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Recommended Citation

Miller, Lana J. (2014) "One School Year with Zora Neale Hurston: A September - June Timeline Unit for K - 8 Schools," *The Journal of Traditions & Beliefs*: Vol. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://engagedscholarship.csuohio.edu/jtb/vol4/iss1/8>

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One School Year with Zora Neale Hurston A September – June Timeline Unit for K – 8 Schools

Lana J. Miller

Zora Neale Hurston was a great writer whose best-known book is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Unfortunately, it was not until I attended Cleveland State University's 2012 International Interdisciplinary Academic Conference and Teacher Workshop, Watching God and Reading Hurston, that I really took a close look at this multi-faceted woman and at all of her intriguing works. Hurston was not only a great author; she was also a singer, songwriter, instrumentalist, teacher and much more. I discovered that she had many other works, not just novels, but writings in several different styles and genres.

During this conference, it occurred to me that everyone should know about Zora Neale Hurston, not just her books but also her life story. Furthermore, they should not wait until they are adults to acquire this knowledge. That is why I decided to design a unit about Zora Neale Hurston for K-8 schools.

Most students in K-8 schools should have some degree of familiarity with timelines, so I chose this format for my unit. Unlike the creators of many traditional timelines, I will be using the months of the year –rather than specific dates—to introduce the students to Zora Neale Hurston; her life and her writings.

Although many of her topics were complicated, controversial and not appropriate for young readers, I was pleasantly surprised to find, during my post-conference research, that several children's books have been written about Zora Neale Hurston. In addition, many of the folktales that she collected from the Gulf States have been adapted into children's books.

There is a big push for the use of The Accelerated Reading Program (AR) in most schools and I was happy to find a substantial list of AR books by and about Zora Neale Hurston. These books have reading and vocabulary practice quizzes and are on the level of the students for whom this unit is designed. In The Accelerated Reading Program, Zora Neale Hurston's book, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is leveled at 5.6, meaning that any student reading at or above this level should comprehend this book and pass the quiz with a score of 90% or better. Some Accelerated Reading quizzes have recorded questions. When AR books are read aloud to younger students, test questions may also be read aloud. Unfortunately, none of the Zora Neale Hurston AR books have this feature.

To get the full effect of Zora Neale Hurston's books, however, I believe that children should read the books themselves AND hear them read aloud. Fortunately, there are recordings of many of her works, and I am encouraging their use along with other forms of oral reading in this unit.

Listening to an audio recording of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was very helpful to me. Actress Ruby Dee's delivery of the text was commendable, and hearing her helped me gain a better understanding of the characters, the setting, and the general mood of the story. I am convinced that listening to this story on CD also enhanced my comprehension, and I believe that listening to this story and other stories by Zora Neale Hurston will do the same for the K-8 students.

This is a whole school project and I am sure that everyone involved will benefit from their participation in it. A large wall or a showcase in the main entrance hallway should be used to display the timeline. Feel free to add to this timeline as you see fit. There were many other events that took place during the months that are listed on the timeline. I just wanted to make sure that I included a few for each month that school is in session. Collaborate with others in the building to make the display around the timeline as attractive and as educational as possible. The display may change throughout the year but the timeline should stay up until the end of the school year. Everyone who enters the building will learn something new about Zora Neale Hurston.

I also suggest that there be a copy of the timeline posted in every room by opening day. This not only includes classrooms but also the main office, the lunchroom, the custodian's office, etc. This will let the students know that everyone is a part of this learning experience. Below are some suggested activities and lessons for each month. I am sure that you will come up with other ideas once you begin your study of this extremely gifted writer and storyteller.

The main objective of this unit is that the students will grow in their understanding and appreciation of the works of Zora Neale Hurston

September: *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published (1937)

Zora's mother dies (1906)

- So that student become familiar with Zora, have a passage read from *Zora Neale Hurston: Writer and Storyteller* over the Public Address system of the school each day until the book is complete.
- Encourage students to design a new cover for the book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. Have a contest to decide the best cover and display them in the hallway or in the showcase.
- Discuss with the children how they think Zora felt when her mother died.
- Upper grades may choose to read or have read to them *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.

October: *Tell My Horse* was published (1938)

Zora was sent to school in Jacksonville Florida (1905)

- Upper grades may read or have read to them excerpts from *Tell My Horse*, *Every Tongue Got to Confess* or *Their Eyes Were Watching God*.
- Lower grades may read or have read to them, one of Zora's stories from, *What's the Hurry Fox? And Other Animal Stories*, *The Three Witches*, *The Skull Talks Back and Other Haunting Tales*, *Lies and Other Tall Tales*, or *The Six Fools*.
- Discuss why Zora was sent away to school and the importance of education in her life.

- November: Autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, published (1942)
- Upper grades may read or have read to them *Dust Tracks on a Road*.
 - Lower grades may write a simple autobiography about themselves. They may also read from or have read to them, one of the books listed in Oct.
- December: Collaborates with Dorothy Waring to write a musical comedy “Polk County” (1944)
- Discuss importance of collaboration
 - Discuss musical comedies
 - Upper grades – discuss satire. They may also read from or have read to them, one of the books listed in Oct.
 - Lower grades – discuss jokes and riddles. They may also read from or have read to them, one of the books listed in Oct.
- January: Zora was born Jan. 7, 1891 & Died Jan. 28, 1960
- Upper grades: Discuss what was happening in the South during the time that Zora was born. They may also read from or have read to them, one of the books listed in Oct.
 - Lower grades: Discuss other famous African – Americans who were born in January. They may also read from or have read to them, one of the books listed in Oct.
- February: Zora left New York to collect folklore in the South (1927)
- Discussion: What is Folklore?
 - Share some stories from a Hurston folklore collection.
- March: Zora was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to study Obeah practices in the West Indies (1936)
- Discussion – What is a Guggenheim Fellowship?
 - Discussion – What are Obeah practices?
 - Continue reading and listening to Hurston’s works.
- April: Zora publishes “What White Publishers Won’t Print” in the Saturday Evening Post (1950)
- Upper grades – read and discuss the article. They may also read from or have read to them, one of the books listed in Oct.
 - Lower grades – write an article about Zora Neale Hurston for a fictional newspaper. They may also read from or have read to them, one of the books listed in Oct.
- May: Zora marries Herbert Sheen (1927)
- Upper grades – discuss all three of Zora’s marriages and why they didn’t last. Look at a timeline of her life and see what she was doing immediately before and after each marriage. Ask the question: Do you

think that Zora's work took priority over her marriages or can their briefness be blamed on some other factors?

- Lower grades – Look at the timeline of Zora's life. Make a timeline of your own life. Include what you think you will be doing 5 – 10 – 15 & 20 years from now. Discuss - Will you go to college? Will you get married? Where will you live? Etc.
- The students should be near completion of their reading or listening to the works of Zora Neale Hurston that are listed throughout this unit.

June: Zora graduates from Morgan Academy High School (1918)

- Discussion Questions: How old will you be when you graduate from high school? How old was Zora? Do you plan to go to college? What colleges did Zora attend? Did you know that Zora's high school was a part of the Historically Black, Morgan State University? How do you think Zora's education enhanced her life?

As a culminating activity, I suggest that there be a whole school assembly where each grade can demonstrate through reading, drama, dance, or music, what they have learned throughout their school year with Zora Neale Hurston.

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