



## Mules and Men

*Zora Neale Hurston*

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## **Mules and Men** Zora Neale Hurston

Acclaimed by celebrated folklorist Alan Lomax as "the most engaging, genuine and skillfully written book in the field of folklore." This is Hurston's first great collection of African American tales, songs and sayings. For the student of cultural history -- or anyone who loves a good story well told -- this treasury captures the imagination as only great literature can."A classic in style and form....Introduces the reader to the whole world of jook joints, lying contests, and tall tale sessions that make up the drama of the folk life of black people in the rural South."--Mary Helen WashingtonA

## **Mules and Men Details**

Date : Published January 22nd 1990 by Harper Perennial (first published 1935)

ISBN : 9780060916480

Author : Zora Neale Hurston

Format : Paperback 341 pages

Genre : Fiction, Cultural, African American, Short Stories, Classics, Folklore, Anthropology

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## From Reader Review Mules and Men for online ebook

### **Ka'leneReads says**

This is a GoodRead! Unaware I was reading an abridged version of this read it still was a GoodRead, I just wonder what was taking out, the reason I normally do not read abridged books.

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### **Illiterate says**

Pioneering folklore and ethnography. Little analysis.

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### **Arlene says**

4.0 Stars. Since this was an abridge version of the book, which I didn't know that I had, I wasn't sure if i would have liked it. There was one tale, or "lie" as it is said to be in the book that I felt was cut off, maybe it was just bad editing. But other than that, this was a pleasure to listen to. It is told from Zora's POV and recalls tales, or lies as they are called, that she has heard from her childhood told by the people of her hometown. I think some of them are ridiculous, like the one about how black folks became black, SPOILER >> it was all a misunderstanding lol. I enjoyed this. It was a quick listen, about 3 hours.

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### **Demetria says**

Ms. Zora Neale Hurston is my literary hero. That is all.

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### **Tracy says**

Mules and Men should be read right along side Joseph Campbell's work. I was drawn more to the anthropological aspect of the book, more so than the literary merits (which it has lots of). Most people forget that Zora Neale Hurston was an Anthropologist who completed extensive fieldwork. In all of her works, anthropology plays an essential role. The use and importance of language is a reoccurring theme of hers, and in Mules and Men it is given equal examination along side African-American mythology.

The brilliance of this work is Ms. Hurston's own mythology as she inserts herself into her anthropological findings. To study a culture or peoples from afar, or as an outsider, has always brought into question the validity, or "truths", of the outcomes/findings. What is most interesting about Hurston's insertion is that she makes no "bones" about the lies and mythology she puts forth. There is a thin line between truth and lies - we call it mythology. By placing herself into the work, she literally personifies it. Her approach also dips its toes into philosophy.

The stories she collects, as well as the hoodoo section, are recognizable for its influence in African-American film, literature and music. However, a lot the myths are not contained to African-American culture. The trickster is found in a number of well-known characters, Bugs Bunny, the famous of all. After reading Mules

and Men, I'd love to do some extensive research on the origins of Bugs Bunny.

For those of you drawn to anthropology, mythology, folklore and the works of Joseph Campbell, Zora Neale Hurston's *Mules and Men* is a must read.

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### **Nichole says**

The following passage is taken from the blurb on the 2008 Harperperennial paperback edition. This blurb says it all:

"...a treasury of black America's folklore as collected by a famous storyteller and anthropologist who grew up hearing the songs and sermons, sayings and tall tales that have formed an oral history of the South since the time of slavery. Returning to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida, to gather material, Zora Neale Hurston recalls "a hilarious night with a pinch of everything social mixed with the storytelling." Set intimately within the social context of black life, the stories, "big old lies," songs, Vodou customs, and superstitions recorded in these pages capture the imagination and bring back to life the humor and wisdom that is the unique heritage of African Americans."

This has been the month for me to revisit all things Zora Neale Hurston, and it's been great. For years, I didn't realize how much I had missed her writing, so when I selected *Mules and Men* to sit down with a couple of days ago, I was pleasantly surprised. Reading Hurston feels like being born again. I loved those chapters of folklore. I was stunned to find out that a few of those "lies" Hurston recorded were actually stories I had loved listening to as a little girl. What an experience - then and now.

Zora Neale Hurston was a jack of all literary trades: a prodigious folklorist and anthropologist, a highly-gifted novelist, a short-story writer, a reporter, even a playwright and poet. She was spunky; an adventurer who loved life; a woman who never let adversity block her path. Until the end of her life, she continued to write. Her kind of spirit is rare.

It was a joy to revisit her.

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### **Lori says**

"Yeah, man. Love is a funny thing; love is a blossom. If you want yo' finger bit poke it at a possum."

A 1935 ethnographic collection, it sounds dreadful. I liked it. I think this woman is great.

This is this the result of Zora Neale Hurston's second field effort to collect African-American folklore. The first was a failure. She must have learned a lot. She captured not just stories, but voices that tell them.

Cultural anthropologist of her day didn't like her participation within the storytelling, or maybe they resented how effective she was at collecting folklore. Her male peers in the Harlem Renaissance didn't think she was bitter enough, disliked the laughter, and perpetuated white stereotypes. Well, she calls them "the Niggerati," so there's probably a lot of backstory that we don't know.

By the mid-1950's her writing was out of print, and she died impoverished. Praise from Alice Walker in the mid-1970s sparked a renewed interest. All of Hurston's major works have been republished.

I'll add the start of her introduction. You decide if want more.

I was glad when somebody told me, "You may go and collect Negro folklore." In a way it would not be a new experience for me. When I pitched head foremost into the world I landed in in the crib of negroism. From the earliest rocking of my cradle, I had known about the capers Brer Rabbit is apt to cut and what Squinch Owl says from the house top. But it was fitting like a tight chemise. I couldn't see it for wearing it. It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings that I could see myself like somebody else and stand off and look at my garment. Then I had to have the spyglass of Anthropology to look through at that.

Dr. Boas asked me where I wanted to work and I said, "Florida," and gave, as my big reason, that "Florida is a place that draws people, white people from all the world, and Negroes from every Southern state surely and some from the North and West." So I knew that it was possible for me to get cross section of the Negro South in the one state. And then I realized that I was new myself, so it looked sensible for me, choose familiar ground.

First place I aimed to stop to collect material was Eatonville, Florida.

And now, I'm going to tell you why I decided to go to my native village first. I didn't go back there so that the home could make admiration over me because I had been up North to college and come back with a diploma and a Chevrolet. I knew they were not going to pay either one of these items too much mind. I was just Lucy Hurston's daughter, Zora and even if I had, to use one of our down home expressions, had a Kaiser baby, and that's something that hasn't been done in this Country yet, I'd still be just Zora to the neighbors. If I had exalted myself to impress the town, somebody would have sent me word in a matchbox that I had been up North there and had rubbed the hair off of my head against some college wall, and then come back there with a lot of form and fashion and outside show to the world. But they'd stand flatfooted and tell me that they didn't have me, neither my sham-polish, to study 'bout. And that would have been that.

I hurried back to Eatonville because I knew that the town was full of material and that I could get it without hurt, harm or danger. As early as I could remember it was the habit of the men folks particularly to gather on the store porch of evenings and swap stories. Even the women folks would stop and break a breath with them at times. As a child when I was sent down to Joe Clarke's store, I'd drag out my leaving as long as possible in order to hear more.

Folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually underprivileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather bed resistance, that is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.

## **Jeanne says**

*The brother in black puts a laugh in every vacant place in his mind. His laugh has a hundred meanings. It may mean amusement, anger, grief, bewilderment, chagrin, curiosity, simple pleasure or any other of the known or undefined emotions.* (p. 62)

*Mules and Men* is a collection of black stories and hoodoo (voodoo), published by Zora Neale Hurston in 1935. To collect such stories, you don't just Google your question; you need to listen carefully. You need to become an accepted member of the group.

[But,] folklore is not as easy to collect as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually under-privileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. (p. 2)

But just because she was black doesn't that gathering these stories was a piece of cake. Hurston initially betrayed herself as an outsider because she had worn a \$12.74 dress from Macy's rather than the \$1.98 mail-order dresses, bungalow aprons, and paper bags that the other women wore.

Changing how she dressed, how she talked, how she presented herself helped people talk to her, but how does being a participant observer change what is observed? Are these the stories they would have told if she wasn't there?

There is a playfulness to Hurston's stories, which belies their seriousness. One person tells a story and another ups the ante. I think of how a people gets around the oppression in their lives. They make and hang quilts to signal safety (or danger); they use language – vocabulary, word play, stories and story telling – to comfort, to reframe the current reality, to present alternate realities.

While the Blacks in these stories are wise and canny and foolish, the Whites are mostly foolish. From one story:

So John knelt down. "O Lord, here Ah am at de foot of de persimmon tree. If you're gointer destroy Old Massa tonight, with his wife and chillun and everything he got, lemme see it lightnin'."

Jack up the tree, struck a match. Ole Massa caught hold of John and said: "John, don't pray no more."

John said: "Oh yes, turn me loose so Ah can pray. O Lord, here Ah am tonight callin' on Thee and Thee alone. If you are gointer destroy Ole Massa tonight, his wife and chillun and all he got, Ah want to see it lightnin' again."

Jack struck another match and Ole Massa started to run. He give John his freedom and a heap

of land and stock. He run so fast that it took a express train running at the rate of ninety miles an hour and six months to bring him back, and that's how come niggers got they freedom today. (pp. 83-84).

Hurston offers little analysis to these stories, as that would steal the life from them. *Mules and Men* is self-serve meaning-making.

*"They all got a hidden meanin', jus' like de Bible. Everybody can't understand what they mean. Most people is thin-brained. They's born wid they feet under de moon. Some folks is born wid they feet on de sun and they kin seek out de inside meanin' of words."* (p. 125)

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### **Melanie Page says**

*Mules and Men* by Zora Neale Hurston can be a hilarious read at times, all while giving insight into 1930s Floridian black communities in the swamps. Yet, this collection can struggle because it ultimately doesn't know how to be what it wants to be.

Check out my full review at [Grab the Lapels](#).

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### **Michael Finocchiaro says**

This is a short story collection from the ingenious author Zora Neale Hurston. I would suggest reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and if you enjoy the style, dive deeply and fearlessly into her universe with *Mules and Men*.

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### **Bloodorange says**

I wanted to read it for a fix of Zora Neale Hurston, and it wasn't the best choice I could make.

Zora's voice is largely absent from the book. After two chapters, the tales became just meh. Sorry. And the first part of the book (58%, to be precise) is that: a minimalistic narrative frame of some documentary value, but not going too much into details of peoples' day-to-day lives, serving as a background for folk tales. There were some stunning moments, though:

Negro women are punished in these parts for killing men, but only if they exceed the quota. I don't remember what the quota is. Perhaps I did hear but I forgot. One woman had killed five when I left that turpentine still where she lived. The sheriff was thinking of calling on her and scolding her severely.

I can only say that my ability to read Southern African-American vernacular Hurston uses for the tales solidified.

The second part (21%) concerns her initiations as a hoodoo priestess with different 'doctors' and hoodoo rituals, and even these chapters were - I don't believe I'm saying this - just that. Pretty dry material. Work

material. This is a rare moment where you can see Zora immortalizing her vision of herself:

"I see her conquering and accomplishing with the lightning and making her road with thunder.  
She shall be called the Rain-Bringer."

... With ceremony Turner painted the lightning symbol down my back ... This was to be my sign forever. The Great One was to speak to me in storms."

The last part (21%) consists of glossary, songs, a list of "paraphernalia of conjure" and descriptions of rituals. I'd say this book may be of interest to people who either study black folklore or hoodoo/ voodoo. If you want to cure gonorrhea or rent a house; kill someone or simply give him 'running feet', this is the book for you. If you're a Hurston fan, but not strongly interested in folklore or early 20th century black culture, choose another one.

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### **Morgan says**

This book read differently than I thought. I thought this was going to be a collection of short stories, instead it's a non-fiction book with interviews. I still liked the book a lot, but I don't recommend to first time Zora readers. Part one is a little hard to read at times too because Zora tries to write the dialect of her people.

The first part of this book is a collection of folklore from her home town Eatonville, Florida. At times I found this a little hard to read, but I still enjoyed hearing the tales. Nice to finally read something about Br'er Rabbit and his friends. I'm not sure why, but the original books are hard to find. I also enjoyed the John Henry stories as well.

The second part of this book is a collection of hoodoo tales for New Orleans. I liked this part better. It was easier to read and I liked reading about Marie Laveau. This part made more sense after reading *Tell My Horse* too.

Make sure you read the appendix parts of this too. It's filled with a glossary, songs (with lyrics and sheets), and some voodoo remedies. Those parts make the book a fun read. I really like how Zora wasn't just an author, but an anthropologist too.

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### **Deb says**

First off, I didn't read this book but listened to it on an audiobook version. This is a collection of black American folk lore. It is a group of oral stories that were passed on to and written down by author Zora Neale Hurston (known for *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). Some of these stories were told back in the days of slavery and ones that Zora heard as a child. This was a project that Ms Hurston started back in the 1930s when she had returned to her hometown of Eatonville, Florida.

What a wonderful time I had listening to these imaginative stories told by the talented Ruby Dee. I felt like I was a little kid again, sitting on the floor, listening to a storyteller weaving some fantastical tales laced with humor, wisdom and culture. This is definitely one "book" that should be listened to and not just read. I can't say enough about Ruby Dee's reading of these stories. A true treasure that hasn't gotten enough attention.

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## **Kathleen says**

*“Belief in magic is older than writing. So nobody knows how it started.”*

I love the idea of this book. And many of the things I read in here will stay with me. But that in-between part--the actual reading of it--was not very fun.

Zora Neale Hurston has such a gift for storytelling. In the beginning I was all excited about reading this because she told of driving around Florida in her car, sort of gathering up folks with stories to tell. The problem was, she handed the storytelling over to them, and their stories kind of fell flat for me. Page after page, I was missing Zora's voice.

This is full of fascinating folklore though, especially the part that details her experiences studying under a number of hoodoo doctors, complete with rituals and spells. Some of them were nasty—death and animal parts and “goofer dust” (dust from graves).

Here's a tame one: A woman went to Zora wanting to get her mother-in-law out of her house. Zora's remedy was to core out an onion, write the lady's name on five little pieces of paper and stuff them in the middle of the onion. Then wait for the lady to leave the house, and when she does, roll the onion behind her after she crossed the doorway. That was supposed to get her out of there within a few weeks. I figured there might be someone out there who could maybe use that information :-)

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## **Michael says**

An interesting mix of travelogue, folklore, and ethnography. The book reads as two yoked under one title; in the first part Hurston embeds African-American folktales within a fast-moving narrative frame, while in the second she switches to more deliberately recounting her research of different practices of hoodoo in the South.

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