



Every Tongue Got to Confess

By Zora Neale Hurston
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Introduction Storytelling is an essential element of many cultural traditions -- especially those that have had to carve their identities in an unfriendly setting and struggle to hold their communities together. The African-American storytelling tradition is one of the strongest, yet this astonishing collection of African-American folk tales has lingered in archival obscurity for decades -- until now. In the late 1920s, with the support of Franz Boas of Columbia University, a circle of friends that included members of the Harlem Renaissance, and a wealthy patron named Charlotte Osgood Mason, Zora Neale Hurston set out to collect the folk tales of the rural south. Travelling from Florida to Alabama to Georgia and Louisiana, Hurston spoke with men and women, young and old, domestics and mine workers, housewives and jailbirds, collecting their tales word for word. She wanted to preserve a language that was unique, pure, and lasting. "I have tried to be as exact as possible. Keep to the exact dialect as closely as I could, having the story teller to tell it to me word for word as I write. This after it has been told to me off hand until I know it myself. But the writing down from the lips is to insure the correct dialect and wording so that I shall not let myself creep in unconsciously." (from the Introduction by Carla Kaplan, p. xxvii) The result of Hurston's travels is this unique and extensive

volume of nearly five hundred African-American folk tales grouped in categories ranging from God Tales to Devil Tales, from John and Massa Tales to Heaven Tales and School Tales. The stories poignantly capture the colorful, pain-filled, and sometimes magical world that surrounded them, revealing attitudes about faith, love, family, slavery, race, and community. Yet the tales are laced with humor from which no one is spared. In one story God is accused of mistaking a white man for a Negro; in another, a watermelon is so large that when it bursts it floods the river and drowns the townsfolk; and in yet another, the devil tries to make a field of cabbage like God has done, but he can't quite get it right and ends up with a field of tobacco. Hurston's determination to capture the authentic language of "the Negro farthest down" (xxvi) is a vital contribution to African-American letters. These folktales were not just Zora Neale Hurston's first love; they paved the way for generations of African-American writers, preserving a language whose poetry thrives to this day.

Questions for Discussion

1. The oral tradition is extremely important -- in fact, for many cultures it is the only way of passing on traditions, beliefs, stories, etc. How has modern life infringed upon or altered this tradition? In the media age, does oral tradition have a place in literature?
2. Many contemporary African-American authors found inspiration in Zora Neale Hurston's work. In reading these folktales, are you able to recognize their influence? And if so, can you think of any particular authors whose style recalls Hurston's?
3. What does the oral tradition lose in the translation to the written word? Do you think that Hurston succeeds in being true to the stories and storytellers in her rendering of these tales? What sort of images do you conjure about the tellers themselves?
4. Do you agree with John Edgar Wideman that "translation destroys and displaces as much as it restores and renders available" (p. xvi)? Discuss how this premise manifests itself in this collection.
5. In the Foreword, John Edgar Wideman draws a connection between African-American oral tradition, jazz, and hip hop. Do you agree with him that Zora Neale Hurston began a trend the cultural impact of which even she could not foresee?
6. In a letter to Langston Hughes, Hurston writes, "I am leaving the story material almost untouched. I have only tampered with it where the storyteller was not clear. I know it is going to read different, but that is the glory of the thing, don't you think?" (xxviii) Discuss the balancing act Hurston had to negotiate between the free flowing storytelling tradition of the rural south and her more formal academic training.
7. In her introduction, Carla Kaplan suggests that if Hurston had published this volume of folktales during her lifetime it may have "derailed" her career as a novelist. Do you agree? How do you think it would have affected her career? How would it have affected our perception of African-American literature?
8. Do you feel that the exactness of the dialect in Hurston's transcriptions -- a dialect that can often be difficult to read -- contributes to the value of these folktales as a historical document? Discuss the pros and cons of reading the folktales in the dialect they were spoken.
9. The title of this collection -- *Every Tongue Got to Confess* -- came from one of the Folktales, but Hurston didn't choose it. Do you think it sums up the essence of the collection? If so, how? And if not, what are some of the other titles you would propose?
10. Discuss your favorite tales in this collection. What is it about these particular stories that you especially liked?

About the Author: Zora Neale Hurston was born in Notasulga, Alabama, on January 7, 1891, the fifth child of John Hurston (farmer, carpenter, and Baptist preacher) and Lucy Ann Potts (school teacher). The author of numerous books, including *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, *Jonah's Gourd Vine*, *Mules and Men*, and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Hurston was a novelist, anthropologist, outspoken essayist, lecturer, and theatrical producer. Hurston's finest work of fiction appeared at a time when artistic and political statements-- whether single sentences or book-length fictions--were peculiarly conflated. Many works of fiction were informed by purely political motives; political pronouncements frequently appeared in polished literary prose. And Hurston's own political statements, relating to racial issues or addressing national politics, did not ingratiate her with her black male contemporaries. The outcome of the controversy was bitter for Hurston, with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* going out of print after an initial burst of commercial success and remaining out of print for nearly thirty years. It was only through the determined efforts of Alice Walker, Robert Hemenway (Hurston's biographer), Toni Cade Bambara, and other writers and scholars in the 1970s that all of her books are now back in print and that she has taken her rightful place in the pantheon of American authors.