

from How It Feels to Be Colored Me

by Zora Neale Hurston



ABOUT THE READING Zora Neale Hurston, is one of the most famous writers of the Harlem Renaissance.



As you read pay attention to the writer's tone and how it relates to the fearless, unselfconscious girl Hurston describes.

I am colored but I offer nothing in the way of **extenuating** circumstances except the fact that I am the only Negro in the United States whose grandfather on the mother's side was *not* an Indian chief.

I remember the very day that I became colored. Up to my thirteenth year I lived in the little Negro town of Eatonville, Florida. It is exclusively a colored town. The only white people I knew passed through the town going to or coming from Orlando. The native whites rode dusty horses, the Northern tourists chugged down the sandy village road in automobiles. The town knew the Southerners and never stopped cane chewing when they passed. But the Northerners were something else again. They were peered at cautiously from behind curtains by the timid. The more **venturesome** would come out on the porch to watch them go past and got just as much pleasure out of the tourists as the tourists got out of the village.

Source: *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr., editor; © Copyright 1997 W.W. Norton & Co., New York.

VOCABULARY

extenuating providing an excuse

venturesome adventurous

proscenium box private seats in a theatre, closest to the stage

Hurston writes that she remembers the day she became colored, meaning she remembers learning that being an African American in the United States meant being devalued.

Sugarcane, the plant from which sugar is produced, is flavorful to chew.

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat for me. My favorite place was atop the gate-post. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter. Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I usually spoke to them in passing. I'd wave at them and when they returned my salute, I would say something like this: "Howdy-do-well-I-thank-you-where-you-goin'?" Usually automobile or the horse paused at this, and after a queer exchange of compliments, I would probably "go a piece of the way" with them, as we say in farthest Florida. If one of my family happened to come to the front in time to see me, of course negotiations would be rudely broken off. But even so, it is clear that I was the first "welcome-to-our-state" Floridian, and I hope the Miami Chamber of Commerce will please take notice.

During this period, white people differed from colored to me only in that they rode through town and never lived there. They liked to hear me "speak pieces" and sing and wanted to see me dance . . . and gave me generously of their small silver for doing these things, which seemed strange to me for I wanted to do them so much that I needed bribing to stop. Only they didn't know it. The colored people gave no dimes. They deplored any joyful tendencies in me, but I was their Zora nevertheless. I belonged to them, to the nearby hotels, to the county—everybody's Zora.

But changes came in the family when I was thirteen, and I was sent to school in Jacksonville. I left Eatonville, the town of the oleanders, as Zora. When I disembarked from the river-boat at Jacksonville, she was no more. It seemed that I had suffered a sea change. I was not Zora of Orange County any more, I was now a little colored girl.

For Hurston, the front porch was like a choice theater seat for someone who loves to go to plays.

Hurston's open and friendly manner with the white tourists contrasts with the behavior of her family members, who were guarded and kept their distance.

Oleander is a poisonous, ever-green shrub.

WHAT DID YOU LEARN?

1. How was Hurston able to reach the age of 13 without realizing what it meant to be an African American in the United States?

2. Based on what you know about civil rights at the time, what probably happened to Hurston on her journey to Jacksonville?

3. **Make an Inference** What does Hurston mean by saying she experienced a “sea change” when she left Eatonville?
