Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 29
Zora Neale Hurston

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast, I'm Susan Stone. The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women both overlooked and iconic who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling onstage here in Berlin and beyond. Dead Ladies Show co-founder Katy Derbyshire is here to help me tell you stuff. Happy New Year, Katy!

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Hello, Susan. Happy New Year!

SUSAN STONE: We have a great talk for everybody today, and it is our first full-length feature highlighting a Floridian -- like myself -- unlike myself, she's a great dead lady, a revered author and anthropologist, and more. It's Zora Neale Hurston! And Katy, who is presenting Zora for us?

KATY DERBYSHIRE: So it's Fatin Abbas, who is a writer and a scholar. He also teaches at Bard College Berlin. Fatin was born in Sudan, and she grew up in the US. She has won many writing prizes and residencies, and her journalism and essays have been published internationally. We're all looking forward to her first novel called "The Interventionists," which is forthcoming from W.W. Norton. So here she is from the stage of Berlin's ACUD.

FATIN ABBAS ON TAPE: Thank you for having me, Florian and Katy, and everybody who is involved in putting together this wonderful series of presentations on dead ladies. Today I will be speaking about the great Zora Neale Hurston, a writer of the Harlem Renaissance who was also an anthropologist.

She's important for many reasons, among them that she she was a huge inspiration for for many women writers and particularly African American women writers like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison. Alice Walker actually rediscovered and marked Zora Neale Hurston's grave about 15 years after Hurston had died and had been lost to obscurity.

I should mention quickly that if you want to get an overview of Zora's life, I would recommend these two books: "Wrapped in Rainbows: the Life of Zora Neale Hurston" by Valerie Boyd and Zora's own autobiography, "Dust Tracks on a Road," which were very helpful in sort of reconstructing her life for this presentation.

Anyway, Zora is extraordinary, not only for the books that she left behind, but also because like many of the fabulous ladies presented on this show, she

lived such a fearless and adventurous life. All the more impressive, given that she was an African American woman, born at the turn of the 20th century in the deep South of the United States of America. And she dealt with difficult circumstances throughout her life, but her beginnings were actually quite idyllic.

She was born in 1891 in Alabama. Her father was a very poor sharecropper. But he was very ambitious, and looking for a place in which he could fulfill his ambitions. He moved his young family to a town in Florida called Eatonville. And Eatonville was a very unusual place for the time. It was the first Black incorporated towns in America. And what this means is that it was a town that was established and occupied exclusively by African Americans. So the town's residents were Black, the city government was Black. The mayor was Black, no women on the city council, shame on them. And given that this was the deep South and in the 1800s this is quite an amazing achievement, obviously.

And growing up in this town meant that Zora really had a childhood where she was sheltered from the Jim Crow racism of the South. She loved Eatonville, which would go on to become a huge inspiration to her work; a lot of her later on fictional work is set in the town. And you get a sense of her love of the place when she describes it in one of her books as: "the city of five lakes, three croquet courts, 300 brown skins 300 good swimmers, plenty guavas, two schools and no jailhouse." (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Her father became a Baptist preacher, and he was known in the area as ‘God's Battle Axe.' (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

But 'God's Battle Axe' was no match for his very young daughter, Zora, who actually he did not like very much. He thought she was too sassy and too spirited. But Zora wasn't afraid of her dad, so when she was a very young girl, she had this fantasy of traveling to the end of the world, but she needed a way to get there. And it happened that shortly before Christmas that year, her father John Hurston asks his eight children what they want Santa Claus to bring them for Christmas. And Zora's siblings all want very simple things. Her older brothers wants baseball outfits, her younger brothers want air rifles, her big sister wants shoes.

And then John Hurston asks his youngest daughter what she wants, and she answers, "I want a fine black riding horse with white leather saddle and bridles." "You what?" Papa gasps. "What was that you said?" "I said, I want a black saddle horse with..." "A saddle horse!" Papa exploded. "It's a sin and a shame. Let me tell you something right now, my young lady, you ain't white! Riding horse. Always trying to wear the big hat. I don't know how you got in this family, no how! You ain't like none of the rest of my youngins. "If I can't have no riding horse, I don't want nothing at all," I said stubbornly with my mouth. But inside I was sucking sorrow. My longed-for journey looked impossible."

So here you you get a sense of Zora as as a young girl, but this kind of idyllic childhood comes to a very sad end with the death of her mother, when she's 13 years old. This is a huge, huge blow to Zora, who's closest to her mother. Within five months, moreover, her father remarries, a woman who's only six years older than Zora. The new wife basically becomes this evil stepmother, and turns John Hurston against his children. And Zora clashes with her so violently that they have this huge fight one day when she's 16, and she actually tries to kill her stepmother, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) and gets very close to it, but is stopped by her father.

Needless to say that this marks the end of her relationship with her father. And she leaves the house at the age of 16, and then spends the next 10 years basically living with relatives, with neighbors, taking on menial jobs, such as working as a maid, and really struggling with poverty, and with no support from her father. And her two big ambitions are to finish her high school degree which was interrupted by her mother's death, and to travel, but she has she just doesn't have the money to do either.

But at the age of 24, she gets a job with a traveling theater troupe, working as a lady's maid for the lead singer. The theater company's all white, they're all Northerners, and this is the first time she's really in close contact with White people. But she's generally treated quite well, relatively speaking. And they love the stories that she tells about her Southern hometown and her Southern dialect and so on. And best of all, she gets to travel all over the country with the theater troupe. So she begins to see more of the world that she's always wanted to do.

But, after two years with the troupe, she again finds herself jobless, ends up in Baltimore struggling to earn a living, and she really, really wants to finish high school, but she just doesn't have the money to go. And at the age of 26, she's way beyond the age at which she can qualify for free public schooling. So at this point in 1917, she decides to do something really radical. She decides to drop 10 years from her age in order to qualify for free public schooling. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

So overnight, she goes from being a 26- year-old woman to posing as a 16-year-old teenager. And indeed, as a 16-year-old, she enrolled in high school, none of her classmates suspect that she's 10 years older than them, the teachers too have absolutely no idea. The fact that she looks much younger than her, her age also helps. And so from this year -- from 1917 onwards -- for the rest of her life, Zora would always present herself as at least 10 years younger than what she actually was, including in her autobiography. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) So there's a lot of omission in her autobiography.

But this is a key moment in her story, because it was really the year that she took charge of her life and her own future by completely reinventing herself. She was determined to pursue her ambitions of education and travel, and this

was just the way to do it. Zora finishes high school, she goes off to Howard University in Washington DC, which is one of the few Black colleges in the US and the most prestigious institution of higher education for African Americans in the country. And that's where she begins writing her first poetry and short stories.

It so happens that Charles S. Johnson was an important figure in the Harlem Renaissance, in terms of initiating this movement of Black arts through a journal that he established. He comes across a story of Zora's, and he's really impressed. He encourages her to move to New York to pursue a literary career.

At this point, Zora has again run out of money, and can't register for another semester at Howard. So in fact, in 1925, she gets on a train to New York and lands in the city with a dollar and 50 cents in her pocket. But she finds a place to live, and she's, she's sort of really happy to be in Harlem, she, she falls in love with it. It's the most happening place in the country, it's the capital of Black America. She meets and friends many of the writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance, who would become sort of pillars of the Harlem Renaissance.

So here you see her with the poet Langston Hughes, is probably the most famous figure from that period. And also Jessie Fauset, the writer. She meets Countee Cullen, and others. And she loves to party, so she was often attending what were called rent parties. In Harlem, rents were very expensive in the neighborhood, often a Black family's paying 40% more rent for the same type of apartment that a White family was occupying. Why? Because landlords knew that African Americans couldn't leave their neighborhoods to live elsewhere. They were basically trapped in the Black neighborhoods, and so they took advantage of this by raising the rents. So people in Harlem would throw house parties, and charge 20-30 cents at the door and just fundraise to pay their rent. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

So Zora was doing the rounds at these rent parties all over the neighborhood. She also begins taking coursework at Columbia with Franz Boas, who's the most illustrious anthropologist in the country. He's this German-born American anthropologist who establishes the first department of anthropology in the US at Columbia. And Zora loves Papa Franz, as she calls him, and he's very impressed by her, and encourages her to pursue a career in anthropology.

For her first assignment, anthropological assignment, she decides to measure the skulls of Harlemites to disprove theories of racial inferiority. So she goes around Harlem, measuring people's skulls -- heads. And Langston Hughes kind of recalling this, describes it in a funny way, he says, "Almost nobody else could stop the average Harlemite on Lenox Avenue and measure his head with a strange-looking anthropological device and not get bawled out for the

attempt, except Zora, who used to stop anyone who's head looked interesting and measure it." (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

Zora gets deeper into anthropology, and graduates from Barnard in 1927. So here you see photos of her, still sort of, kind of, with 10 years off her age, and embarks on these long years of fieldwork in the South, which is good because the Wall Street Crash happens in 1929. And then the Great Depression hits, everyone is doing badly. And overnight, basically the Harlem Renaissance comes to an end. So Zora takes off to the South.

She first travels to Florida, to collect African American folklore on a fellowship that Franz Boaz secures for, and she buys this crappy second-hand car which she's named Sassy Susie, and drives all over the place. She also collects footage in the South, this is some of the footage that she shot and, and sort of records folk songs and so on. And of course, as a black woman on her own in the Jim Crow South, she has to be very, very careful. So she travels -- she carries a pistol with her wherever she goes. But her attitude sort of towards the kind of racism that she has to navigate is quite interesting. She sort of doesn't let it stop her. So in one essay that she writes called "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," she sort of talks about this. And she writes, "Sometimes I feel discriminated against, but it does not make me angry. It merely astonishes me. How can any deny themselves the pleasure of my company, it's beyond me." (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

So after Florida, Zora goes off to New Orleans to study Hoodoo, not Voodoo, which is the African American variant of Voodoo. And she spends time with -- a lot of time with Hoodoo doctors and participates in a number of initiation ceremonies, including one where she has to lie naked on a rattlesnake skin for three days without food, just a jug of water by her hand. For another initiation rite she actually has to hunt a black cat, throw it alive in boiling water -- poor cat -- and then eat it and suck on the bones, which she actually does. (AUDIENCE GROANS)

During this time, she also interviewed this man, called Cudjoe Lewis or Kossola Oluale, who's the last survivor of the last known slave ship to leave the African continent carrying human cargo in 1859, on a slave ship by the name of the Clotilde. And so she sort of spends a lot of time with Kossola, who's very hard to get to, to talk, to open up at first, but she actually gets him to recount all of these memories of the Middle Passage, the last person to -- surviving to have survived the Middle Passage. But the book isn't published during her lifetime because the publishers thinks the dialect that she uses to record his speech is too strong, and, and that sort of readers won't take to it. However, as it happens, just last year, her sort of research, her interviews with Kossola, were published in the book "Barracoon: The Story of the Last "Black Cargo," so that's actually recently been released.

Soon after her fieldwork in the South, Zora's first books begin appearing. So her first book, "Jonah's Gourd Vine," which is based on her parents' marriage and their life in Eatonville, is published in 1933. And then in 1935, she publishes "Mules and Men," which is kind of a combination of her fieldwork, collecting African American folklore in the South. And both are sort of big hits with critics. She's beginning to make a name for herself as a writer and anthropologist, she's also putting on theatre performances based on African American folk songs and folklore she's collected but even though they're sort of big hit with critics and audiences, they're always financial flops.

Then in 1936, Zora gets a Guggenheim Fellowship to study Voodoo in the Caribbean. And so that year, she sets sail for Jamaica, where she spends months at first living in a Maroon settlement in the mountains of Jamaica. The Maroons were these former slaves who escaped slave plantations by the sea, down on sea level, and fled to the mountains of Jamaica, where they set up these free communes, and they remain there even after the end of slavery. So Zora spends months living with the Maroons, interviewing them and learning about them. Then she ends up in Haiti.

At the beginning of her trip there, she writes, "Their Eyes Were Watching God," partly as a way to come to terms with the end of this love affair, a very passionate love affair she's had in Harlem, with a man called Percival McGuire Punter -- much younger than her. The affair has ended, she's gone up to Haiti, and she kind of writes this book, and the main character of "Their Eyes Were Watching God," is Teacake, which is probably the best name for romantic hero of a novel. Teacake is partly based on Punter. So she finishes the novel in seven weeks, (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) and sends it off to her publisher, and then becomes immersed in studying Voodoo.

But during her fieldwork, she's she's sort of warned off by people, she's told, “Be careful asking too many questions, because you might get in trouble.” And in fact, she becomes convinced that she's been fixed when she falls extremely ill for two weeks, so ill that she can barely leave the house, her bed, and then decides that okay, it's probably time to leave Haiti, and that she sort of -- it's it's, yeah, it's the end of it. But one of the key moments of the research is this photograph that Zora took right here.

This is the first photograph ever taken of a zombie. It was taken by Zora Neale Hurston. It's of a woman who died, according to her family, and had been buried, and then showed up at her brother's house and knocked on the door. And the family's terrified, they brought her to the hospital and Zora was there to take the picture. And here is Zora speaking about zombies in Haiti for a radio interview.

ZORA NEALE HURSTON ON TAPE: Well, a zombie is supposed to be the living dead. People who die and are resurrected, but without their souls, and they can take orders, and they're supposed to be -- never to be tired, and to

do what the Master says, without cease, and without being tired. I naturally, it would be futile for me to attempt to try to explain everything. I do know that people have been resurrected in Haiti. I do not believe that they were actually dead. I believe it was suspended animation. And since there is no embalming there, it's possible, and since people are not buried below ground, they have the above-ground vaults as they do in New Orleans. And they take corpses out. It's been proven, there've been cases proven where folks have been dead, folks thought they were done fore, and months later, somebody finds them somewhere in some hidden place, actually alive but without their minds.

FATIN ABBAS: Okay, zombies! (LAUGHS) So Zora goes back to the US, she's involved in a second divorce. I haven't mentioned that she's been married a couple of times. She will be married a third time, but basically, she always abandons her husbands and often her lovers, because she's sort of afraid of being trapped by marriage and children like her mother had been. So she gets involved, gets married and then would run off to do field work and then eventually get a divorce, and that would be that. But by this point, in sort of, in spite of this divorce happening in the background, she's this established author, having published "Their Eyes Were Watching God;" "Tell my Horse;" "Man of the Mountain;" and then later in 1942, "Dust Tracks on a Road," which is her autobiography.

But then scandal hits, just as her third novel, "Seraph on the Suwanee," which is actually a novel sort of about poor Whites in the South — but just as this is coming out, the 10-year-old son of a former landlady of hers accuses Zora and other adults of sexually molesting him and his friends in the basement of Harlem building. Now, the story is completely made up. Zora was not in the country when these events were supposed to have happened. The boy had gotten in trouble with his mother for sort of sex play with friends. And then he sort of starts blaming all of these adults that he knows. A trial begins, and even though it's supposed to be kept secret, someone leaks the charges against her to the press, and this becomes a huge scandal. She gets written about in the papers as a pervert, as a child molester. And even though the boys take back their story, and the charges are dropped, Zora is devastated, and enters into a deep depression.

She leaves New York, settles permanently in Florida, and finding herself again facing money troubles, in 1950 she takes a job as a maid for a White couple in Miami. The woman who's employing her accidentally discovers that Zora is in fact a famous author when she comes across one of her stories in a literary journal. And again, Zora finds herself in the news. This time, the newspapers are writing about how this accomplished, lauded author is working as a housemaid in Florida. But Zora takes this in stride and eventually gets a job as a journalist, and continues writing fiction.

But her books are sort of rejected by publishers, which may have to do with this this scandal that was all over the news, or it may be because by this point,

her health is deteriorating, and she's just not writing as well. She's around 60 at this time, but officially again, at least on paper, she's 50. So she settles in the small town of Fort Pierce, with very little money, but is lucky to have a nice landlord who becomes friends with her, and basically lets her live for free when he realizes that she's sort of facing all of these money problems.

And on January 24, 1960, she dies of stroke in a welfare home. This is her second stroke, the first stroke had sort of landed her in this welfare home. And then she has a second stroke and dies. And there's no money even for a funeral. But her friends gather enough for her to have a funeral, but there's no headstone for her. And Zora's ending, of course, is often kind of taken to be quite tragic, but she ultimately lived the life that she wanted, although she was always sort of facing these material struggles, but as she told her friend who was also her landlord, this doctor, "I'm a genius. I can do only one thing. You're smart. You can make a living."

And her spirit and her attitude to sort of the ups and downs of her life can be summed up in this really beautiful quotation from her autobiography, which is also kind of based -- the image of the rainbows is based, taken from this African American folk song. "I have been in sorrow's kitchen and licked out all the pots. Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrapped in rainbows with a harp and a sword in my hands." Thank you very much. (APPLAUSE)

SUSAN STONE: Fatin Abbas on Zora Neale Hurston. Now, last week was possibly Zora Neale Hurston's birthday. I say ‘possibly,’ because as we heard from Fatin, Zora changed some of her biography here and there, so she may have been born January 7, or she may have been born January 15. But anyway, in honor of her possible birthday, there were a few stories and links popping up on social media. And one that I really liked that I want to share with you was story on LitHub. Actually it is from 2019, but it was recirculated. And it talks about how Zora was involved in the creation of the first realistic mass-produced Black baby doll.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Oh, yes. You see, I didn't read that, but I kind of was vaguely aware of this story existing.

SUSAN STONE: So this report pulls from an older article from the Florida Historical Quarterly -- go Florida -- and explains that from 1949 to 1951, Zora Neale Hurston worked with activists and researchers Black and White, including Eleanor Roosevelt, to bring what Zora called an "anthropologically correct" Black baby doll to the mass market. There were a few dolls around at that point and before, mostly made or imported by private groups, including churches, but there just weren't Black baby dolls available for purchase in toy stores. So I'm going to show you a picture of the doll, Katy. There she is. So there's a picture of the doll.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Oh, cute.

SUSAN STONE: She's really cute. She's called Sara Lee. It's got a great beautiful -- it's almost like a baptismal outfit, a beautiful lacey dress and hat and little shoes. Cute. So we'll have a pic of Sara Lee on our website also. And the group involved actually planned for a little family of four dolls, with different features, hair and skin colors. But in the end, Sara Lee was an only child, she was the only model produced. She was advertised, she was sold in the Sears catalog in 1951. And was the first commercial effort to bring African American children dolls that looked like them. Unfortunately, she was not quite a hit. That's partly due to the materials used by the toy company to manufacture the doll. And so production ceased in 1953. The next mass market African American doll didn't arrive until 1968. And that was Barbie's fashionable friend, Christie.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: Okay. We'll have photos and links for you to learn more about Zora at our website deadladiesshow.com/podcast. You can follow us on social media @deadladiesshow. And please share, rate, and review the show as it helps other people to find our podcast, too. Our theme song is "Little Lily Swing" by Tri-Tachyon.

SUSAN STONE: The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced and edited by me. Thanks to Fatin, to Florian, to Katy, and to all of you for joining us. I'm Susan Stone.

(Dead Ladies Show Music - ‘Little Lily Swing’ by Tri-Tachyon)

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