

Zora Neale Hurston: Folklore and Hoodoo



*Zora Neale Hurston beating the hountar, or mama drum, 1937
Book jacket to "Mules and Men," 1935*

Zora Neale Hurston (1891 - 1960) was a novelist, folklorist and anthropologist of African-American life. Throughout her career, she wrote extensively on the subject of hoodoo, a blend of folklore, spirituality, and conjuring native to the Deep South. Later in life, Hurston wrote a weekly column entitled "Hoodoo and Black Magic" that ran from 1957 - 1959 in the Fort Pierce Chronicle, a Florida newspaper. The following is an excerpt from her 1935 novel Mules and Men.

I was glad when somebody told me, "You may go and collect Negro folklore."

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.

I had spent a year in gathering and culling over folktales. I loved it, but I had to bear in mind that there was a limit to the money to be spent on the project, and as yet, had done nothing about hoodoo.

So I slept a night, and the next morning I headed my toenails toward Louisiana and New Orleans in particular. New Orleans is now and has ever been the hoodoo capital of America. Great names in rites that vie with those of Haiti in deeds that keep alive the powers of Africa Hoodoo, or Voodoo, as pronounced by the whites, is burning with flame in America with all the intensity of a suppressed religion. It has its thousands of secret adherents.

Nobody knows for sure how many thousands in America are warmed by the fire of hoodoo, because the worship is bound in secrecy. It is not the accepted theology of the Nation and so believers conceal their faith. Brother from sister, husband from wife. Nobody can say where it begins or ends. Mouths don't empty themselves unless the ears are sympathetic and knowing.