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THEATER

## Renaissance For a Pioneer Of Black Pride

By ROSEMARY L. BRAY; Rosemary L. Bray is an editor of The New York Times Book Review.

She was tall and tan and stylish, expansive and difficult, playful and brilliant. She began her career as an anthropologist in the late 1920's and made her mark as a novelist during the Depression years. Almost 30 years later she died, nearly forgotten, in a Florida welfare home, and lay buried in an unmarked grave for more than a decade. But Zora Neale Hurston, novelist and folklorist - dubbed the Queen of the Harlem Renaissance, yet mocked by many of her contemporaries as a vehicle for white stereotypes of blacks - is undergoing an intense re-examination by a new generation attracted to her lyrical gifts and strong African-American sensibility.

It was Hurston's love for rural African-American imagery - revealed in the songs and stories and "big old lies" of her Florida friends and neighbors - that informed her writing, to the great unhappiness of her critics. The novelist Richard Wright went so far as to call her a minstrel who stooped to caricature black Americans rather than uplift them. But she had no patience with what she called "the sobbing school of Negrohood" that portrayed the lives of black people as constantly miserable, downtrodden and deprived. From her early education at Howard and Barnard colleges and her stunning popularity in the 1930's, through the indignity of a false charge of child-molestation that, though disproved, ruined her career, Hurston was consistently, sometimes foolishly, herself.

Throughout the late 1960's and into the mid-1970's, Hurston was a **cult figure** known only to a small but loyal group of scholars and intellectuals, primarily black and female. Her four novels, two books of folklore and her autobiography - more often than not out of print - were photocopied or passed from friend to friend like samizdat publications.

It was the writer Alice Walker's pilgrimage to Eatonville, Fla., to find and mark Zora Neale Hurston's grave, that first brought renewed attention to Hurston. Ms. Walker wrote of her search, "Looking for Zora," in Ms. magazine in 1975. That was followed in 1977 by the first biography of Hurston, by Robert E. Hemenway, and in 1978 by the re-issue of "Their Eyes Were Watching God."

Composed in seven weeks while Hurston was in Haiti on a Guggenheim fellowship, "Their Eyes," as it is fondly known, centers on Janie Crawford, a young rural black woman, and her journey toward an evolving self through three radically different marriages. Perhaps the first true love story in African-American literature, it provided a glimpse of black womanhood virtually absent from American letters.

The novel was misread by white critics and vilified by black critics when it was published in 1937. At a time when the bitter social protest novels of writers like Richard Wright were the preferred vision of African-American life, Hurston's complete lack of literary interest in the attitudes of whites, along with her admiration for the country people with whom she grew up, seemed to her peers a betrayal of her talent

and education. Yet Hurston rejected heartily the prevailing belief that black artists would earn respect only by emulating whites.

Three years before the publication of "Their Eyes" Hurston urged so-called "New Negroes" to rethink their rejection of African-American culture. "Who knows," she wrote, "what fabulous cities of artistic concept lie within the mind and language of some humble Negro boy or girl who has never heard of Ibsen?"

Hurston's artistic concept is being re-discovered in the current revival of interest in her work. The Lincoln Center Theater plans a premiere this summer of "Mule Bone," the play written by Hurston in collaboration with Langston Hughes (never produced in either writer's lifetime because of a series of disputes about authorship). And later this month, Harper & Row will reissue four of her seven books, with a general afterword by the series editor, Henry Louis Gates Jr., and introductions by such scholars and poets as Mary Helen Washington, Ishmael Reed, Arnold Rampersad and Rita Dove.

There is also a Zora Neale Hurston Society, founded in 1981 by Ruth Sheffey, a professor of English at Morgan State University in Baltimore. For students at Morgan State, Hurston is an old and honored friend; she attended the school in 1917, when it was known as Morgan Academy. Now, with more than 300 active members, the society publishes a biannual journal devoted to Hurston scholarship, and its biennial conferences are increasing in size. (Nearly 500 people are expected to attend this year's conference from May 25 to 27 in Baltimore.) Morgan State may see Hurston as an old friend, but it is Eatonville that calls her family. The central Florida town of 3,000 people, 10 miles north of Orlando, is the oldest incorporated black town in the United States. From Jan. 25 through Jan. 28, Eatonville honored its daughter with the first annual Zora Neale Hurston Festival of the Arts, organized by the Association to Preserve the Eatonville Community and financed in part by the Florida Endowment for the Arts. The planners estimated that more than 10,000 people attended a variety of tours, exhibits and workshops; Alice Walker spoke at the festival banquet.

It was Hurston's life-affirming childhood in this all-black town that shaped her artistic vision, according to Mary Helen Washington, a professor of English at the University of Massachusetts who wrote the introduction to the new edition of "Their Eyes Were Watching God." And it was this confidence that allowed Hurston to reveal the complex humanity at the heart of the African-American folk experience.

In the end it is Hurston's pride and joy in being black - expressed at a time when being black was shameful - that speaks to readers of every race. Long before the word entered the language, Zora Neale Hurston was an Afrocentric writer. African culture and its influence in the New World were, for her, the pearls of great price that blacks risked losing in their quest for white acceptance and assimilation. In all her work, there remains the deeply felt conviction that there is something inimitably precious in every variation of the African-American voice.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

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## Renaissance For a Pioneer Of Black Pride:

### Zora Neale Hurston

\_\_\_\_\_ 1. What was Hurston's first job?

- a. A novelist
- b. A poet
- c. A folklorist
- d. An anthropologist

\_\_\_\_\_ 2. Why did some of Hurston's peers disapprove of her writing?

- a. They thought she reinforced negative stereotypes.
- b. They thought it was improper for a woman to work.
- c. They thought she did not have the educational background of a writer.
- d. They thought her stories were unsuitable for teenagers.

\_\_\_\_\_ 3. Hurston wrote primarily about people living in:

- a. Harlem, New York
- b. Eatonville, Florida
- c. Chicago, Illinois
- d. Port au Prince, Haiti

\_\_\_\_\_ 4. The description of Hurston as a "cult figure" most nearly means that she:

- a. started a religious cult
- b. believed in spells and witchcraft
- c. was an outcast in society
- d. was admired by a select group of people

\_\_\_\_\_ 5. Who is credited for first reviving interest Hurston?

- a. Langston Hughes
- b. Mary Helen Washington
- c. Alice Walker
- d. Ruth Sheffey

\_\_\_\_\_ 6. Why did Hurston disagree with the New Negro movement?

- a. She thought African-Americans were denying their own culture to appeal to white authors.
- b. She thought that the movement promoted segregation between diverse groups of people.
- c. She was angry that critics disapproved of her novels and stories.
- d. She did not want to be defined by a narrow label.

\_\_\_\_\_ 7. All of the following statements about the town of Eatonville, Florida are true EXCEPT:

- a. It is the home of the Zora Neale Hurston Society.
- b. It is where Zora Neale Hurston is buried.
- c. It is the oldest incorporated black town in the United States.
- d. Hurston's experiences growing up in Eatonville had a profound influence on her writing.

\_\_\_\_\_ 8. The tone of the article's author towards Zora Neale Hurston can best be described as one of:

- a. Neutrality
- b. Admiration
- c. Scorn
- d. Disappointment