

# Q & A with **T. R. SIMON**

## **How do the maturing Carrie and Zora see the world differently as they approach their teens?**

In book two of the Zora and Me trilogy, Zora and Carrie are now twelve going on thirteen. Although they are still children, they have encountered the sorrow of death along with the pride and joy that life in Eatonville affords them. What begins to alter them now is a slowly growing awareness of the past. While Eatonville could seem idyllic, tucked away from the daily brutality of the Jim Crow South, it is not free from the shadow of American history, particularly from the history of slavery. The history of slavery is a hard thing for young people because it requires them to confront the brutality of hate and the despair of powerlessness. Zora and Carrie grapple with the conflicted feelings that learning about Eatonville's history brings up while simultaneously realizing that life is necessarily, for good and for bad, informed by the past.

## **Why did you choose to tell this book with dual narratives?**

I struggled with how to powerfully connect the fact of Jim Crow to the institution of slavery. Ultimately, I decided that the most effective way to do that was to show them side by side. Reconstruction was the attempt of newly freed slaves to enact self-determination, and Jim Crow was a formalization of the backlash to Reconstruction. If you don't understand how slavery operated and the ideas of race that made slavery go, you can't understand Jim Crow as the logical social extension of that violently inhumane practice.

## **Zora and Carrie make assumptions about the reclusive and enigmatic Mr. Polk and Old Lady Bronson that end up being pretty off base. What can young readers learn from the girls' tendencies to jump to their own conclusions?**

The mind always wants to fill in narrative blanks. For Zora, this always leads to an exciting story, and Carrie inevitably gets pulled into that story. In this case, two people they've known their whole lives, Old Lady Bronson and Mr. Polk, suddenly appear to them in a very different light. They are not the distant adults whose odd ways are part of the town's quirky fabric, but people whose past contains a mystery. Suddenly Zora and Carrie find that, instead of looking at them from the outside, they

are trying to get inside their thoughts and understand their actions. That is always the point at which objectification ends and human empathy begins. We can't really know another person until we are willing to learn and understand their story. *Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground* is about how much a person's story, otherwise known as their history, can change what you understand about them, yourself, and the world around you.

**What research did you do for this novel?**

For the parts on slavery, I read scholarly histories and dozens of slave narratives, as well as novels about slavery. In some respects, the backstory for the slave section came easily. As a child, I lived in the Dominican Republic, and I still have vivid memories of running rings around lime trees hung with wasp nests and swimming with my mother out into the deep blue ocean waters. As an adult studying anthropology, I was joyful that Zora Neale Hurston chose to do ethnographic work on an island that was so dear to me. In this way, I began to wonder how her fascination with travel and the Caribbean might have been ignited in childhood.

**By pure coincidence, 2018 will see the release of *Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground* as well as a never before published work from Zora Neale Hurston herself. How do you feel about reading more of her work? How do you hope it will further connect young readers with the *Zora and Me* novels?**

I am thrilled that new Zora work is being made available! Although most widely known for her fiction, Zora was a formal intellectual of great magnitude; she is one of our most compelling and culturally precise chroniclers of the black American experience. Her new book, *Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo,"* about Cudjo Lewis, the last survivor of the Atlantic slave trade, will be a significant contribution to the field of historical anthropology. I'm also excited because *Barracoon* segues beautifully with young Zora learning about the horrors and complexities of slavery and wanting to bring that history to light.

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