

Report from the Field:

An Interview with Valerie Boyd

On Wednesday, December 29, 2004, at approximately 11:55 a.m., N.Y. Nathiri began a telephone interview with Zora Neale Hurston biographer, Valerie Boyd. Her book, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, has received a warm reception from critics and the reading public alike.

NYN: As you have traveled the country over the past two years promoting *Wrapped in Rainbows*, how would you describe the interest in Zora Neale Hurston?

VB: It's an interest that is continuing to grow. I am particularly encouraged by the number of high school students, many of them in their junior year and in advanced placement classes, who are reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. This interest in Zora can be transforming. For example, in Palm Beach County, Florida, the people voted to read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as part of a One Book/ One Community initiative. I was invited to speak at the culminating event, and there were about 200 people attending,

including dozens and dozens of Black teenagers, all of whom had read *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which was set, in part, in their community. These young people came from families like the rural farm workers Zora gave voice to in *Their Eyes*. So they were deeply affected by the novel; it was quite wonderful for them to read about people like their grandparents, like their parents, like themselves.

I see this kind of interest in Zora continuing to grow, particularly with the recent issuance of the Hurston postage stamp, as well as with the upcoming TV movie adaptation of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which is scheduled to air in March. It's being produced by Oprah Winfrey and stars Halle Berry as Janie Crawford, the sensitive, self-educated seeker at the center of the novel. I think this TV movie is going to pique the interest of many people who haven't heard of Zora Neale Hurston or who haven't read *Their Eyes*. So I see the interest in Zora as an ongoing, ever-blossoming thing.

NYN: In terms of demographics, who are the people whom you meet who have shown this great interest in Zora?

VB: It's really heartening to see just how broad and deep the interest in Zora is. I've met a broad range of people who are passionate about her work, from Black high school students like those in Palm Beach County to a multigenerational group of Black women in Albany, N.Y., who carpooled to Massachusetts to hear me speak, to a great gang of mostly white retirees in Sarasota, Fla., who chartered a bus a couple of years ago to travel to Eatonville for the ZORA Festival. Zora really is, "Everybody's" Zora, as she



Dr. Richard A. Long, National Planner, introduces Hurston biographer Valerie Boyd at a Saturday morning session. She discussed her best-selling book *Wrapped in Rainbows* and signed copies for the capacity crowd.