



The Cursed Ground

T.R. Simon

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A powerful fictionalized account of Zora Neale Hurston's childhood adventures explores the idea of collective memory and the lingering effects of slavery.

"History ain't in a book, especially when it comes to folks like us. History is in the lives we lived and the stories we tell each other about those lives."

When Zora Neale Hurston and her best friend, Carrie Brown, discover that the town mute can speak after all, they think they've uncovered a big secret. But Mr. Polk's silence is just one piece of a larger puzzle that stretches back half a century to the tragic story of an enslaved girl named Lucia. As Zora's curiosity leads a reluctant Carrie deeper into the mystery, the story unfolds through alternating narratives. Lucia's struggle for freedom resonates through the years, threatening the future of America's first incorporated black township -- the hometown of author Zora Neale Hurston (1891-1960). In a riveting coming-of-age tale, award-winning author T. R. Simon champions the strength of a people to stand up for justice.

The Cursed Ground Details

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Author : T.R. Simon

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From Reader Review The Cursed Ground for online ebook

Rosemary says

Is it any more perfect that the latest installment in a series starring a young Zora Neale Hurston is out right before Banned Book Month? Zora Neale Hurston's brilliant classic, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is both a staple on high school reading lists AND a book that's landed on Banned and Challenged lists since 1997.

Zora & Me is the story of young Zora Neale Hurston and her best friend, Carrie. The year is 1903, and the two live with their families in Eatonville, Florida, in the first African-American city to be incorporated in the state. Even as a child, Zora is every bit the storyteller, the grand designer of adventures; Carrie likes to play it safer, but always follows Zora into an escapade - or a mystery. In this second novel, author T.R. Simon examines hate, white privilege, and history. It begins when Mr. Polk, their mute neighbor, is attacked and his horses set loose. When the girls go investigate and help Mr. Polk, they discover he can speak - he speaks to Old Lady Bronson, a woman rumored to be a conjure woman. When Mr. Polk breaks his silence, it sets other pieces to a long-unsolved puzzle into motion. The narrative shifts between the events in 1903 and the story of a Lucia, a young woman sold into slavery in 1855. In 1903, Zora and Carrie discover an abandoned plantation mansion on Mr. Polk's property; at the same time, white men come to Eatonville and demand more of Mr. Polk's land, claiming a right to it. Tensions rise, and the people of Eatonville prepare to stand up for themselves and their home. As the narratives move back and forth, the puzzle comes together and everything becomes heartbreakingly clear.

Zora & Me: The Cursed Ground is intense and raw, with brutal honesty about slavery and its aftermath. T.R. Smith writes about the roots of racial violence and the "enduring wounds of slavery" that persist to this day. Zora Neale Hurston is an intelligent, headstrong 12-year-old, and Carrie finds her strength and voice. They're strong protagonists, strong African-American young women, and fully aware of the danger that whites present to them, even if slavery is now something they're only hearing about: many parents were born into slavery, and freed as very young children. This generation knows that they weren't "given" their freedom. They weren't given anything; they will fight for everything that is theirs. Lucia, the third main character in *The Cursed Ground*, tells a sharp, painful story about family lost and found; about freedom taken; about people who would diminish a whole race's humanity, and about discovering and defending one's sense of self. It's an incredible story. A biography of Zora Neale Hurston and a timeline of her life conclude this story. I hope to read more of Zora's and Carrie's adventures. This is definitely on my Newbery shortlist, and I hope it's on a Coretta Scott King Award shortlist, too. It's a must-add to historical fiction collections and would make a stellar African-American History Month reading assignment for classes.

Aeicha says

The *Zora & Me* series, which includes book one, *Zora & Me*, and book two, *The Cursed Ground*, is a fictionalized account of the childhood of famous writer Zora Neale Hurston during the turn of the 20th century. Each book in the series is narrated by Carrie Brown, best friend to fictionalized Zora, and takes place in the very real Eatonville, Florida, the first all African-American established and inhabited town in the USA (where the real Zora lived).

Both *Zora & Me* books offer readers complex mysteries with immense impacts on their characters and history. In book one, *Zora & Me*, Carrie and Zora find themselves wrapped up in a murder mystery that may

or may not involve an alligator man. While in book two, *The Cursed Ground*, Carrie and Zora uncover a mystery that stretches back to the horrific times of slavery, and the story switches back and forth from Carrie's POV in their present to the POV of an enslaved girl named Lucia.

This series shines a light on an often overlooked and dismissed era and community, bringing the joys, obstacles, and daily lives of African Americans during this time period (and throughout history) to life, and celebrating the history, culture, and achievements of this community and people. With an authentic and unwavering voice, these stories offer captivating and exciting mysteries, while deftly exploring themes of racism, poverty, slavery, family, friendship, and community. Young Zora is a dazzling, delightful, and larger than life character, with a beautiful imagination.

With wonderful storytelling, rich history, and engaging characters, this series is sure to inspire, move, and entertain young readers.

Erin says

There are two kinds of memory. One is the ordinary kind, rooted in things that happened, people you knew, and places you went.... The second type of memory is rooted in the things you live with, the land you live on, the history of where you belong.

How on earth are we ever gonna suck the marrow out of life if we just sit by and let questions stroll down our street without inviting them in for a glass of lemonade?

This is the story that alternates between the 19th and 20th centuries; first, it is the story of Carrie Brown and Zora Neale Hurston, both age 12 in 1903, the girls are awakened one night to the sound of horses running through Zora's yard. They soon discover a neighbor in need and wounded, although the town conjure woman or "witch" shakes them off, the girls feel there are a lot of secrets that they are grown up enough to know. It is also when they begin to realize that their home, Eatonville, the first incorporated town for coloreds has a history that existed long before they were born.

Slavery happened to folks who lived in the past and somewhere else; our Eatonville was a place where Negroes lived outside of the will of white folks, and we only ever saw ourselves as a bright future.

Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground is also the story of Lucia, an orphan girl that follows her master to Saint Augustine, Florida in 1855 and eventually to a farm called Westin. Once a companion to the master's daughter, it is quickly told to Lucia her real place is amongst the slaves. As readers, we follow Lucia from her time in Westin and all that she endures while longing for freedom.

The past is living in each one of us. Trying to push it down below remembering just makes it find another way through.

I found both stories to be equally captivating and it's the reason that I was late getting supper on the table. As an adult reader, I had an inkling of how exactly these stories were going to converge with one another, but that doesn't diminish how compelling a story *Zora and Me* quickly became. I felt that the story was appropriate for the middle grades and that there would certainly be plenty of discussion generated from the novel. In addition to the story, there is a thorough biography of Zora Neale Hurston, herself, a member of the Harlem resistance movement and a novelist(*Their Eyes Were Watching God* & three others). There is also

included in the book a a timeline of Hurston's life and acknowledgements from the author.

Thanks to NetGalley for a digital copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Cindy says

Zora Neale Hurston is my favorite author and Their Eyes Were Watching God is my favorite book. I was thrilled when I learned that there would be a series loosely based on her childhood. I devoured the first book and gave it five stars. This book was no different. I love that although these books are for middle grade readers they contain ugly truths from history that we need never forget. Highly recommend this book.

Thank you to NetGalley and the publisher for a free copy of this book in exchange for an honest review.

Juli says

The Cursed Ground is the second book in the Zora and Me series, a fictionalized account of the childhood of African American author Zola Neale Hurston (1891-1960). Hurston was a writer and anthropologist, writing on racial issues in the American South and Haitian voodoo. T.R. Simon creates a world of her childhood in the early 1900s, where Zora and her best friend, Carrie Brown, live in Eatonville, Fla. Eatonville was one of the first all-black incorporated towns in the United States.

I have not read the first book in this series, but The Cursed Ground is a wonderful, bittersweet and captivating story about racial issues and the aftermath of slavery. The book alternates between Zora's time and 50 years before, telling the story of a young slave named Lucia. The tale begins when Zora and Carrie discover a secret about Mr. Polk, the town mute. Turns out that the mystery of how the mute man can actually speak is part of a bigger secret....one that might threaten the future of Eatonville.

I loved this book! The storytelling is vibrant and emotional. The characters are beautifully developed and striking. I had never heard of Zola Neale Hurston before I read this book. But I'm definitely going to read about her life and learn more. I'm on the waiting list at the library for one of her books, Their Eyes Were Watching God.

Lovely book! I will definitely read more of this series!

****I voluntarily read an advanced readers copy of this book from Candlewick Press via NetGalley. All opinions expressed are entirely my own.****

Alex (not a dude) Baugh says

I don't usually like to read second books in a series before I read the first book, but I made an exception for Zora & Me: The Cursed Ground, and I'm glad I did. I was immediately pulled into the mystery that the two main characters find themselves involved in, but this book turned out to be so much more than just a mere puzzle.

When Zora Neale Hurston was young, she lived with her family in a town called Eatonville, Florida, the first all black community in the United States. The story begins there one night in 1903 when Zora and her best friend Carrie Brown, both 12, discover two loose horses in the Hurston yard. Recognizing the horses as belonging to Mr. Polk, a mute neighbor, the two girls sneak out and head for his place to see what happened. There, they find Mr. Polk injured and a fire in his cabin. But Zora and Carrie aren't the only ones who noticed something happening, so did Old Lady Bronson, the town's conjure woman, who took charge of Mr. Polk's injuries, and to the absolute surprise of both girls, spoke to him in a strange language and heard him answer. When Zora presses Old Lady Bronson for answers about what she and Carrie just witnessed, the conjure lady makes a deal with her: if she keeps quiet about the night's events, she will tell Zora "a story worth hearing."

The story shifts back to 1855 and a young black girl named Lucia begins narrating her story. Leaving her Caribbean island home of Hispaniola with Prisca and her father Master Frederic, her white owners, Lucia finds herself living enslaved on a plantation in Florida named Westin. Up until moving to Florida, Lucia had been treated well by Master Frederic and was best friends with Prisca. But, three years later, Master Frederic has died and Prisca's stepmother decides to sell Lucia, claiming the plantation needed money and it was part of her marriage contract with Master Frederic that Lucia would be sold.

The story continues to alternate between Zora and Carrie's present and Lucia's life of slavery. Slowly, however, the two stories come together in a surprising way as Zora and Carrie learn the truth about Mr. Polk, Old Lady Bronson and their own connections to slavery and Eatonville's past, and that "history wasn't just something you read in a book. It was everything your life stood on. We who thought we were free from the past were still living it out." (pg 174)

Zora & Me: The Cursed Ground is a gripping coming of age work of historical fiction and Simon has done a stellar job bringing the characters, the time periods, and the setting to life. Carrie is an intelligent, though somewhat cautious girl, while Zora is an impulsive, curious, and intelligent girl, and Old Lady Bronson knows when she finds the two girls at Mr. Polk's place that Zora won't be happy until she is told the truth about the night's events.

Simon goes easily from time period to time period without jarring the reader, ending each section with enough to really keep the reader going simply by igniting their curiosity to discover, like Zora, what is going on.

And Eatonville? Setting in a novel is always important, but here so much of the action in this novel centers around the town of Eatonville, founded in 1887, that it actually becomes another important character as Lucia's 1855 story begins to merge with the events of 1903 Eatonville. I can't say more or I'll give too much away and you definitely want to find out the answers on your own.

Zora & Me: The Cursed Ground may be difficult for some readers. Simon tackles the brutality of slavery head on and without apology. This may make some white readers uncomfortable, but if you can get past your discomfort, there is a lot of painful truth to be found here. Prisca's stepmother and her children are classic examples of white attitudes about black people, but what is made clear is that this attitude persisted into the 20th century and, I am sad to say, even into 21st century. This is certainly a thought-provoking element in the novel and I hope people do think about it.

Do read Simon's short biography of Zora Neale Hurston at the back of the novel, and check out the timeline of her life. There is also an annotated bibliography of Hurston's work, and a list of children's books that were adapted from the folktales she collected.

This book is recommended for readers age 10+
This book was an EARC received from NetGalley

And yes, I can't wait to read the first book, *Zora & Me*

Brenda says

The Cursed Ground is the second book in the *Zora & Me* series. Unfortunately, I missed out on the first book, but both appear to be the historical fictionalized accounts of author Zora Neale Hurston's early childhood. The story is initially narrated by Carrie and set in 1903 in Eatonville, Florida. Late one night while sleeping over at her friend Zora's house, Carrie hears horses running wild outside the bedroom window. She suspects that they belong to Mr. Polk's farm. Zora immediately wants to investigate and convinces Carrie to come with. Upon reaching the farm, they find Mr. Polk with a long gash on his arm. Shortly after, Old Lady Bronson, the local healer or seer shows up and tends to his wound. When Lady Bronson and Mr. Polk communicate in a language the girls don't understand, they're flabbergasted as Mr. Polk is well known for being mute. Mrs. Bronson makes a deal with the girls, she'll tell them a story in exchange for their silence about Mr. Polk being able to speak.

From there the story shifts back in time to 1855 where our second narrator, Lucia, an orphan serving girl and Prisca, the daughter to the gentleman Don Federico have just found out that Prisca's father has taken a new wife and they will be leaving the Dominican Republic to travel to their new home in Westin, Florida. Lucia has been a companion for Prisca for most of her life, the two are the best of friends, spending almost every waking moment in each others company. Yet, following the move to Florida, Lucia becomes a slave within the household. No longer can the two friends play together, now Lucia has chores and punishments if she doesn't perform her duties. Lucia tries to adapt to her new life, learning to survive by keeping her emotions and feelings in check but also lives in fear of angering those around her and having the atrocities she witnesses befall her. She tries very hard not to jeopardize the other slaves around her by not drawing attention to herself.

Zora & Me is really a story within a story that spans two time periods. In 1903, we find out the events that led to the attack on Mr. Polk and in 1855 learn about Lucia's life and struggles in Florida. I found Lucia's story to be the most impactful because of how accurately it portrayed the brutality of slavery, the emotions, feelings, and pain. The story makes slavery not just something that happened in the past, somewhere else, but something tangible. Images and characters that you won't forget. Some parts are sad, heartwrenching and difficult to read, but it is a very important story. I especially enjoyed the strong theme that "history is a living history, not something you just read in a book, that it is everything your life stood on." That even in 1903, the girls are facing events that occurred from the past, how they begin to see that the history of slavery is one based on a "hate and desire to have control or power over something seen as inferior." There are so many powerful messages within *Zora & Me* making this a valuable teaching tool.

The ending came together rather quickly for me, partially because I was so engrossed in Lucia's story, but it was important for the reader to be brought up to speed with the historical details of the Jim Crow Laws and Reconstruction to ensure they had the context to be able to follow the events occurring in Zora's hometown. I read this book in one sitting, it has such a riveting plot and I loved how Lucia's and Carrie's stories intertwined.

** ARC received from Candlewick Press in exchange for an honest review**

Kelly Hager says

This is one of the most powerful books I've read in ages. The synopsis doesn't tell anywhere near the whole story. (Which obviously is good; who wants to know everything?)

This is set in two times--the early 1900s and the late 1800s, but pre-Emancipation Proclamation. Zora and her friend Carrie are in the early 1900s; Lucia is late 1800s. Even though Zora has only ever known freedom, it's clear that slavery still has a powerful legacy in her town (Eatonville). Because of this, basically any white face is cause for concern. There are exceptions, but not many.

But the value in this book is the way it lays bare how monstrous slavery was. Most of the white people in the 1880s section are what we would consider kind people. A couple of them are horrible, but most of them aren't. They would never whip a slave. But they would absolutely sell them. One of them says to another white person (and I'm paraphrasing). "Slaves aren't people and they aren't pets. They're property and they aren't your property. They belong to the plantation."

Read that a couple times and let it sink in.

It wouldn't even occur to them that Lucia is an actual person, with worth beyond what she can do for the white people in her life.

This book gave me the bad kind of chills.

But it's also incredibly well-written and, while it's hard to read, it's also hard to stop reading. We need to remember what we, as a country, allowed to happen in order to keep it from happening again.

Highly recommended.

Jazmen says

Reading stories set during the time of slavery twists the stomach into a knot.

Though most of us have never and might never have to experience such a cruel era of servitude and dehumanization it's a sore spot. A spot that smarts at the mere mention.

But it's also a time to take it all in, a time to learn, and a time to understand. A time to come together mentally, and collectively.

Zora and Me and The Cursed Ground are a time-telling story of the slave era—told through the voice of a pre-teen girl who's best friend happens to be the now illustrious Zora Neale Hurston.

Told in the juxtaposition of two different time eras, post and pre-slavery, there is a startling and searing similarity between the past and present. Effortless and seamless transitions between the times allowed for clutter-free reading. The author does a stellar job of weaving the two sides together as they eventually overlap but do so without stuttering about.

Beautifully written, and engaging, the reader will be enraptured in a world so far from their own but it will feel like it's happening right in front of them like a 3-D film.

Thoroughly impressive and downright realistic, this book is a must-have.

The characters are rich and practically leaped off the page with life.

Enough can't be said about the goodness of this novel—and readers will yearn for more adventures of these two girls—both young and old readers alike.

A solid piece of literature, worth buying!

Lana says

I thoroughly enjoyed this historical novel and did not realize until after reading it that it was the second in a series. It is perfect as a stand alone. This story is told in two places in time, 1855 and 1907 about the first all-black town, Eatonville Florida. The characters in 1907, through events in their town are learning about the secret history of Eatonville, and slowly the story told in 1855 catches up to 1907. Such a powerful and well-written middle grade book. I highly recommend this story for all ages.

Thank you to Candlewick and NetGalley for this e-copy, my opinions are my own.

www.colecampfireblog.com

LanaLCole@yahoo.com

Tahlia says

Published on: <https://museofnyxmares.wordpress.com/...>

*I was provided with an ARC of this book through Netgalley, in exchange for my honest opinion.

I loved this story so much! It was easy to read and had such beautiful prose, that I not only read it, but felt it! The author really blew me away with how simple thoughts and actions could be so cleverly crafted, so that each sentence fully resonated. There were some very difficult topics in this book and the writing did such a wonderful job of making the reader deeply feel. Most of the text had such a playfulness about it, as the characters themselves were such a light-hearted bunch. But the writing still managed to evoke such a strong reaction when it dealt with slavery.

I'm always curious about how children view race and furthermore, racism. Children usually want straight answers for things and with racism there really isn't a clear cut answer, and so there must be such confusion surrounding it for children of all races. This was evident in *The Cursed Ground* as the children kept constantly asking why people were racist and not understanding why they were hated simply for the colour of their skin. It was heart breaking to read about how these children had to come to terms with such a harsh reality.

The two stories intertwining was great and each story had me equally engrossed. I was invested in both of the storylines and their respective characters. I honestly can't say which story I loved more, although Zora and Carrie's story had such sweet and humorous moments that it might have just taken that extra bit of my heart. Lucia's story was quite difficult to read and I felt angry and upset on her behalf. People had been cruel to her in many ways and yet she tried continuously, to rise above hate. Her plight documented slavery in a very honest and deeply upsetting way, but even sad stories deserve and need to be told. The way that the two story's came together was amazing, and it was even more rewarding because it felt like two beloved books coming together, although in this case they were already apart of the same story.

Zora and Carrie's friendship was so special and I cherished every second of it. They loved each other so fiercely and were definitely partners in crime, no matter how much Carrie tried not to get caught up in Zora's plans. Zora was by far my favourite character, she was gutsy, stubborn, witty and most of all, deeply caring and protective. She was hilarious and was very much the town busybody, and in her own opinion it's protector. Her character was a delight and it was magical how well her and Carrie balanced each other out.

I cared for all of the main characters and even some of the secondary characters very much. The only ones that I didn't like were the ones that I wasn't supposed to. I was over the moon to find myself with such a likeable cast of characters, Zora's little town truly means a lot to me. The author created such a luminous glow about the place, as no matter what hate tried to ride in to town, it kept on shining with the glow of love, family, friendship and community.

I wasn't aware that this was the second book in the Zora and Me series when I requested it, but I don't think it really mattered, I didn't feel like I lacked prior knowledge of anything. I thoroughly enjoyed this book and I'm very impressed at how well it conveyed that we can't and shouldn't forget the past, but rather learn from, grow from and find your own sense of peace and if needs be, justice from it. I definitely recommend it!

Monique says

“ All of our lives altered because a boy wanted to prove to his father that he was man enough to own other human beings.” (Page 247)

So this is a brand new book that slipped in my To-Be-Read piles as it intrigued me, and is signed..this is the story of a young Zora Neale Hurston and her childhood in Eatonville, America's first incorporated colored town established by twenty-seven black men soon after the Emancipation Proclamation--“Eatonville a place where Negroes lived outside of the will of white folks, and we only ever saw ourselves as a bright future” (Pg. 81)

“..We are living out Eatonville's history as blindly as pawns in a century-old chess game. We were no more new or free than the land itself, but like all young people, we confused youth with beginning and our experience with knowledge” (Pg. 2)

The Zora Neale Hurston is introduced as an inquisitive child always looking for a story and to find out why—

“You know how my mind works—once a question starts a fire inside me, I have to answer it, no matter how bad I get burned. There ain't no pain more painful than the pleasure I get from the light of the truth.” (Pg. 23)

I regret finding out that this is the 2nd book in the series as I hate reading out of sequence but this one seemed to be independent and every character is introduced well so I don't feel like I missed anything though I do want to read the first one at some point. Alright so Zora and her best friend Carrie Brown are awakened one night by horses trampling through their yard and of course they rush out to find the mystery

and run into a huge one—the town’s mute Mr. Polk is dazed and injured and when the town’s conjure woman Old Lady Bronson comes to tend his wounds he begins to speak. Though Mr. Polk does not speak coherent English the Old Lady is able to understand him and so starts this intriguing tale----

Why did Mr. Polk stop speaking in the first place?

What happened and who hurt him that night?

This is a story within a story circling back many times to the past of Eatonville and the slaves who lived there before and while it is played up brilliantly as a mystery once you read the slave story you can easily figure out the people but it was very well written and readable for middle school especially. There are such wonderful passages to reread, savor and think about like--

This was the moment when our color became our curse...(Pg. 221)

The family you are born to is your lifeblood, but the family you choose is your heart (Pg. 247)

Then I asked the question that I had been burning to ask my whole life. “Why do they hate us so much?” Old Lady Bronson reached down and took my chin her hand, firmly yet gently. “They have to hate because you can’t take another person’s freedom with love.” (Pg. 248)

I can’t wait to put this book in the hands of two lovely ladies in particular as what was also amazing is that there is a biography on the storyteller extraordinaire Zora Neale Hurston which I thought was especially rich to include as you want to know more and read more about this curious little girl. I love that it’s a series and I can’t wait to read more and sigh the first installment...Great read.

Michelle says

Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground is the second in a series of historical fiction written by T. R. Simon. Set in Eatonville, Florida the novel not only introduces middle grade readers to a fictionalized young Zora Neale Hurston, but also to the very first African-American incorporated village. The book follows two storylines: one that centers on a land dispute that threatens the safety of the young town and the other set 50 years earlier during slavery. Both narratives have strong female characters, their resiliency imbuing the power of collective memory and the history that lives on within us. As a mother I am constantly looking for books that have characters that will resonate with my children. I am particularly aware of how important this is for my daughter. Although she is only 6 now I want to be able to provide for her positive images of young Black women. Whether it's something magical as is implied by the catchphrase *Black girl magic* or just her tapping into her own innate human capacity, I want her to know all that is within her power. **Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground** does this with characters that ring sincere and hold their own unique strengths. The plot was engrossing and could hold its own as a stand alone novel. Definitely something I would want my daughter to read.

Thank you NetGalley, Candlewick Press and T. R. Simon for an advanced reader's copy in exchange for an honest review.

Robert Kent says

Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground is not quite a young adult novel, but it's definitely upper-age middle grade. Alas, there just isn't a kid-friendly way to discuss slavery without pretending slavery was something less horrible than what it was (don't do this, even if you're writing a text book in a church in Texas).

Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground is not quite a historical accounting, even though it's drawn from historical events and features a fictionalized version of a Zora Neale Hurston. It's more of a story than an essay, but the book definitely has a formal message. It's a sequel, but I don't think you need to have read the first book to enjoy this one.

T. R. Simon catches up quickly:

I was staying with Zora's family for the week while my mama tended her employer's sick baby over in Lake Maitland. After Daddy died, there was just me and Mama. I was an only child. Alone with Mama I might have felt lonely in the world, but I had Zora, my best friend, my secret keeper, and my talisman against sorrow. From the time I was old enough to have a conversation, Mama always liked to tell how my three-year-old self toddled over to Zora, who was squirming and fussing one pew away from us in her father's church, grabbed her hand, and didn't let go for the next hour. Zora took a long look at me, tried once to shake me loose, then settled right down to the idea of us being joined. Zora's mother liked to say that after I took a hold of Zora, Sunday morning service once again became a place of worship and peace for her. I don't remember that at all. In fact, my own first memory of Zora has the roles reversed: instead of me grabbing her, she's grabbing me and pulling me with her as she scrambles after a lizard that turns out to be a baby diamondback rattler. My screams brought our parents running, and Zora was praised for saving me. Only, I knew there would have been no need to save me if she hadn't taken hold of me in the first place. But I never held the scrapes against Zora. She made life in a town no bigger than a teacup feel like it held the whole world.

Our narrator is Carrie Brown, who is a sort of Watson to young Zora's Sherlock Holmes, or, if you prefer (and I do), her Ellicott Skullworth to Zora's Banneker Bones. Incidentally, I wondered about the aptness of comparing these two young black girls to two older white men (Watson and Sherlock, not Ellicott and Banneker), but after I wrote this, I watched the video below in which the author makes the same comparison, so we're good:).

Zora and Carrie are on a new case, and it's a fun one (from a mystery writer's perspective). Someone has stabbed the local mute man who can't say what happened. The middle grade mystery doesn't open with a body, but there'll be bodies before it's done. Further intriguing, the mute man is able to whisper something to the town conjure woman.

Note how Simon is able to tell us so much about Carrie and Zora's relationship and their motivations in this simple exchange:

The secret Mr. Polk shared with Old Lady Bronson didn't excite me; it frightened me. "Honestly, Zora, maybe it ain't for us to know. Maybe there's some secrets folks just ought to keep." She looked at me incredulously. "Carrie Brown, you can't be serious. How on earth are we gonna suck the marrow out of life if we just sit by and let questions stroll down our street without inviting them in for a glass of lemonade? Mama always says, 'Ain't no one ever got dumber trying to answer a question.' And I intend to answer all life's questions.

Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground starts out rather tame-ish in 1903 in the town of Eatonville where all the inhabitants are black and doing as well as can be expected in America in 1903. But of course, white folks are at the edge of town conspiring to mess it all up because of course they are. And this is a book that gives us a very specific, and, sigh, accurate view of many white folks at the time (#notallgreatgrandmas):

There's nothing white folks won't do when colored folks have something they want.

No matter how clear our town borders seemed to me, they could be disregarded at any moment by white men who sought to hurt us.

Uneasy whites always bring black death.

Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground isn't going to be a favorite read of our Trump-supporting relatives, but they're not really readers anyway. This is a book for reasonable, thinking folks who can appreciate facts for what they are and an honest discussion of them. If that's not you, go ahead and watch your Fox News.

White people reading this book will be made uncomfortable, even the ones who listen to NPR and voted for Obama twice:) Good. This is uncomfortable stuff and should not be read easily.

If you're a teacher considering not reading this book to your class because some of your students are a different race than you and you don't want things to get awkward, quit being a coward. Read this book aloud. Now. Don't wait until February--this is American history all year round. Awkward discussions need to be had, so fight through it.

Getting back to the book, you'll remember this town has a conjure woman. This is one of my most favorite character introductions of ever:

A shadow fell across the doorway. We looked up to see Old Lady Bronson. She was wrapped in a dark-gray shawl, her giant black cowhide bag hung against her right hip. With soldier boots that stopped below her knees and the still-dissipating smoke rising around her, the town conjure woman looked every bit the part of a witch. The steel-gray hair I'd only ever seen her wear in a single tight braid down her back blew wild behind her, gleaming with droplets of rain. Her freckled skin glowed in the lamplight. Silhouetted against the lightning-filled sky, Old Lady Bronson looked electrified.

There's a lot more to Old Lady Bronson than first meets the eye, but I can't tell you much without spoiling. She's an extremely interesting character and I'd like to read a book that was just about her without any children detectives, but that wouldn't be very middle grade:) She's wisely employed here as someone who may or may not have the ability to curse things, which might come up in a book subtitled "The Cursed Ground."

And she's extremely useful as a plot device, again in ways I shouldn't reveal. But authors, take note at the way T.R. Simon deploys Old Lady Bronson to provide necessary exposition rather than flat out telling us how old these girls are:

I always tell folks that twelve is a changeling year, and it looks like you starting to have some sense with your twelve years.

Carrie has developed feelings for Teddy, a friend of her and Zora's, and there's some other drama in the present tense of the story, but we're not going to bother with that. Because just when the reader is settling in for a familiar middle grade read about our young detectives solving a mystery, Simon pulls the rug out from beneath them by flashing back to 1855 to discuss the adventure of two other girls, Lucia and Prisca.

They might almost be Carrie and Zora in another life, save for one crucial difference. Though the girls start as equal, when they move to America, the darker-skinned Lucia is designated a slave and worked to the bone, while Prisca remains free. And the telling of their story is brutal and unflinching:

I was terrified of what Prisca's tears could bring.

And so I shushed her, apologizing gently until her tears slowed.

In that moment I learned to be a slave even with Prisca. To bottle up my feelings and my fears so that she did not unleash the force of her own power, a power she herself barely understood. The power to be a whole person, her whole self, while I was now forced to exist as a fraction of a human being, a slave with no rights to my own self. What Prisca did not understand, but that I now did, was that the past meant nothing.

She answered me in a ferocious whisper. "Out there you're a slave, but in here we are as we always have been. In here, nothing has changed!"

The first year Prisca often pulled me into her bed during the night and wept onto my shoulder. I did not weep with her. I lay still, the flesh and blood doll she turned to when her loneliness became too hard to bear.

Prisca was defending me--not because I was a person and should not be sold, but because I was her property and could not be taken from her.

There are worse passages to follow, but I won't share them all. Lucia is whipped and beaten and subjugated and endures all manner of things that are unpleasant, but which children growing up in Trump country need to be made aware actually happened.

Know, children, just what sort of awfulness that man intends when he says he wants to "make America great again." Know the history his "fine people" marching in Charlottesville would have us repeat.

There is violence in this novel, but it's mostly the emotional kind. And even though there's at least one death that's a bit more graphic than what I'm accustomed to in middle grade fiction, Simon is mindful to explain these complex adult subjects in a manner that's easier to digest for younger readers, without altering the truth of what she's discussing:

Zora's brow creased. "What a horrible choice: freedom for yourself or slavery with the folks you love." Teddy shook his head and said, "Seems like no matter what you chose, running or staying, you must have had a broken heart your whole life."

As I said, that opening passage at the top of this review reads like the thesis of an academic argument as much as the opening of a middle grade novel, and I dig that so hard. Crank up your Bob Dylan, fellow English majors, and let's discuss the meaning of "The Cursed Ground." Oh, sure, there's a conjure woman, but the curse of this particular patch of American soil has far less to do with magic than the action of our ancestors.

Much of the tension of this story comes from learning how the story of 1855 connects to the story of 1903, which of course it does, brilliantly. Without spoiling, one character late in the novel tells us, "Slavery is over, but tonight you saw how it still haunts us."

Once the reader understands that this book is as much an essay as it is a story, they can fully appreciate the closing arguments:

Zora was right: history wasn't just something you read in a book. It was everything your life stood on. We who thought we were free from the past were still living it out.

Mr. Ambrose rubbed his forehead. "Because slavery isn't far enough in our past yet," he answered. "What we're facing now is the unfinished business of slavery."

"When will it be finished?" Zora demanded.

"That's what I want to know," I added.

"I don't know, girls. White folks have a disease A disease that started with slavery. We taught ourselves to see colored folks as inferior so we could enslave them. And now we have a need to keep seeing them as inferior. White folks have become dependent on feeling superior to the colored race; no matter how low we fall, we can tell ourselves that the colored man is always lower."

"Do you think that, too?" Zora asked.

Mr. Ambrose took a full minute to respond. "It would be a lie to say I didn't. Every white man I know has the seed of race hate planted and rooted in him by the time he's reached his fifth year. This country is founded on it, and not even a civil war could uproot it. The only way to fight that hate is to consciously decide every day to choose against the hate we've been taught."

Thankfully, in 2008, Barrack Obama was elected president and racism was over forever in the United States and white police never again shot an unarmed black man and evil white people never repeatedly flashed white power hand symbols behind a would-be rapist supreme court nominee put forward by the most evil political party our nation has ever seen.

The past is still very much with us, Esteemed Reader, as we are all living on cursed ground. Those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it.

Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground is an important book that should be made available in every classroom across this country as a primer for American children to learn about this political mess they're inheriting. Don't miss this extraordinary novel.

And don't miss author T.R. Simon's interview on Wednesday. As always, I'll leave you with some of my favorite passages from Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground:

A last flicker of lightning lit up his face, making invisible all the wrinkles of age for a fraction of a second and revealing the face of a troubled boy.

"You know how my mind works--once a question starts a fire inside me, I have to answer it, no matter how bad I get burned. There ain't no pain more painful than the pleasure I get from the light of truth."

For the first two weeks, when the two of us were alone, I allowed myself the fantasy that things between us were as they had been, that we still could enjoy each other's company in a time and place without slavery. It was a useless fantasy and a dangerous one. The present was a hell with no escape, and the past could change nothing about that.

Across his shoulder was slung the rifle he always carried, pressed tight against his lean frame like a second spine.

House wasn't quite the right word. It was more like a shipwreck in the shape of a house.

The gun made the house feel like a cage set with a trap.

I burned with fear, sorrow, humiliation, and helplessness. And not one of Prisca's tears could extinguish that fire.

Zora elbowed me. She loved the way folks whose speech was plain as gray wool in normal times liked to trot out their biggest words on special occasions, as if they had been saving them up and didn't want to waste them on everyday things. We agreed that her father was king of the fifty-cent words, but there were a lot of dukes and earls and counts in the kingdom of Eatonville, too!

Shelby M. (Read and Find Out) says

4.25 stars. My Video Review
