went on.

The names of Oglethorpe, Clinch and Andrew Jackson are well known on the white side of the struggle. For the Indians, Miccanopy, Billy Bow-legs and Osceola. The noble Osceola was only a sub-chief, but he came to be recognized by both sides as the ablest of them all. Had he not been captured by treachery, the struggle would have lasted much longer than it did. With an offer of friendship, and a new rifle (some say a beautiful sword) he was lured to the fort seven miles outside of St. Augustine, and captured. He was confined in sombre

Fort Marion that still stands in that city, escaped, was recaptured, and died miserably in the prison of a fort in Beaufort, South Carolina. Without his leadership, the Indian cause collapsed. The Cherokees and most of the Seminoles, with their Negro adherents, were moved west. The beaten Indians were moved to what is now Oklahoma. It was far from the then settlements of the whites. And then too, there seemed to be nothing there that white people wanted, so it was a good place for Indians. The wilds of Florida heard no more clash of battle among men.

The sensuous world whirled on in the arms of ether for a generation or so. Time made and marred some men. So into this original hush came the three frontier-seekers who had been so intrigued by its prospects that they had turned back after actually arriving at the coast of Brazil without landing. These young men were no poor, refuge-seeking, wayfarers. They were educated men of family and wealth.

The shores of Lake Maitland were beautiful, probably one reason they decided to settle there, on the northern end where one of the old forts—built against the Indians, had stood. It had been commanded by Colonel Maitland, so the lake and the community took their names in memory of him. It was Mosquito County then and the name was just. It is Orange County now for equally good reason. The men persuaded other friends in the north to join them, and the town of Maitland began to be in a great rush.

Negroes were found to do the clearing. There was the continuous roar of the crashing of ancient giants of the lush woods, of axes, saws and hammers. And there on the shores of Lake Maitland rose stately houses, surrounded by beautiful grounds. Other settlers flocked in from upper New York State, Minnesota and Michigan, and Maitland became a center of wealth and fashion. In less than ten years, the Plant System, later absorbed into the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad, had been persuaded to extend a line south through Maitland, and the private coaches of millionaires and other dignitaries from North and South became a common sight on the siding. Even

a president of the United States visited his friends at Maitland.

These wealthy homes, glittering carriages behind blooded horses and occupied by well-dressed folk, presented a curious spectacle in the swampy forests so dense that they are dark at high noon. The terrain swarmed with the deadly diamond-back rattlesnake, and huge, decades-old bull alligators belated their challenge from the uninhabited shores of lakes. It was necessary to carry a lantern when one walked out at night, to avoid stumbling over these immense reptiles in the streets of Maitland.

Roads were made by the simple expedient of driving buggies and wagons back and forth over the foot trail, which ran for seven miles between Maitland and Orlando. The terrain was as flat as a table and totally devoid of rocks. All the roadmakers had to do was to curve around the numerous big pine trees and oaks. It seems it was too much trouble to cut them down. Therefore, the road looked as if it had been laid out by a playful snake. Now and then somebody would chop down a troublesome tree. Way late, the number of tree stumps along the route began to be annoying. Buggy wheels bumped and jolted over them and took away the pleasure of driving. So a man was hired to improve the road. His instructions were to round off the tops of all stumps so that the wheels, if and when they struck stumps, would slide off gently instead of jolting the teeth out of riders as before. This was done, and the spanking rigs of the bloods whisked along with more assurance.

Now, the Negro population of Maitland settled simultaneously with the white. They had been needed, and found profitable employment. The best of relations existed between employer and employee. While the white estates flourished on the three-mile length of Lake Maitland, the Negroes set up their hastily built shacks around St. John's Hole, a lake as round as a dollar, and less than a half-mile wide. It is now a beauty spot in the heart of Maitland, hard by United States Highway Number 17. They call it Lake Lily.

The Negro women could be seen every day but Sunday

squatting around St. John's Hole on their haunches, primitive style, washing clothes and fishing, while their men went forth and made their support in cutting new ground, building, and planting orange groves. Things were moving so swiftly that there was plenty to do, with good pay. Other Negroes in Georgia and West Florida heard of the boom in South Florida from Crescent City to Cocoa and they came. No more back-bending over rows of cotton; no more fear of the fury of the Reconstruction. Good pay, sympathetic white folks and cheap land, soft to the touch of a plow. Relatives and friends were sent for.

Two years after the three adventurers entered the primeval forests of Mosquito County, Maitland had grown big enough, and simmered down enough, to consider a formal city government.

Now, these founders were, to a man, people who had risked their lives and fortunes that Negroes might be free. Those who had fought in the ranks had thrown their weight behind the cause of Emancipation. So when it was decided to hold an election, the Eatons, Lawrences, Vanderpools, Hurds, Halls, the Hills, Yateses and Galloways, and all the rest including Bishop Whipple, head of the Minnesota diocese, never for a moment considered excluding the Negroes from participation. The whites nominated a candidate, and the Negroes, under the aggressive lead of Joe Clarke, a muscular, dynamic Georgia Negro, put up Tony Taylor as their standard-bearer.

I do not know whether it was the numerical superiority of the Negroes, or whether some of the whites, out of deep feeling, threw their votes to the Negro side. At any rate, Tony Taylor became the first mayor of Maitland with Joe Clarke winning out as town marshal. This was a wholly unexpected turn, but nobody voiced any open objections. The Negro mayor and marshal and the white city council took office peacefully and served their year without incident.

But during that year, a yeast was working. Joe Clarke had asked himself, why not a Negro town? Few of the Negroes were interested. It was too vaulting for their comprehension.