

## Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree

written by William Miller  
illustrated by Cornelius Van Wright and  
Ying-Hwa Hu

### About the Book

**Genre:** Nonfiction

**Format:** Paperback, \$10.95  
32 pages

**ISBN:** 9781880000335

**Reading Level:** Grade 3

**Interest Level:** Grades K-5

**Guided Reading Level:** R

**Spanish Guided Reading Level:** Q

**Accelerated Reader® Level/Points:**  
3.9/0.5

**Lexile™ Measure:** 540L

\*Reading level based on the ATOS Readability Formula

**Themes:** Biography, Dreams and Aspirations, Coping with Death, Breaking Gender Barriers, Childhood Experiences and Memories, Courage, Education, Identity, Self Esteem and Confidence, Mothers, Optimism and Hope, Overcoming Obstacles, Persistence and Grit, Pride, Women's history, African American history, United States history, African/African American Interest

**Resources on the web:**

[leeandlow.com/books/zora-hurston-and-the-chinaberry-tree](http://leeandlow.com/books/zora-hurston-and-the-chinaberry-tree)

[leeandlow.com/books/zora-hurston-y-el-arbol-sonador](http://leeandlow.com/books/zora-hurston-y-el-arbol-sonador)

### SYNOPSIS

Zora is full of dreams. From the top of the chinaberry tree, she dreams of living in the cities beyond the horizon. Her father thinks she should wear dresses and leave dreaming and tree-climbing to boys. But her mother teaches Zora that like each new branch of the chinaberry tree, dreams are always within reach.

Independent and full of spirit, Zora explores her hometown and listens to the stories of its people – stories her mother makes her promise to remember. But it isn't until Zora is faced with her mother's death that she realizes the importance of her promise. Based on autobiographical writings of the renowned African American writer Zora Neale Hurston, this is a story that will appeal to all readers who, like Zora, believe in their dreams.

All guided reading level placements may vary and are subject to revision. Teachers may adjust the assigned levels in accordance with their own evaluations.

## BACKGROUND

### From the Author

Zora Hurston was born in 1891. She grew up in Eatonville, Florida, the first all-black, incorporated town in America. At an early age, she was exposed to the rich oral tradition of her community: stories, songs, and folklore that celebrated African American life.

Hurston attended Howard University and Barnard College, where she studied anthropology. She traveled throughout the South recording the folktales of her people. She published these stories in a collection called *Mules and Men*. Hurston was also the author of many works of fiction. Her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, is a classic of African American literature.”—Author William Miller

### Additional Information

According to the official website of Zora Neale Hurston (<https://www.zoranealehurston.com/about/>), Zora Hurston published four novels, two books of folklore, an autobiography, numerous short stories, and several essays, articles and plays over a career spanning 30 years. Her mother championed her and her seven siblings, but her mother passed away when Zora was only 13 years old. Zora was part of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. For photos and more information about Zora Hurston's life and work, see <https://www.zoranealehurston.com/about/>.

### Recommended Profiles

- The University of Central Florida Zora Neale Hurston Digital Archive <https://chdr.cah.ucf.edu/hurstonarchive/>
- “Where to Start with Zora Neale Hurston” from New York Public Library <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2019/09/16/where-start-zora-neale-hurston>
- “A Society of One: Zora Neale Hurston, American Contrarian” from *The New Yorker* <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/1997/02/17/a-society-of-one>

## BEFORE READING

### Prereading Focus Questions

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 5 and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

Before introducing this book to students, you may wish to develop background knowledge and promote anticipation by posing questions such as the following:

- When kids dream about their futures, what might they imagine? What do you dream about for your future?
- Where might kids dream of their futures? Do you or anyone you know have a special spot where you go to think and dream?
- How can adults impact how kids feel about their future dreams? Give examples of how an adult can encourage a kid to reach for their dreams, or discourage them.

- What are some challenging events in kids' lives might make it hard to focus on their dreams? How might kids move past challenging events? Give real-life examples if you have them.
- Who in your life believes in you? What does this person mean to you and why?

### Exploring the Book

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strand 1; Craft & Structure, Strand 5; and Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 7)  
(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

- Talk about the title of the book. Then ask students what they think this book will most likely be about and whom the book might be about. What do they think might happen? What information do they think they might learn? What makes them think that?
- Take students on a book walk and draw attention to the following parts of the book: front and back covers, author/illustrator biography, title page, dedication, illustrations, and author's note.

### Setting a Purpose for Reading

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

Have students read to find out:

- what Zora Hurston's childhood was like
- the challenges Zora faced and how she responded
- why the chinaberry tree is special to Zora

Encourage students to consider why the author, William Miller, would want to share this story with young people.

## VOCABULARY

(Reading Standards, Craft & Structure, Strand 4)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1 and 2)

The story contains several content-specific and academic words and phrases that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary below.

Encourage a variety of strategies to support students' vocabulary acquisition: look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, create a specific action for each word, list synonyms and antonyms, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word. (Many of the Spanish words can be found in the book glossary, but there are also some that are not included. Students could be encouraged to create a log of these words—they will not be listed here.)

### Content Specific

chinaberry tree, horizon, bream, catfish, wagons, Bible, verses, Sunday school, checkers, campfires, John Henry, Africa, root doctor, snake oil, mustard salve, sparrow

### Academic

envy, recite, obey, worshipped, promise

## AFTER READING

### Discussion Questions

After students have read the book, use these or similar questions to generate discussion, enhance comprehension, and develop appreciation for the content. Encourage students to refer to passages and/or illustrations in the book to support their responses. **To build skills in close reading of a text, students should cite textual evidence with their answers.**

### Literal Comprehension

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1–3)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. Where is Zora's special place? What does she do there?
2. What does she see when she's in the chinaberry tree? What does it make her think about?
3. What does Zora's father tell her?
4. What does Zora's mother tell her?
5. What does Zora do at the town store?
6. What does Zora do at the campfires?
7. What happens to Zora's mother? How does Zora respond?
8. How do the adults try to take care of Zora's mother? What happens?
9. What does Zora see when she's climbing the chinaberry tree? What does she do? What does she see at the top?

### Extension/Higher Level Thinking

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 2 and 3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4 and 6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

1. Why do you think the Chinaberry tree is Zora's special place?
2. Why do you think going to the city is something Zora dreams about so much?
3. What does it mean to "watch with envy?" Of what is Zora envious?
4. How are the messages Zora receives from her father and her mother different?
5. Imagine the scene about Zora playing checkers. How do you think the men reacted when she first started asking questions? How do you think their responses changed over time? Imagine what they might be saying in the book illustration.
6. What does Zora learn at the campfires? Why do you think the author included this part of the story? (See the Interdisciplinary Activities section of this guide for more changes to explore this section of the book with students.)
7. What does Zora's mother tell her before she dies? What do you think she means by her messages?

8. How do you think Zora's mother's words might have influenced Zora's decision to become a writer as an adult?
9. How do the adults each react when Zora's mother dies? What can you infer about traditions for honoring the dead in Zora's community? How does Zora react to her mother's death? Why do you think she reacted this way?
10. What do you think "never stop climbing" means? What do you think it means to "always reach for the newborn sky, always jump at the morning sun?" What is Zora really promising her mother?
11. Why do you think the author, William Morrow, wrote this story? What ideas do you think she hopes readers will think about or discuss?

### Reader's Response

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4–6)

Use the following questions and writing activities to help students practice active reading and personalize their responses to the book. **Suggest that students respond in reader's response journals, essays, or oral discussion.** You may also want to set aside time for students to share and discuss their written work.

1. Draw Zora with one parent on each side of her. Include speech bubbles for each parent that show the messages they each gave to Zora. Include speech bubbles for Zora imagining what she'd say in response.
2. Draw a heart map for Zora. (For an explanation of heart maps and a template, see (<https://blog.heinemann.com/heart-mapping-at-home-meaningful-authentic-writing>)). What feelings, people, memories, places, things, or questions do you think would be in Zora's heart, based on the information shared in the text?
3. Why do you think Zora's mother encouraged her to climb the tree "one branch at a time?" Give examples from your life, another book character's, or someone you know, about how this advice can relate to achieving one's dreams.
4. Pretend you are Zora's friend. Write her a letter encouraging her to remember her dreams and to find a way to keep her promises to her mother.
5. What can you learn from Zora in this story? Write a promise to yourself, inspired by Zora's promises, and explain what you will do to keep this promise.

### ELL Teaching Activities

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1–3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 4–6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 4–6)

These strategies might be helpful to use with students who are English Language Learners.

1. Assign ELL students to partner-read the story with strong English readers/speakers. Students can alternate reading between pages, repeat passages after one another, or listen to the more fluent reader.
2. The Spanish version, *Zora Hurston y el árbol soñador* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/zora-hurston-y-el-arbol-sonador>) presents ample opportunity here to encourage students to

engage with both languages. Have one student read the English translation and one student read Spanish translation (if applicable in your classroom). Both students who are reading the translations should be biliterate in both English and Spanish. Ask students to compare their experiences. What was it like reading the story in English? What was it like reading the story in Spanish? Have students discuss the different translations and how they are similar/different.

3. Have each student write three questions about the story. Then let students pair up and discuss the answers to the questions.
4. Have students give a short talk about one of their dreams for their future. Brainstorm and discuss vocabulary related to goal-setting and practice putting sentences in the future tense.
5. The book contains some content-specific and academic words that may be unfamiliar to students. Based on students' prior knowledge, review some or all of the vocabulary. Expose English Language Learners to multiple vocabulary strategies. Have students make predictions about word meanings, look up and record word definitions from a dictionary, write the meaning of the word or phrase in their own words, draw a picture of the meaning of the word, list synonyms and antonyms, create an action for each word, and write a meaningful sentence that demonstrates the definition of the word.
6. Show students photographs or real items to help them understand the content-specific vocabulary in the story, such as a checkerboard, or photos of a campfire, horse-drawn wagon, chinaberry tree, sparrow, etc. Talk about how each item relates to the story.

### Social and Emotional Learning

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas & Details, Strands 1-3 and Craft & Structure, Strands 4-6)

(Speaking & Listening Standards, Comprehension & Collaboration, Strands 1-3 and Presentation of Knowledge & Ideas, Strand 4)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-2 and Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4-6)

(Language Standards, Vocabulary Acquisition & Use, Strands 6)

Social and emotional learning involves being aware of and regulating emotions for healthy development. In addition to understanding one's own feelings, strong socio-emotional development allows individuals to develop empathy for others and to establish and maintain relationships.

Use the following prompts to help students study the socio-emotional aspects of this book.

1. Flip through the pages of the book and focus on the characters' faces on each page. Describe how their faces look and name the emotions they convey. (You might also notice their body language.) Use sticky notes to label various emotions.
2. Discuss some of the strategies Zora uses to manage difficult feelings and situations, and particularly her grief over losing her mother (e.g., persistence, finding a peaceful place, remembering a loved one). Ask students, "How could these strategies help you in your own life? What other strategies could also be helpful?"
3. Discuss what it might have been like to be Zora's friend while her mother was sick and after she died. How might a friend have helped and encouraged Zora? Make a list of ways friends can help each other cope with challenges and achieve their dreams and display it in your classroom.



## INTERDISCIPLINARY ACTIVITIES

(Introduction to the Standards, page 7: Students who are college and career ready must be able to build strong content knowledge, value evidence, and use technology and digital media strategically and capably)

Use some of the following activities to help students integrate their reading experiences with other curriculum areas. These can also be used for extension activities, for advanced readers, and for building a home-school connection.

### English/Language Arts

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- Read other books that describe characters creating or finding their own special spaces, such as *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree* and *Amelia's Road* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/amelia-s-road>) or *A Space for Me* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/a-space-for-me>). What do the main characters of these books have in common? What are the creative ways the main characters come up with to have their own spaces? Why was their own space important and necessary for the main characters?
- Read other books about children chasing their dreams, despite facing opposition. Compare and contrast the characters' experiences in several different stories, such as *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree*, *Chasing the Moon: The Story of a Young Girl's Baseball Dream* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/catching-the-moon>), and *Hiromi's Hands* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/hiromi-s-hands>).
- Have an author study of William Miller with *Zora Hurston and the Chinaberry Tree* and some of his other books, including *The Bus Ride* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/the-bus-ride>) and *Frederick Douglass: The Last Day of Slavery* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/frederick-douglass>), *Joe Lewis: My Champion* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/joe-louis-my-champion>), *Night Golf* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/night-golf>), *The Piano* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/the-piano>), and *A House by the River* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/a-house-by-the-river>). Make connections between the texts. What themes do the books have in common? How are the characters and their experiences similar? How are they different? What do you think William Morrow's messages are to his readers across all the books? You might also share excerpts from this author interview with students: <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/zora-hurston-and-the-chinaberry-tree/interviews>.

## Social Studies, Geography & STEM

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- Have students research more about Zora Hurston's life and create a timeline of key events.
- Have students research the chinaberry tree. Find out what it looks like, and how tall it typically grows. Compare this height to something with which students are familiar, so they can imagine being that high and looking down onto the surrounding landscape.
- Use additional books and research to make a list of limitations placed on girls during Zora Hurston's time that no longer exist today.
- Learn about other artists who lived at Zora Hurston's time and were influential in the Harlem Renaissance. For instance, read *In Her Hands: The Story of Sculptor Augusta Savage* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/in-her-hands>), *Baby Flo: Florence Mills Lights Up the Stage* (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/baby-flo>), and *Love To Langston*, a collection of poems about the life of Langston Hughes (<https://www.leeandlow.com/books/love-to-langston>). Compare these artists' life experiences to Zora Hurston's.
- Help students learn more about the folklore and history referenced in the campfire scene of the book. For instance:
  - Read about the ballads that reference John Henry at <https://www.wpr.org/classic-folk-song-explores-anxiety-humans-vs-technology> and view a photo of the statue of him in Talcott, West Virginia.
  - Learn more about the Atlantic slave trade (<https://kids.britannica.com/students/article/Atlantic-slave-trade/602896>) and read briefly about how Zora Hurston documented the experience of a slave aboard a slave ship (<https://www.pbs.org/newshour/arts/poetry/how-zora-neale-hurston-captured-the-poetry-of-african-american-folklife>).
  - Have students research some of the great African cultures, such as the empires of Ghana, Mali, and Songhai, the forest kingdom of Benin, and the city states of East Africa, and present their findings to the class.

## Art, Media & Music

(Reading Standards, Key Ideas and Details, Strands 1–3, Craft and Structure, Strands 4–6, Integration of Knowledge & Ideas, Strands 7–9, Range of Reading of Text Complexity, Strand 10)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1–3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strands 4 and 6, Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7–9, and Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1–3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4–6)

- Have students use watercolors or tempera paints to create paintings of their mental images of Zora's view from the chinaberry tree, using text evidence to support their artistic decisions. Use online resources or field guides to look at photos of the plants and animals referenced in the text (chinaberry tree, bream, catfish, sparrow).



- Together on chart paper, sketch a sample portrait of Zora in her tree, with a large thought bubble above her head filled with images of her dreams for the future. Then, have students create their own portraits of themselves in a special place, dreaming of their futures.

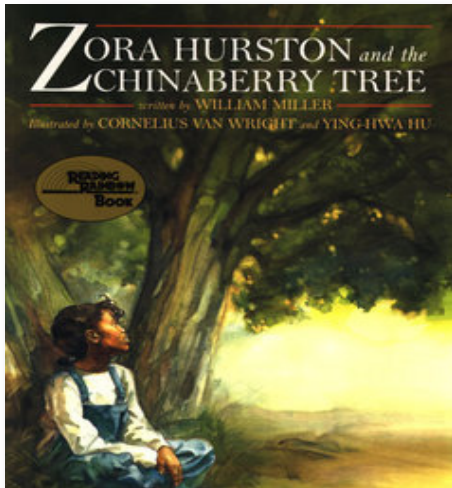
### School-Home Connection

(Reading Standards, Integration of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 7 and 9)

(Writing Standards, Text Types & Purposes, Strands 1-3, Production & Distribution of Writing, Strand 4, and Research to Build & Present Knowledge, Strands 7-9, Range of Writing, Strand 10)

(Speaking and Listening Standards, Comprehension and Collaboration, Strands 1-3, Presentation of Knowledge and Ideas, Strands 4-6)

- As a class, brainstorm questions for adults related to advice or messages their parents or other adults told them as children. Include questions about adults who encouraged them to reach for their dreams. Share responses at school and discuss connections among them, and connections to the text.
- Together, write a short blurb about how learning stories and traditions from her culture was important to Zora. Have students ask an older family or community member to tell them an important story or piece of history from their culture.
- Ask family members or other adult school community members to share names of their favorite authors. Choose some of the other notable authors to read about in class.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**William Miller** is the award-winning author of numerous books for children for Lee & Low. Mr. Miller lives in York, Pennsylvania, where he teaches African American literature and creative writing at York College. Read more about Mr. Miller's background in this interview: <https://www.leeandlow.com/books/zora-hurston-and-the-chinaberry-tree/interviews>.

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Cornelius Van Wright and Ying-Hwa Hu** are married and have illustrated dozens of award-winning books. Their illustrations have been praised by *Kirkus Reviews* as "bright, detailed and dynamic, vividly depicting . . . characters' facial features and personalities." Van Wright, a native New Yorker, and Hu, who was born in Taiwan, live in New York City.

### AWARDS

Reading Rainbow Selection –*PBS Kids*

Choices –*Cooperative Children's Book Center (CCBC)*

Pick of the List –*American Bookseller's Association*

## Ordering Information

### General Order Information:

[leeandlow.com/contact/ordering](https://www.leeandlow.com/contact/ordering)

### Secure Online Ordering:

[leeandlow.com/books/zora-hurston-and-the-chinaberry-tree](https://www.leeandlow.com/books/zora-hurston-and-the-chinaberry-tree)

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