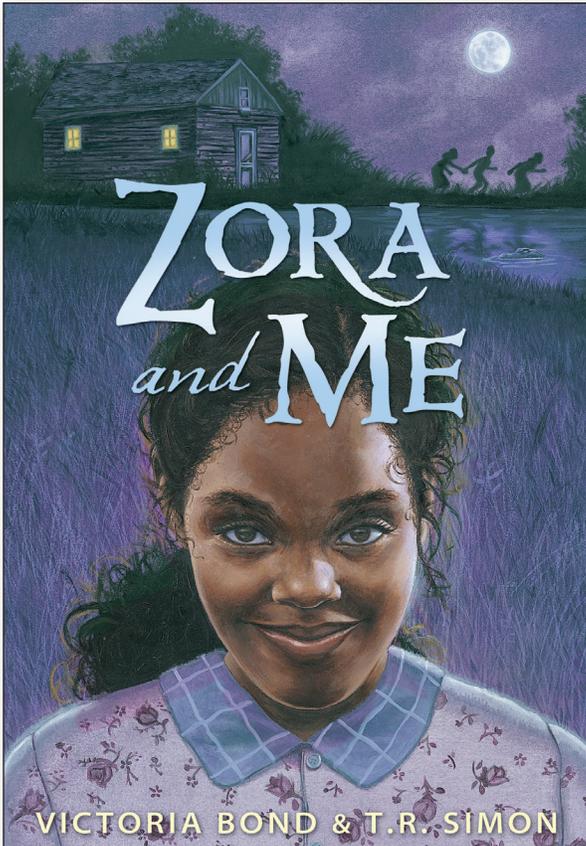


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# ZORA AND ME

BY VICTORIA BOND AND T. R. SIMON



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Racial duplicity threatens an idyllic African-American community in the turn-of-the-century South in a dazzling debut inspired by the early life of Zora Neale Hurston.

Whether she's telling the truth or stretching it, young 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—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 written 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.

**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 writing a young adult novel 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.

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# Behind the Scenes with the Authors



Photo credit: Robert Burnett, Jr.

*Why did you choose to write the book together, and how did your tandem efforts play out, in terms of both time and style?*

**Victoria:** For years Tanya and I had kicked around the idea of working on a project together, but nothing ever gelled. When Tanya came up with the idea of Zora as a kind of “girl detective,” she graciously shared her idea and a skeletal plotline with me, and we began going back and forth, filling in and refining the details of the story. Our writing process was a continuation of this: we passed the manuscript back and forth, sometimes after one of us had held and worked on it for months. Though I did make edits in terms of plot and character development, I think of the *story* of *Zora and Me* as Tanya’s, while the *voice* of the novel is mine.

**Tanya:** I came up with the idea for *Zora and Me* while I was pregnant with my daughter four years ago. I had jotted down some notes and then set them aside to do small things like give birth and learn to parent. When my daughter turned one, my memory of the book idea was jogged, and I thought, *Hey, that’s something I’d still really like to do!* But the more I contemplated it, the more it seemed the project needed two brains, and the only other brain I could work with belonged to Vicky, my best friend. She took about a minute to say yes, and that’s the last time it was my idea alone. Everything after that has been the two of us in it together.

*What research did you do before and during your writing that helped to frame the characters and setting?*

**Victoria:** Hurston’s autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, and Valerie Boyd’s biography, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, gave me the greatest sense of Zora’s character in terms of how her childhood shaped her as a folklorist, novelist, and anthropologist. In terms of imagining the Eatonville of Hurston’s childhood, Hurston’s short stories and *Jonah’s Gourd Vine*, a novel inspired by the courtship and marriage of her parents, brought Eatonville fully to life for me. The short story that helped me most fully see Zora as a girl was her own “Drenched in Light,” about an irrepressible child named Isis. It’s clear to me that Isis represents how Hurston viewed herself as a child, and I always kept that in mind as we shaped the character of Zora.

**Tanya:** Basically we read everything Zora Neale Hurston wrote. So much of Zora’s work is anthropological, so her “field” is everything human, and everything she writes about is rooted in her lived experience growing up in central Florida and, later, traveling around the U.S. and the world. Our book reflects that perspective. We place our fictional Zora very much in the world that the real Zora described having growing up in. Her Joe Clarke is our Joe Clarke; her actual relationships with her mother, father, and siblings are reflected in the way we depict young Zora’s relationships in the novel. We’re also very honest about the racial politics in America at the time.

*What was the best surprise or most unexpected feeling or truth that resulted while writing Zora and Me?*

**Victoria:** As I wrote about how much Carrie and Zora love Eatonville, my own understanding deepened of how profoundly I have been shaped by my hometown of East Orange, New Jersey. Home is truly hallowed ground.



Also, working with Tanya I came to an understanding of how friendships and, more broadly, partnerships can constitute a *home*—at once a place to stand and a place to build out from. Through this entire process we have been a foundation for each other, while also pushing each other and our work to be emblematic of much more than the place we started from. *Zora and Me* is the result of a journey we took together.

**Tanya:** I realized something very personal in the writing of this book. I had always thought writing was a solitary endeavor, and, to some extent, it is. However, art at its best is collaborative, and writing with Vicky has made me realize how important collaboration and the exchange of ideas are to me and my artistic process. I'm stronger for having had my ideas interrogated and shot down, and, oddly enough, I'm never more invigorated than when I realize I've done something too facile. I love the challenge of working with someone else and having to live up to their standards as well as to my own.

One of the most surprising things that occurred while we were writing was how much I was channeling my young self. I realize now that it's still very alive and a strong force within me. A particular joy that comes with writing for children is the knowledge that you are writing for everyone, because everyone still carries the child he or she once was. Zora carried Eatonville inside herself consciously throughout her entire life. Ultimately, there is no escaping our earliest and most formative experiences. Understanding that has really deepened my understanding of repetition compulsion and how primal it is in all of us. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, we use memory as the ruby slippers that take us home. The journey home isn't always happy, but if we can't own where we came from, we won't get very far beyond that place.

*How were you able to secure the endorsement of the Zora Neale Hurston Trust, the first ever such acknowledgment for a book not written by Hurston herself?*

**Tanya:** We are fortunate to know the lovely Victoria Sanders, the literary agent who represents the Zora Neale Hurston estate. She liked our novel, agreed to share it with the estate, and ultimately represented us. It all unfolded so smoothly that it is, in retrospect, shocking.

## Three Quick Questions:

*Who is your favorite book protagonist?*

**Victoria:** Jane Eyre. She's a survivor of childhood trauma who trusts in her own self-worth and resilience. Also, by not flinching at the chance in her adult life to give and receive love and kindness, she doesn't repeat the cycle of abuse she endured.

**Tanya:** Heathcliff. He's dark, tortured and vengeful, yet despite the profound abuse of his childhood, he's capable of loving and helpless to stop loving the one person who suspends his existential loneliness.

*What is your favorite word or phrase?*

**Victoria:** "Life for me ain't been no crystal stair."  
—Langston Hughes, "Mother to Son"

**Tanya:** "Zounds! Sink me, dear!" —*The Scarlet Pimpernel*

*If you weren't an author, what would you would be?*

**Victoria:** A teacher. Probably of the blind.

**Tanya:** A suburban therapist with Danish modern office furniture and a signed copy of *Civilization and Its Discontents* proudly displayed on my teak sideboard.

