

★ Author of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*  
**ZORA NEALE HURSTON**

Adapted by National Book Award Winner  
**IBRAM X. KENDI**

# MAGNOLIA FLOWER



Illustrated by  
**LOVEIS WISE**

**EDUCATORS' GUIDE**





## ABOUT THE BOOK

When a brook excitedly asks the ancient river for a story about the people it has seen, the river obliges with a sweet and powerful tale of love. The love of family, the love of those seeking freedom during the devastation of slavery and settler colonialism, and the fierce love of those who join together in resistance.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Zora Neale Hurston** was an American author, anthropologist, and filmmaker. She portrayed racial struggles in the early-1900s American South and published research on West African spiritual practices of enslaved Black Americans. The most popular of her four novels is *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, published in 1937.

**Ibram X. Kendi** is a National Book Award-winning and #1 New York Times bestselling author. He is also the Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the Humanities at Boston University, and the director of BU's Center for Antiracist Research. Kendi was awarded a 2021 MacArthur Fellowship, popularly known as the "Genius Grant."

## ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

**Loveis Wise** is an illustrator and designer from Washington, DC. They are currently based in Los Angeles and their work often speaks to themes of joy and liberation. Their work can be found through the New Yorker, Google, Adobe, and the New York Times. You can find them online at [www.loveiswise.com](http://www.loveiswise.com).

Zora Neale Hurston photo courtesy Barbara Hurston Lewis and Faye Hurston. Ibram X. Kendi photo by Stephen Voss. Loveis Wise photo by David Banks and Kendrick Brinson.



## PRE-READING ACTIVITY

Before reading, take the students on a book tour. Consider the jacket art and design, the endpapers, and the title page illustration. Ask students:

- What about these parts of the book grabs your attention?
- How do the different parts relate to each other? What elements do they have in common?
- What do the jacket, endpapers, and title page seem to be telling you about the story to come? What kind of story are you expecting?

## QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Why does Brook want River to tell it a story? When have you asked a grown-up for a story from their life or about something they saw happen?
2. What do you think of the book's title? If you could give the story another title, what would you choose?
3. What connections can you make between Magnolia Flower the character and the actual flowers of the magnolia trees? Look again at the book's endpapers and title page illustration. What words describe these flowers? Which words also describe Magnolia Flower (the character) as she's drawn and as she's written?
4. Why doesn't Bentley like John? What do you think it means to be a "man of words" rather than a "man of metals?" Do you agree or disagree with Bentley?
5. What do you think of Magnolia Flower's decision to defy her father? Did she make a good choice? When have you needed to break a rule to help someone?
6. Think about the book's illustrations. What do you like or dislike about the illustrator's artistic style? What elements catch your attention most—color, shape, size, something else?
7. What illustration did you find the most interesting or most important? Why?
8. Try looking at the illustrations without reading the text. What story would you tell to explain what's going on in the images? Is it similar or different from the story told in the text?
9. Who has power in this story? What do they do with their power? How do their actions move the story forward?
10. Does this story remind you of any other stories? Are the characters similar to other characters you've read? Can you think of books with similar illustrations? Share your examples.
11. If a body of water or tree or mountain or some other part of nature was going to tell a story about you and your community, what would it say?
12. What do you think the author wants readers to remember most from this story? What message is the author trying to share? How can you tell?
13. What's something new that you learned from reading this book? How can you find out even more?





# EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

## LIKE FATHER, LIKE DAUGHTER.

Have students make a chart to compare Bentley and his daughter Magnolia. How are they alike? How are they different? What connections can students draw between both characters' journeys and choices? Using their chart, have students write a "compare and contrast" paragraph.

## LEARNING WHAT THE RIVERS KNOW.

Have students get into groups to research Maroon communities in Florida. Group members can work together or each take on answering a different question: Who were Maroons and why did they form communities? What kind of land did they settle on and why? How did the free and escaped Black peoples work and live together with the Seminole nation? What other Maroon communities existed and where? When students have completed their research, they'll write and share a brief group report that includes where they found their information.

## CHOOSE THEIR ADVENTURE.

Because the story is told from River's perspective, readers don't see Magnolia Flower's life between when she leaves her home and eventually returns. Have students fill in this gap by writing about Magnolia Flower and John. Students can write a poem or prose, working in pairs or alone. Their narrator can be Magnolia, John, another person they invent, or a part of nature like the River, and students should include at least one illustration (drawing, painting, collage, etc.). For their story, students can consider questions like: Where do Magnolia and John go and live? Who do they meet? What problems do they encounter and how do they solve them? Why do they decide to return to visit their trees?

## STORY SLEUTHS.

Have students submit at least one question they have now that they have read the story. It could be about details the story doesn't provide, what happens next after the end, something related to the text or art, information they'd like to know about the author or illustrator, etc. Put students into small groups and have each group choose a question (not written by any of the group members) and try to answer it. Groups that choose a question about the text or plot should support their answer with evidence from the book. Groups answering questions about the author or illustrator, the setting, represented cultures, etc. should support their answer with relevant online or print sources. And so on.

## THUMBS UP, THUMBS DOWN.

Have students write a book review for *Magnolia Flower* explaining why they would or would not recommend the story to other readers. Along with their review, students will include three read-alike books in their recommendation. Have students work with their school or public librarian to search for similar books based on whatever qualities of *Magnolia Flower* they deem most important





# TIPS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

## INTRODUCING ZORA NEALE HURSTON

Zora Neale Hurston was a world-renowned writer whose work uplifts Black characters, their lives, and their experiences in the American South. She influenced many other Black writers who went on to become famous authors in their own right. Outside of her fiction and poetry, Hurston was also an accomplished anthropologist and folklorist, studying Black culture and collecting stories. Explore Hurston's life, world, and the impacts of her work with students by:

- **Reading biographical books with students and using primary sources as references to help students learn more about Hurston's experiences. Check students' comprehension of the materials with reading quizzes.**
  - A selection of biographies for young readers: *Zora!: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston*, *Jump at the Sun: The True Life Tale of Unstoppable Storycatcher Zora Neale Hurston*, or *Rad American Women A-Z: Rebels, Trailblazers, and Visionaries who Shaped Our History . . . and Our Future!*
  - Primary sources to inform parents and educators: "How It Feels to Be Colored Me" (1928) essay; "Letter to Countee Cullen" (1943), "What White Publishers Won't Print" (1950) essay, Zora Neale Hurston historical newspaper coverage (LOC), and the Zora Neale Hurston timeline (LOC)
- **Exploring the Harlem Renaissance and the Black storytelling themes and expressions that came out of it. Students can dive into whatever aspect of the movement appeals to them**
  - History of the period • Poetry • Music • Plays
- **Introducing students to the Black cultural folktales that Hurston collected. Help students connect these stories to folktales they're familiar with and to consider why Hurston felt it was so important to collect these stories.**



# TIPS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

## ENGAGEMENT AND CONNECTIONS

To help students engage with *Magnolia Flower* and other Hurston writings, create bridges between the picture book content or themes and other areas of student interest. Making connections between the book and other areas or disciplines of interest can spark a deep exploration of the story via pathways the students get to choose.

### • Nature (Scientists)

- Explore information about rivers and other waterways. Students can learn how water is recycled and the stages of the water life cycle, how old US rivers are, and what kind of animals and ecosystems are supported by rivers.
- Encourage students to find all the information they can about magnolia trees and blooms. Where do they grow and what conditions do they need to thrive? How many varieties are there? When do they flower? Students can make drawings of trees they visit or from images they find in their research. They can also try planting and caring for a tree or flower that grows well where they live.

### • Race & Resistance (Historians & Activists)

- Help students research the history of free and previously enslaved Black people and of Indigenous nations in Florida with child-appropriate sources like Library of Congress resources, PBS documentaries, and Tribal websites. They can learn more about how Black people resisted slavery, how Indigenous peoples resisted the Trail of Tears and other settler colonial violence, about Civil War events, and about emancipation.
- Help students connect the historical resistance of slavery and settler colonialism to other Black and Indigenous resistance movements using nonfiction or informational texts about Jim Crow, Civil Rights, Water Protectors, and 21st century activism. Check out resources like EmbraceRace and Zinn Education Project for suggested texts.

### • Folktales & Cultural Stories (Writers & Storytellers)

- Have students list the folk and fairy tales they know, as well as stories passed down from their elders, and have them investigate what cultures they come from and why they're important. After introducing students to some of the folktales that Hurston collected, have students write their own tale.

### • Travel & Exploration (Explorers)

- Help students make a map to a place they love or would like to visit. Students can convert distances from miles to inches to draw an accurate map, and use multiplication and division to figure out how long the trip would take using their map. If possible, encourage the students to follow their map (with a grown-up's help) and make notes on the map of what they see along the way.

This guide was written by Anastasia M. Collins. Stacy (she/they) is a librarian, youth literature scholar, and an anti-oppression educator. You can follow them at @DarkLiterata.