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ZORA AND ME

VICTORIA BOND
and
T. R. SIMON

ABOUT THE BOOK

Whether she's telling the truth or stretching it, Zora Neale Hurston is a riveting storyteller. Her latest creation is a shape-shifting gator man who lurks in the marshes, waiting to steal human souls. But when boastful Sonny Wrapped loses a wrestling match with an elusive gator named Ghost — and a man is found murdered by the railroad tracks soon after — young Zora's tales of a mythical evil creature take on an ominous and far more complicated complexion, jeopardizing the peace and security of an entire town and forcing three children to come to terms with the dual-edged power of pretending. Zora's best friend, Carrie, narrates this coming-of-age story set in the Eden-like town of Eatonville, Florida, where justice isn't merely an exercise in retribution, but a testimony to the power of community, love, and pride.

A fictionalization of the early years of a literary giant, this astonishing novel is the first project ever to be endorsed by the Zora Neale Hurston Trust that was not authored by Hurston herself. It includes an annotated bibliography of the works of Zora Neale Hurston, a short biography of the author, and a timeline of her life.



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Who is the narrator of this novel? What do you know about her? Talk about her relationship with Zora. Why do you think the authors wanted to tell the story from her point of view?
2. Think about the first time we see Zora as a storyteller. What is so special about the way that she tells the story of Mr. Pendar transformed into a half gator (page 8)? Explain what the narrator means when she says that Zora turns the story of Sonny's death "into a storied pearl" (page 5).
3. The narrator talks about the difference between a true story and a made-up one. She says, "Just because something's good listening doesn't necessarily make it true" (page 12). Think about your own experience. Have you ever been in a situation where a story was stretched to make it more interesting? Tell your story to a partner and discuss which parts are true and which are exaggerated.
4. In chapter five, the narrator says, "That's how Zora saw things. Everything in the world had a soul" (page 26). What does having a soul mean to Zora? Think about something you see every day. Describe the soul or essence of that thing.
5. Who is Ivory? What is special about the children's encounter with him?
6. How does Joe Clarke respond when Zora tells him about Mr. Pendar? What insight does this give the reader about Mr. Pendar's character?
7. Joe Clarke is very upset when he hears about Ivory. What do we learn later about his relationship with Ivory?
8. What is a *pall*? What does it mean that a pall had "fallen on the whole town" (page 63)?
9. In chapter ten, Mr. Hurston is preparing to go to Orlando to preach for a week. During the family dinner the night before his trip, he promises each one of his children a gift. What does Zora say when it is her turn to tell her father what she wants? Describe Mr. Hurston's response to Zora. How does Zora react when Mr. Hurston asks her if she thinks she is white? What does being white mean to Mr. Hurston?
10. What is the difference between a daddy's girl and a mama's girl according to Carrie? What do you think Zora expects of herself?
11. In chapter thirteen, Zora and Carrie meet Gold. How do they describe her? What is their reaction to her? Who is the man with Gold? Mrs. Hurston says about Gold, "She best be careful about being too friendly with people she gave up her place with" (page 85). What does this mean to you?
12. Who is Snidlets? Describe the relationship between Mr. Ambrose and Zora. Why would this be considered an uncommon relationship in Eatonville during the early 1900s? Discuss Mr. Ambrose's use of the word *niggers* (page 97). Do you think Mr. Ambrose is a racist? Why or why not?
13. The narrator says, "Zora's story about Mr. Pendar wasn't a lie. It was her way of making things make sense" (page 99). How does Zora defend her story during recess? How do Stella and Hennie respond?



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14. What does Mr. Ambrose give to Zora? His note says, "*Knowledge unties knots*" (page 102). What do you think this means? Write about a time in your life when knowledge untied knots.
 15. Discuss the significance of songs in this novel. How do they support the events in the story?
 16. The children believe that they may have freed Ivory's soul, but they still don't know what killed him. What do they find out about Ivory and Gold that helps them put the puzzle together?
 17. Throughout the novel, people talk about knowing who they are. When Mr. Hurston asks Zora if she thinks she's white, Mrs. Hurston says, "Everyone at this table knows who they are" (page 66). Later in the novel, Joe Clarke says, "Gold don't know who she is and don't nobody else know, either" (page 130). What does it mean to know who you are? What does this tell you about the racial politics of the time? Do you feel people look at race the same way today? Why or why not?
 18. As the story unravels, Zora says, "Every time I try to explain to myself what probably happened, what really happened outgrows my explanation" (page 133). Has this ever happened to you? How did you resolve the situation?
 19. How does Carrie feel when she realizes there was no gator king?
 20. Why does Ivory's death rock Carrie "like an earthquake" (page 135)? Discuss Carrie's feelings about her own father's disappearance.
 21. What are "white lies" according to Zora? How do white lies relate to the motto of Eatonville? Discuss places in the novel where people tell white lies. Why do they do it?
 22. Gold says, "Mama said fooling white folks wasn't a sin if it brought us what we needed" (page 141). Is this the same as the "white lie" that Carrie talked about before? Why or why not? Zora asks Gold why she would want to be like white folks. What do you think of Gold's answer?
 23. Gold and Ivory never get to see each other in this novel. What do you think they would say to each other if they did meet?
 24. Zora and Carrie come to a conclusion about what happened to Ivory. What is their conclusion? How do they think it relates to skin color?
 25. The narrator compares Gold and Mr. Pendir. What do they have in common? Explain how each character deals with fear.
 26. Carrie says that Eatonville is her destiny. What does she mean by this? Zora went on to travel and live in new places. How does this bring people who have never set foot in Eatonville closer to the town?
 27. Carrie learns that reality is not necessarily the same as the truth. She still feels that the world of the gator king is true even though it is not real. What does this say about seeing the world through a child's eyes?
 28. In the epilogue, what biblical reference do the authors use to explain the knowledge that Carrie and Zora gain? How is the outcome different from the one in the Bible?
 29. How does the safety and security that Zora, Carrie, and Teddy feel inside Eatonville compare to other portrayals of African-American children's lives on TV, in movies, or in books?
- For more activities and information about the authors and Eatonville visit www.ZoraAndMe.com



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❧ ABOUT VICTORIA BOND ❧ AND T. R. SIMON

Victoria Bond and T. R. Simon met ten years ago while working together in publishing and became fast friends. After kicking around the idea of a writing collaboration for years, the notion of a novel for young readers about Zora Neale Hurston emerged, and both knew they had stumbled into the project of their dreams. Excited and humbled by the opportunity to expose young readers to a seminal figure in twentieth-century American letters, they discovered that Hurston's life as both field anthropologist and writer custom-fit their own backgrounds. T. R. (Tanya) Simon has an MA in anthropology, while Victoria Bond holds an MFA in creative writing.

To prepare for the writing of this book, Simon and Bond read everything Zora Neale Hurston ever wrote. Bond says, "Hurston's autobiography *Dust Tracks on the Road* and Valerie Boyd's *Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston* gave me the greatest sense of Zora's character in terms of how her childhood shaped her as a folklorist, novelist, and anthropologist."

Simon and Bond feel the experience of their collaborative effort helped them grow as writers. Taking this artistic journey together also deepened their appreciation for the power of hometowns. Eatonville, Florida, Hurston's childhood home and the home of her imagination "was the impetus for everything Zora did," notes Simon, who grew up living all over the world. Bond, who grew up in East Orange, NJ, notes, "Home is truly hallowed ground." Both Bond and Simon now live in New York.

This guide was written by Taunya Nesin, a school publishing editor based in Washington, D.C.



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