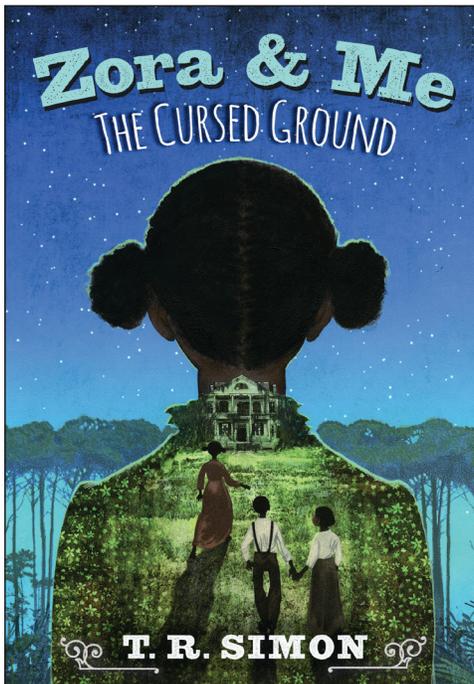


# Zora and Me: THE CURSED GROUND

**T. R. SIMON**

## ABOUT THE BOOK

When Zora Neale Hurston and her best friend, Carrie Brown, discover that the town mute can speak after all, they think they've uncovered a big secret. But Mr. Polk's silence is just one piece of a larger puzzle that stretches back half a century to the tragic story of an enslaved girl named Lucia. As Zora's curiosity leads a reluctant Carrie deeper into the mystery, the story unfolds through alternating narratives. Lucia's struggle for freedom resonates through the years, threatening the future of America's first incorporated black township—the hometown of author Zora Neale Hurston (1891–1960). In a riveting coming-of-age tale, award-winning author T. R. Simon champions the strength of a people to stand up for justice.



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

T. R. Simon is the coauthor, with Victoria Bond, of the John Steptoe New Talent Author Award winner *Zora and Me*. She holds a master's in anthropology and currently lives in Westchester County, New York.

### Common Core Connections

This discussion guide, which can be used with large or small groups, will help students meet several of the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) for English Language Arts. These include the reading literature standards for key ideas and details, craft and structure, and integration of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA.LITERACY.RL), as well as the speaking and listening standards for comprehension and collaboration and for presentation of knowledge and ideas (CCSS.ELA.Literacy.SL). Questions can also be used in writing prompts for independent work.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. An author can use a prologue to provide readers with background information at the beginning of a novel. Think about the prologue in *Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground*. What tone does it set? The narrator states, “The second kind of memory is rooted in the things you live with, the land you live on, the history of where you belong” (page I). Why is this type of memory important? How might this information relate to the theme of the story? Support your response with textual evidence. Can you think of an example from your own life aligned to both memory types? (CCSS: Reading: Literature: Craft and Structure: RL.6.6)
2. Using details from the story, explain how the friendship between Zora and Carrie develops. How do Carrie and Zora each respond to dangerous or challenging situations? What actions show that the girls support each other in times of difficulty? Throughout the novel, how do the girls support community members they consider friends?
3. Zora defines friendship as “equal parts loyalty and honesty” (page 23). Do you agree with that definition? Why? Does Carrie and Zora’s friendship highlight loyalty and honesty?
4. After the incident at Mr. Polk’s, should Zora and Carrie keep a secret with Old Lady Bronson? Why? What are possible alternatives to keeping the secret? As the novel progresses, examine how Zora’s and Carrie’s perspectives of Old Lady Bronson and Mr. Polk change. What misconceptions do the girls have about the two? Which events change those misconceptions?
5. In chapter three, Zora and Carrie find Teddy and explain what happened at Mr. Polk’s home. How does Zora’s description differ from the events described by the narrator (Carrie)? What aspects does Zora exaggerate during her account of the evening? Provide evidence from both descriptions in your response. How does Carrie’s point of view as the narrator develop throughout the text? (CCSS: Reading: Literature: Craft and Structure: RL.6.6)
6. In chapter four, Lucia states, “In that moment I learned to be a slave even with Prisca. To bottle up my feelings and my fears so that she did not unleash the force of her own power, a power she herself barely understood. The power to be a whole person, her whole self, while I was now forced to exist as a fraction of a human being, a slave with no rights to my own self” (page 65). What occurred to make Lucia feel like a fraction of a human being? How are Lucia and Prisca each treated at Westin? What privileges does Prisca possess? Do you think Prisca treats Lucia like a slave? Why? How does Prisca’s opinion of slavery change as the story develops?
7. There are many moments when Lucia thinks about her lessons from Mama Sezelle. Describe the relationship between the two. What lessons did Mama Sezelle teach Lucia before she arrived at Westin? How do those lessons and memories help Lucia survive? How are they each treated in their native land? Why is Lucia considered a slave in Westin, but not in her homeland? Use details from the story in your answer.

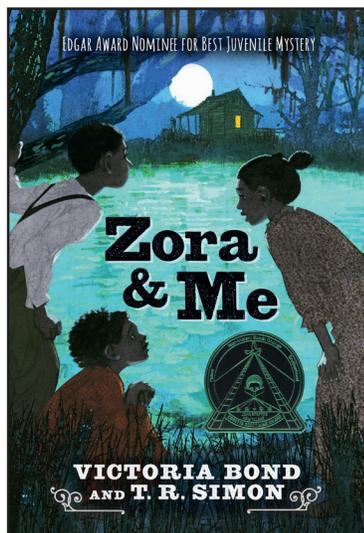


8. In chapter five, Lucia says, “The arrival of the moth was as arresting to Rebecca as it had been to me, but it did not frighten me as it did her” (page 71). Why doesn’t Lucia fear the moth? How does each character respond to the moth’s presence? What might the moth represent?
9. In chapter seven, Zora and Carrie each see something mysterious in the woods. Describe what they each notice as they are exploring. Why do you think their observations are different? Why doesn’t Carrie tell Zora everything? Make a prediction about why the imagery is significant to the story, using evidence to support your claims. (CCSS: Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.6.1)
10. When Lucia declares “I hate them” (page 126), what is Horatio’s response? What has caused Lucia to feel hatred? How does Horatio’s advice guide her at that moment and throughout the remainder of the novel? Do you agree with Horatio’s advice? Why? As you read, explain whether Lucia’s actions are aligned with hatred or love.
11. What makes Eatonville a unique town in 1903? How was it established? Why is property ownership important to its citizens? What is the problem that Mr. Clarke is facing? How do the perspectives of the town men differ regarding the problem and solution?
12. While reading the novel, it is very important to consider the laws in 1903. There are quotes throughout the story about the equity of the law and ownership. Mr. Ambrose states, “The law is reasonable when reasonable men practice it. But when it comes to color, there are very few reasonable men” (page 206). Do you agree? Is the problem the law or the individuals practicing the law? What suggests that Mr. Ambrose is reasonable? How does his character compare to other white men presented in the story? Can you think of any laws in our society today that seem unfair to some individuals or groups?
13. In chapter fifteen, Old Lady Bronson says, “The past is living in each one of us. Trying to push it down below remembering just makes it find another way through” (page 170). What does this quote mean literally and figuratively about dealing with the past? How is the past related to the current situation in Eatonville? In your opinion, why would someone want to forget the past? (CCSS: Reading: Literature: Craft and Structure: RL.6.4)
14. Why is it difficult for Carrie to imagine an Eatonville with slavery? Can you think of places with a history of oppression or symbols of past racism? Using details from the novel, explain why is it important for people to know and understand history. The narrator says, “Zora was right: history wasn’t just something you read in a book. It was everything your life stood on. We who thought we were free from the past were still living it out” (page 174). Do you agree with this quote? Why?



15. How does the dual narrative in the novel provide clues about the plot of the story? In your opinion, does this narrative structure make the story more interesting? Why? Explain how the narratives merge by the end of the story. During the progression of the novel, what clues did you notice to connect the narratives?
16. The theme of a story is the message that the author wants to convey through the characters and/or events. What is the theme or central message of *Zora and Me: The Cursed Ground*? In your own words, provide a concise summary of the novel. Does the theme from the text relate to another novel you have read? How? (CCSS: Reading: Literature: Key Ideas and Details: RL.6.2)
17. This novel is the second book in the Zora and Me series. Think about how the characters and story developed in the previous novel. What is similar about this novel? What is different? How do the events in each book change Zora's and Carrie's perspectives? How do the girls' actions improve their community? What adventure do you think Zora and Carrie should take next? Why?
18. What types of things do families and communities pass on through generations? What have family and/or community members passed down to you? Think about this quote: "However much we were each other's future, we were irrevocably one another's past" (page 250). How are the members of Eatonville part of one another's past and future?
19. Review the time line of Zora Neale Hurston's actual life at the end of the book. What similarities to the novel do you notice? Does the time line match anything that you have read from other sources about Zora Neale Hurston? Select one event from the time line to research using electronic and/or text-based sources.

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