

How It Feels to Be Colored Me

Zora Neale Hurston

BACKGROUND Between 1865 and 1900, more than 100 independent towns were founded by African Americans trying to escape racial prejudice. Eatonville, Florida, a small town just north of Orlando, was the oldest of these self-governing black communities. Growing up in Eatonville, Zora Neale Hurston was sheltered from the experiences of exclusion and contempt that shaped the lives of many African Americans. As you read this essay, think about how these early experiences influenced Hurston's opinions on race.

ANALYZE VISUALS

What words would you use to describe the girl in the painting? Identify the techniques or elements that lend her these qualities.

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. **A**

The front porch might seem a daring place for the rest of the town, but it was a gallery seat to me. My favorite place was atop the gate-post. Proscenium box for a born first-nighter.¹ Not only did I enjoy the show, but I didn't mind the actors knowing that I liked it. I actually 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-

extenuating

(ĕk-stĕn'yoō-a'tĭng) *adj.*
lessening the severity of
extenuate v.

A TONE

Describe the tone of lines 1–12. What does Hurston's tone reveal about the way she sees herself?

1. **proscenium . . . first-nighter:** A proscenium box is a box seat near the stage. A first-nighter is a person who attends the opening night of a performance.

Girl in a Red Dress (1934), Charles Alston. Oil on canvas, 71" x 55.9".
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