“When I pitched headforemost into the world,” writes Zora Neale Hurston, “I landed in the crib of Negroism.” Cognizant from girlhood of the wealth of literary and anthropological material in this “crib,” Miss Hurston, one of the most active Negro writers of the past decade, has been primarily interested in collecting the folk songs and sayings of her people. From her pen have come *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* (1934) and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), two folk novels; *Mules and Men* (1935), a collection of Florida folklore and Louisiana conjure tales; *Tell My Horse* (1938), a study of Haitian sorcery and of Jamaican folklore, politics, and celebrities; *Moses: Man of the Mountain* (1939), a biography of the Hebrew leader from the viewpoint of Negroes who consider him to be the greatest of magicians; and *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942), an autobiography recently selected by Henry Seidel Canby, Henry Pratt Fairchild, and Donald Young as joint winner with Donald Pierson’s *Negroes in Brazil* of the John Anisfield Award for work in the field of race relations. In addition to the six above-mentioned books, Miss Hurston has written a number of stories, sketches, articles, and investigative papers. Furthermore, through the presentation of Bahamian songs and dances to American concert audiences, she has expedited the awakening of interest in Negro folk materials.

Miss Hurston’s literary career began in the early 1920’s at Howard University, where she became a member of *The Stylus*, a collegiate literary society directed chiefly by Alain Locke. “My joining *The Stylus*,” she says, “influenced my later moves.” This is evident, because through her writings for this organization she came to know Charles S. Johnson, then editor of *Opportunity* and a promoter of the Negro Renascence. Dr. Johnson not only published her earliest short stories—“Drenched in Light,” “Spunk,” “John Redding Goes to Sea,” and “Mutsy,” which appeared in *Opportunity* for December, 1924; June, 1925; January, 1926; and August, 1926, respectively—but also, after financial difficulties caused her to leave Howard and go to New York City in 1925, brought her into asso-

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*1 Mules and Men, p. 17.*

*2 Dust Tracks on a Road, p. 175.*
ciation with Fannie Hurst,8 who gave her employment as a secretary, as well as with Annie Nathan Meyer, who got her a scholarship to Barnard College. “So I came to New York through Opportunity,” declares Miss Hurston, “and through Opportunity to Barnard.”4

At Barnard Miss Hurston came under the influence of Columbia University’s noted anthropologist, the late Franz Boas, whom she in ardent discipleship calls “the king of kings” and “Father Franz”; and through him she was temporarily diverted from literature to social science. After being graduated in 1928, she secured through Dr. Boas a fellowship which enabled her to collect Negro folklore in the South. When this stipend was used, she continued her investigations with a two-year grant of two hundred dollars per month given by Mrs. R. Osgood Mason, also the patron of painter Miguel Covarrubias and author Langston Hughes.

In one way or another, all of Miss Hurston’s major works stem from her anthropological interests and investigations. While engaged in research in 1929, for example, she had the idea for her first book, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, the actual writing of which, however, she did not begin until the autumn of 1933, when the J. B. Lippincott Company—impressed by her short story, “The Gilded Six-Bits,” which was sent to *Story* by Robert Wunsch of the Rollins College faculty and subsequently printed in the August, 1933, issue of that periodical—inquired if she had a full-length book for publication. Completed in about three months, dedicated to Wunsch, and containing an introduction by Miss Hurst, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* was planned as a protest against the race-conscious productions of the Negro Renascence. In this connection the author states:

... What I wanted to tell was a story about a man, and from what I had read and heard, Negroes were supposed to write about the Race Problem. I was and am thoroughly sick of the subject. My interest lies in what makes a man or woman do such-and-such, regardless of his color. It seemed to me that human beings I met reacted pretty much the same to the same stimuli. Different idioms, yes. Circumstances and conditions having power to influence, yes. Inherent difference, no.6

Revealing Miss Hurston’s capacity for appropriating folklore to the purpose of fiction and having its setting in Alabama and Florida, *Jonah’s Gourd Vine* presents as the leading character John Buddy Pearson,6 the illegitimate son of a white man and a Negro woman. Unjustly governed by his black stepfather, Pearson goes “over de Big Creek” to the planta-

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3“Two Women in Particular,” a chapter in *Dust Tracks on a Road*, treats Miss Hurston’s friendship with Fannie Hurst and Ethel Waters. Also see Miss Hurston’s article, “Fannie Hurst,” in *The Saturday Review of Literature* for October 9, 1937.

4*Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 176.

5Ibid., p. 214.

6Pearson was probably suggested by the author’s father, John Hurston, Ibid., pp. 20 ff.
tion of a white boss who remembers the youth's mother as "a well-built-up girl and a splendid hoe-hand" and cannot "see why she married that darky and let him drag her around sharecropping." Given employment, Pearson becomes a valuable worker and the husband of an intelligent girl named Lucy. A series of illicit affairs finally results, however, in a brawl which forces Pearson to flee in order to escape punishment. Eventually settling in Eatonville, Pearson sends for Lucy, and, largely through her wise counsel, becomes a property-owner, a successful preacher, and mayor. Called to the pastorship of the largest church in Sanford, he succeeds and eventually becomes a Baptist moderator; but his continued marital unfaithfulness hastens the death of his wife. An unfortunate marriage with a slut leads precipitately to a divorce trial whose repercussions force Pearson to give up his church. Going to Plant City, the disgraced minister marries a prosperous and respectable widow who guides him to the pastorship of a large church; but an incontinent escapade with an Eatonville strumpet provokes him to such all-consuming self-condemnation that he drives headlong into a moving train and meets instant death.

Because of her ability to penetrate what Dr. Boas has termed "that affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the white observer," Miss Hurston produces in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* a more intimately wrought transcript of folk life than that rendered in the South Carolina plantation fiction of Julia Peterkin. Convincing are Miss Hurston's descriptions of railroad camps with their "hammer-muscling men, singers, dancers, liars, fighters, bluffers, and lovers"; of the Northward surge of dark people during the World War period; and of Negro churches with their emotional religion and corrupt politics. Competently handled are the peculiar idiom of cotton-country speech and "them big old lies" of the folk. Less expertly done are the construction of plot, the management of characterization, and the analysis of social problems. Racial difficulties, which exist in real life no matter how much the author might choose to minimize and avoid them, never disturb the even tenor of the action; and the Negro peons of the *milieu* are resigned to exploitation and oppression. Andrew Burris, therefore, is reasonably correct in his observation that in *Jonah's Gourd Vine* Miss Hurston uses "her characters and the various situations created for them as mere pegs upon which to hang their dialect and folk-ways."

Miss Hurston's second novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, wherein the author confessedly "tried to embalm all the tenderness of [her] passion" for a lover in New York City, not only displays a gift for handling folk material but also shows a somewhat better grasp of character development and social realism. Janie, an attractive octoroon born out of  

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7Lucy was probably suggested by the author's mother, Lucy Ann Potts Hurston. *Ibid.*
wedlock, is the heroine of the story. After marrying an elderly farmer in order to please her grandmother, she impulsively deserts him and elopes with Joe Starks to the all-colored town of Eatonville. Here Starks, who is a born go-getter, becomes landlord, storekeeper, and mayor, but develops such an absorption in self that he loses the affection of his wife. After Starks' death Janie is wooed and won by Tea Cake, a happy-go-lucky gambler and itinerant worker with whom she finds love and happiness. Together they enjoy an adventurous life until Tea Cake, bitten by a mad dog during a Lake Okeechobee hurricane, contracts hydrophobia. Forced to kill her maddened husband in order to save her own life, Janie is exonerated and returns to Eatonville.

In addition to painting graphic pictures of town life in Eatonville, gambling dives in Jacksonville, and bean-picking communities in the Everglades, Their Eyes Were Watching God mirrors more effectively than does Jonah's Gourd Vine the social tension of the Southern scene. Effectively rooting her narrative in the past, Miss Hurston recounts how Janie's slave grandmother, having borne a child by her master, fled from his vengeful wife. The Lake Okeechobee hurricane episode, like Richard Wright's "Down by the Riverside" in Uncle Tom's Children (1938), illustrates that prejudice thrives even in times of disaster. During the fierce storm, for example, whites preempt elevated points and afterwards bury their dead individually in pine boxes but order Negro fatalities to be dumped wholesale into pits.

Their Eyes Were Watching God also provides a brief study of intra-racial color prejudice. Mrs. Turner, a disciple of Nordicism whom Janie meets in the Everglades, brings to mind Olivia Cary of Jessie Fauset's Comedy American Style (1933). Possessing Caucasian features, she idolizes these traits in others and despises Negroid characteristics. Viewing intermixture with horror, she thinks that light-skinned colored people should first seek union with whites or, if this is impossible, should establish a separate and distinct mulatto caste. She admires her brother, who considers Booker T. Washington a "white folks' nigger." Disregarding snubs and mistreatment, she grovels before whiteness and simultaneously subjects dark folk to insult and humiliation.

Mules and Men, Miss Hurston's second book to be published but actually her first to be written,9 received the following enthusiastic comment from Lewis Gannett in The New York Herald Tribune for October 11, 1935: "I can't remember anything better since Uncle Remus." Dedicated to Annie Nathan Meyer and containing an introduction by Dr. Boas as well as ten illustrations by Covarrubias, this volume is chiefly a collection of the folk tales of Florida Negroes and of the formulae and para-

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9See Dust Tracks on a Road, pp. 216-217.
phernalia of Louisiana hoodoo practitioners. To collect the material for *Mules and Men*, Miss Hurston freely mingled with folk of her native Florida and submitted to rites of various hoodoo cults in Louisiana. Dr. Boas complimented not only the unique ability of the author to enter "the homely life of the Southern Negro as one of them" but also the importance of her findings to scholarship dealing with the transplantation, conflict, and fusion of cultures:

To the student of cultural history the material presented is valuable not only by giving the Negro's reaction to everyday events, to his emotional life, his humor and passions, but it throws into relief also the peculiar amalgamation of African and European tradition which is so important for understanding historically the character of American Negro life, with its strong African background in the West Indies, the importance of which diminishes with increasing distance from the South.\(^10\)

In *Tell My Horse*\(^11\)—dedicated to Carl Van Vechten, who is called "God's image of a friend"—Miss Hurston extends her investigations to the West Indies, where she studies Jamaican folklore and Haitian voodoo, politics, and personalities. She relates that her greatest thrill in assembling the material for the volume "was coming face to face with a Zombie and photographing her."\(^12\) Some of the chapters of *Tell My Horse* discuss rather superficially the history and modern social problems of the milieu, but the book is primarily of interest to the student of folklore.

*Moses: Man of the Mountain*, Miss Hurston's fifth book, is a full-length fictionized biography of the Hebrew leader who was earlier mentioned in *Mules and Men* as the first and greatest voodoo man.\(^13\) This work stresses those phases of the Mosaic legend which have appealed to Negroes who accept the ancient lawgiver "as the fountain of mystic powers." Though presenting rich folk materials and admirably revealing slave psychology, *Moses: Man of the Mountain* is deficient as a biography in at least three major ways. In the first place, modern colloquial speech is ill-suited to the action and characters of the story. Secondly, the characterization, as Dr. Locke observes, is "caricature instead of portraiture."\(^14\) Thirdly, Mosaic law and philosophy are not studied so competently as in earlier studies of the Hebrew emancipator by such scholars as Ahad Ha'am, Sigmund Freud, Louis Untermeyer, and Edmond Fleg. As Philip Slomovitz notes, the book "is weak in its interpretation of the ethical contributions of the prophet and in its treatment of the code of laws handed down by him."\(^15\)

\(^10\) *Mules and Men*, p. 7.
\(^11\) Published in London by J. M. Dent and Sons under the title, *Voodoo Gods: An Inquiry into Native Myths and Magic in Jamaica and Haiti*.
\(^12\) See *Dust Tracks on a Road*, p. 213. The experience is treated at length in *Tell My Horse*, pp. 189-209.
Dust Tracks on a Road, Miss Hurston’s most recent publication, is just as deficient as an autobiography as Moses: Man of the Mountain is as a biography. In this work the author, looking at the world through rose-colored glasses and adopting the success-story technique, outlines her life from her humble birth in Eatonville to her ultimate emergence as a well-known novelist and folklorist. In her struggle for employment and education she passed through an interesting period of vagrancy and hardship, but her experiences evidently did more to develop her capacity for sentimental hero-worship than to sharpen her powers of social understanding. As a matter of fact, Dust Tracks on a Road fails in at least two major ways: first, in self-portraiture, and, second, in re-creation of the times during which the author lived. In other words, we are not aware, as Sainte-Beuve expresses it, that the veil is torn away and that we are reading the bare soul; furthermore, we are not cognizant of the ability of the author to reproduce the spirit of the stirring years through which she has come. In her autobiography Miss Hurston had a rare opportunity to give a first-hand view of the Negro Renascence; but, unlike Langston Hughes in The Big Sea, she manifested greater concern for smart witticisms and inconsequential gossip. In so far as the author’s treatment of racial problems in Dust Tracks on a Road is concerned, Arna Bontemps states her procedure quite succinctly: “Miss Hurston deals very simply with the more serious aspects of Negro life in America—she ignores them.” Of course, Miss Hurston has clearly defined her position in this matter:

I hate to talk about race problems. I am a writer, and leave sociological problems to sociologists, who know more about them than I do.

While we concede that racial issues are not always pleasant topics, we cannot accept Miss Hurston’s distaste for them as a valid excuse for her failure to give a realistic and well-rounded representation of her milieu.

In general Miss Hurston’s stories and articles, written at intervals throughout her career, present on a smaller scale the same themes, interests, and techniques which are to be found in her full-length books. Passing reference has already been made to her early tales in Opportunity and to “The Gilded Six-Bits,” a contribution to Story. Other narratives include “Possum or Pig?” which appeared in Forum for September, 1926, and “Story in Harlem Slang,” which was published in The American Mercury for July, 1942. Among Miss Hurston’s articles the more noteworthy are “Cudjo’s Own Story of the Last African Slaver,” which was included in The Journal of Negro History for October, 1927, and “Dance Songs and Tales from the Bahamas” and “Hoodoo in America,” which appeared in The Journal of American Folk-lore for July, 1930, and Octo-

16This statement, which is an excerpt from Miss Hurston’s contention that she had been misquoted by reporter Douglas Gilbert of The New York World-Telegram, may be found in The Atlanta Daily World for March 3, 1943. According to Gilbert, Miss Hurston declared that the Jim-Crow system works.
ber, 1931, respectively. Perhaps the most valuable of these articles is
that which describes the life and customs of a community near Mobile,
Alabama, composed mainly of Negroes who are the direct descendants
of the last African slaves smuggled into the United States in 1859. For
this study, which was sponsored jointly by the American Folk-lore Society
and the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History, the author
received valuable information from Cudjo Lewis, the sole survivor of
this last cargo.

In conclusion, Miss Hurston’s major works represent a unique amal-
gam of folklore and fiction. In her folklore Miss Hurston practices
but little of the scientific method and manifests only a slight inclination
to trace her materials to their sources and analogues: she rather colors
her findings with her own impressionistic reactions and writes about them
much in the manner of an over-enthusiastic tourist. In her novels and
short stories she is generally more interested in folklore, folkways, and
dialect than in prose style, plot construction, character development, and
social realism. As a result, her fiction lacks the literary finish, the struc-
tural craftsmanship, the psychological penetration, and the understanding
of life which distinguish the chefs d’oeuvre of the masters. At the same
time, however, Miss Hurston, more successfully than any other American
writer, has imitated the quaint idiom of dark people in the rural South-
est and exhibited the treasure-trove of literary material available in
Negro folkways and folklore.

Ernest Everett Just

[Reprinted by permission from the Journal of Nervous and Mental Diseases,
February, 1943]

In the death of Professor Just, America has lost one of the stalwarts
of its science and the world one of the most brilliant and original experi-
mental biologists of the present century. Though Professor Just’s special
field was cytology and he never contributed a single line to psychiatry,
the results of his experimental work carry a far-reaching message to us,
especially in giving experimentally supported evidence of the tremendous
influences that environment has on constitution. Modern genetics has em-
phasized the primary role which the chromosomes and genes play in
heredity, virtually ignoring the activities of the cytoplasm; but it remained
for Professor Just, by synthesizing a vast amount of experimental data,
to show the immense importance that the cytoplasm-ectoplasm and the
external environment play in the workings of chromosomes and genes. As
a research scientist he had boundless enthusiasm for his chosen field, but
it was a quiet rather than explosive enthusiasm. He was no Jelliffe or
Osler to produce several hundred contributions and titles, nothing volcanic