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The Cruelty of Zora Neale Hurston

by Sean McCann

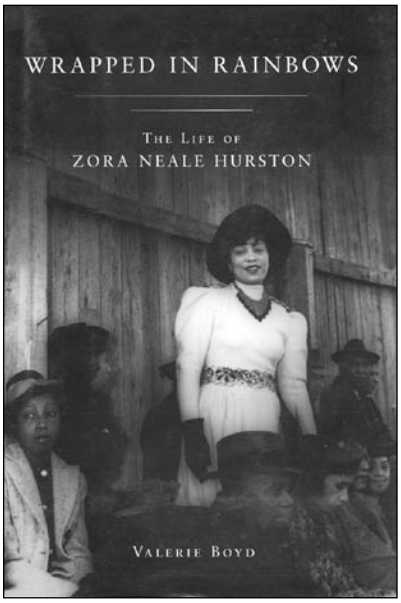
Books discussed in this essay:

Wrapped in Rainbows: The Life of Zora Neale Hurston
By Valerie Boyd
Scribner, 2003
$30

Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters
Edited by Carla Kaplan
Doubleday, 2002
$40

Near the end of her sprightly new biography, Valerie Boyd arrives at a summary account of Zora Neale Hurston's literary achievement. Canvassing Hurston's four novels, her autobiography, her two works of ethnography, and her many essays and stories, Boyd distills them into a dispiriting sentimental message: Hurston teaches us "the subtle power of love and laughter to overcome oppression."

FLEENER



Saccharine though that moral may seem, it is far from an outlier in the field of Hurston criticism. Indeed, it puts in only slightly exaggerated form what has become the common wisdom about Hurston. Since her rediscovery some thirty years ago, millions of readers have come to appreciate the special powers of Hurston's writing—its thickly textured portraits of the rural black South; its earthy, folk-inflected humor; and, above all, its magnificent rendition of the aesthetic glories of the African American vernacular. But Hurston has rarely been admired for her literary accomplishments alone. In search of literary foremothers and representative figures, Hurston's fans have often cast her not just as a great writer, but as a combination moral visionary and political hero. Hence the sentimental picture summed up by Boyd's title: Hurston the brassy and exuberant, the woman who refused to be humbled, who took from undoubtedly painful experience not bitterness and gall but a deep enthusiasm for the beauties of life.

The truth, of course, is more complex—as both Carla Kaplan's superb collection of Hurston's letters and, more inadvertently, Boyd's chatty but impressively researched biography reveal. A master of public relations and a woman intensely jealous of her privacy, Hurston herself worked hard to cultivate the image that Boyd and others have embraced, leaving obscured behind its vivid yet thin picture a number of still unresolved mysteries. Only rarely do those hidden depths peep through, even in her most intimate letters and confessions. It is clear, however, that the facts of Hurston's life only partly matched her public persona. Zestful and impudent though she was, Hurston was also, as her friends and colleagues often noted, self-dramatizing and manipulative. A woman of extraordinary strength, she could be in turn mean-spirited and petty. Perhaps most discomforting to her contemporary admirers is that, for all her stubborn independence, Hurston could be painfully obsequious—especially to her white patrons and employers, who were sometimes embarrassed to find themselves referred to as "Boss."

In short, Hurston was often not the woman her admirers want her to have been. But the more important fact is that her writing, too, fails to fit the two-dimensional public image Hurston herself fostered. As Kaplan nicely puts it, Hurston "has often been loved too simply." For her admirers, she is the master of sassy resilience. For those rarer critics, such as Richard Wright, who accused Hurston of performing a kind of minstrelsy, she offers a vapid portrait of happy folk life. But neither of these perspectives gets at the true power of Hurston's fiction, which is far more complex and disturbing than either allows. Whether in the praise of her admirers or in the less familiar damnation of her critics, the Hurston we have now is a little like the homely picture of Robert Frost that used to prevail before Lionel Trilling famously drew attention to the dread and dark perversity at the heart of his poetry. Hurston's fiction is also inhabited by a barely submerged, virtually gothic obsession with what Trilling called "the terrible actualities of life," and, much as in Frost, it is that fascination with power and cruelty that provides the pulsing core of Hurston's art. Richard Wright had her exactly wrong, yet so too have many of her defenders. Indeed, Hurston was much like Wright himself—a modernist writer in the deep-rooted antinomian, American

grain. As Trilling said of Frost, at her best she is "a poet who terrifies."

1.

Despite their legendary disagreement, in a number of respects Hurston and Wright have much in common. Both were products of the Deep South and of the lower reaches of its respectable black middle class—a milieu from which each escaped only with the greatest difficulty. In her mature work, Hurston typically looks back on that world with deep fondness, celebrating in a series of finely etched and loving portraits the all-black town of Eatonville, Florida, where she spent her childhood. But Hurston later recalled that Eatonville's folkways had fit her "like a tight chemise": "It was only when I was off in college, away from my native surroundings, that I could see myself like somebody else." And indeed the urgent desire to be somebody else, and somewhere else, runs powerfully through her fiction. Alongside their recurrent images of vibrant folk community, her novels and stories consistently portray charismatic heroes, stifled by the narrowness of their worlds and longing to set off, as she frequently put it, for "the horizon."

Hurston herself lived a version of that story, leaving small-town Florida behind for a briefly glamorous life as one of the most celebrated African American writers. But the more important fact may be that even this story avoids a large chunk of Hurston's formative years. The fourth child of an energetic carpenter-cum-preacher and an ambitious and loving mother, Hurston led, by her own account, a happy childhood in the relatively sheltered world of Eatonville—the nation's first incorporated black township. Hurston belonged to what was only the second generation of her family born into freedom, and she spent her youth in a world shaped by parents determined to make the most of the opportunities that the new, postemancipation world appeared to offer.

So it must have been a terrible shock when that protected world suddenly fell to pieces. In Hurston's thirteenth year, her mother fell ill and died, leaving the daughter with no shield against the rages of an increasingly domineering father. By the time she was fourteen, Hurston found herself effectively homeless. For the next twelve years, she would wander the South, traveling between family members and impermanent, unpromising jobs—a fruitless sojourn that ended only in 1917, when, at twenty-six, she shaved ten years off her age and enrolled in night classes at a Baltimore high school. It was perhaps the pivotal event of her life. Her great talent and intelligence discovered, Hurston soon found herself on a path to receiving recognition from sympathetic members of Baltimore and Washington's powerful black bourgeoisie and ultimately from white patrons and publishers as well.

Neither Boyd nor Kaplan can tell us much about the twelve years missing from Hurston's biography. Preferring to act as though she had been transported almost directly from Eatonville to her first glory days in New York, Hurston never spoke much about them herself—though on one rare occasion, when she was only thirty-six and still pretending to be a decade younger, she admitted to a friend that "the heel of life has left its print in my face." Nevertheless, for Hurston, much as for Wright, that southern experience turned out to be crucial, since it meant that she had a far more intimate knowledge of the folklore

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of the black South and of the legacies of poverty and racial oppression in which it was rooted than any of her more prominent literary peers—almost all of whom were raised in the North or in the West, the offspring of comparatively privileged families. Most "Northern Negroes," she pointedly declared, "know no more about negro life in the South than Northern white folks do."

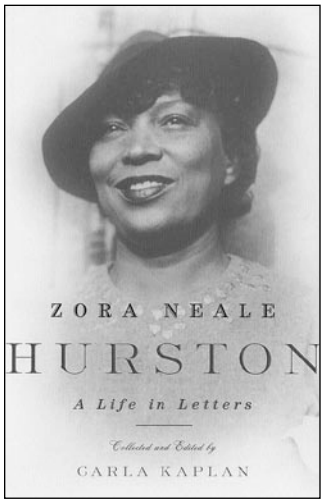
In fact, Hurston's southern roots go a long way toward explaining why she never flourished as a writer during the Harlem Renaissance, despite being an important figure in its social scene. Although she is often associated with the New Negro movement that flowered in Harlem during the 1920s—Boyd misleadingly calls her one of the movement's "most enduring voices"—Hurston did all of her major work during the 1930s, long after the halcyon days of the New Negro had passed. Through most of the Roaring Twenties, when Hurston's friends, such as Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen, were the voices of a new literary vanguard, Hurston wrote little, working instead to finish her studies in anthropology at Barnard College and laboring as an "employee" of Charlotte Osgood Mason—a wealthy white patron of the "primitive" arts whose contract with Hurston significantly interfered with the writer's abilities to develop her own talent. (One of the revelations of both Boyd's and Kaplan's books, however, is just how complex and emotionally intense the relationship between the two women was.)

But Hurston was not stifled by her patron alone. A constitutionally insubordinate writer, Hurston also had ambivalent feelings toward the prominent black impresarios and intellectuals of the New Negro movement, whose preening self-satisfaction often rubbed her the wrong way. Hurston's letters reveal, alongside her evidently generous spirit, a resentfulness and increasingly paranoid fear of disloyalty that seems to have undermined many of her relationships. She called Langston Hughes, one of her closest friends and colleagues, a chiseler, "a sneak and a weakling." Her tutor and sometime champion Alain Locke she denounced as a "malicious, spiteful little snot that thinks he ought to be the leading Negro because of his degrees." And the revered W. E. B. Du Bois, the intellectual godfather of the New Negro movement, became in Hurston's typically barbed manner "Dr. Dubious."

The more important point, however, is that Hurston's vision of the vernacular world of the black South never fully squared with her contemporaries' understanding of the meaning and significance of African American culture. The Harlem Renaissance was many things to many people, but as David Levering Lewis, the most eminent historian of the movement, points out, a "cultural nationalism of the parlor" lay at its core. Seeing little hope for directly political action on behalf of black civil rights, the leading figures of the movement, such as Locke and Charles Johnson, hoped that art might prove the "intellectual parity" of "the Negro" to sympathetic whites. Perhaps still more earnestly, they thought that cultural expression might provide a force that would bind the educated black elite to its "submerged" brethren. In Locke's terms, Negro art served as a reminder of the "corporate destiny" of the race. "What stirs inarticulately in the masses," Locke wrote in "Negro Youth Speaks" from *The New Negro* (1925), the essay that provided the clarion call for the movement, "is already vocal upon the lips of the talented few."

Though a number of the Harlem Renaissance writers were far less polite than Locke and far more interested in provoking sensation, most of them tended to share his vision of racial destiny and his genteel thought that this destiny was fitly expressed by the well educated. Hughes, for example, deliberately scandalized some of his contemporaries among "the smug Negro middle class" by creating poetry from the gritty new world of the urban blues. But, if more brash and rude than Locke, Hughes too focused intuitively on the meaning of the "heritage of rhythm and warmth" for the black, middle-class poet. Hence, like "the Negro" who "speaks of rivers" in Hughes's first successful and most famous poem, the black folk and blues singers of Hughes's poetry tend to be mythic abstractions. As a reviewer for the *Messenger* admiringly put it, even though Hughes sang "in the living speech and rhythms of the present," he made of them a "refined blues."

It is hardly surprising in this light that Hurston—who lampooned the Harlem Renaissance as an alliance of the "Niggerati" and the "Negrotarians"—fell out with Hughes, just as she did with her employer Mason and with Locke. She scorned not only the Harlem Renaissance's inveterate tendency to speak the language of genteel uplift, but also its inevitably simplified visions of what she called the people "furthest down." Her fiction, which contains dozens of sharply etched characters, includes not a single representative of "the Negro." More vehemently still, she dispatched the visions of fraternal solidarity, the "corporate destiny" that Locke and his allies advanced. A tireless champion of the vernacular creativity of the black South, Hurston often emphasized its roots in ritualized combat, insult, and humiliation, rather than its unifying powers. In the world of Eatonville, "there was open kindness, anger, hate, love, envy"—"all . . . naked and nakedly arrived at," Hurston recalled. "You got what your strengths would bring you." All of which meant that what Hurston's critics recognized as "the lusciousness and beauty of the Negro dialect" could not be separated from the combative, often cruel world that fostered it or the anger and frustration that ran just beneath its surface. It is no small detail that the most eloquent celebration of popular creativity in Hurston's writing occurs in the opening scene of *Their Eyes Were Watching God,* in which the people of Eatonville, having "been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long," attempt in an act of "mass cruelty" to take their frustrations out on Janie, the novel's protagonist: "They made burning statements with questions, and killing tools out of laughs. . . . Words walking without masters; walking altogether like harmony in a song."



2.

Hurston's critics have often drawn attention to that passage, but they have rarely probed the link between cruelty and beauty that runs throughout Hurston's work—in part because Hurston may now be the most sentimentalized of all American writers; in part because most readers focus especially on *Their Eyes,* in which Hurston presents her major themes more subtly than in any of her other novels. But there is a still more fundamental reason for this neglect. American readers have gotten used to the thought that affection and aggression belong to different worlds, that the desire for intimacy and the yearning for power are

antithetical impulses. In Hurston's world, there is no great distance separating any of the fundamental passions, and love and hatred, desire and power are not opposed so much as fundamentally entwined forces. "People talk about tenderness and mercy," she explains, "but they love force."

Hurston discovered the opportunity to articulate that message fittingly only during the meanest depths of the Great Depression. Her patron had cut her off; her friends in the Harlem Renaissance had fallen nearly silent. As Hughes recalled, the Crash had sent their world "rolling down the hill toward the Works Progress Administration." For Hurston, however, the moment promised only opportunity. At the least, she crowed, the Depression had "produced a generation of Negroes" who had grown "impatient" of genteel "Race Men" like Du Bois and Locke. Suddenly granted the opportunity to publish a first novel, she turned as if in response to the vision of an utterly different kind of black leader. *Jonah's Gourd Vine* was to be a celebration of the scarcely literate southern revivalist preacher and his charismatic power—a force that by Hurston's reckoning was simultaneously poetic, erotic, and utterly domineering. The "hold upon their people" that black preachers exercised stemmed not from the paltry "wine and flowers" of polite Christianity, Hurston explained, but from the "grandeur" of the black church's underlying "reversion to paganism."

For a model of that pagan grandeur, Hurston looked to her father, with whom she had struggled bitterly. A man whose combination of piety and aggression was evident in his nickname, "God's Battle-Axe," given to him by his congregation, he became in Hurston's rendition a figure of both awesome sexual potency and simmering violence. Hurston referred to her work in progress as "Big Nigger," the name she and her siblings called their father behind his back. It was as if she would answer Locke and Hughes by making the voice of the black vernacular not the lyrical and poignant figures that flourished in the twenties, but a staggeringly virile bully.

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At the heart of *Jonah's Gourd Vine,* and nearly all of Hurston's other fiction as well, is an ambivalent fascination with the "barbaric splendor" of that virility and an acute sense of its costs. Charting the rise and rapid fall of protagonist John Buddy Pearson's career (hence the title's biblical allusion to a great vine felled overnight), Hurston's novel ties his power in the pulpit to a sexual voracity that destroys his marriage and to a swaggering domination that, once it shows signs of weakness, leads his congregation to turn on him "like a wolf pack about a tired old bull." Not only does Hurston align Pearson's abilities in the pulpit with his charismatic appeal to women and his violent domination of other men, she consistently suggests that such power is the very essence of both love and divinity itself. "Gods show feet—not faces," she frequently reminds us. "Fear is the most divine emotion."

Indeed, throughout Hurston's fiction there is no escape from power, no hope of sentimental attachment or mutual consent. Even when, having surrendered his pulpit, Pearson briefly experiences the loss of his virility and, "shy as a girl," subordinates himself to domestic happiness, Hurston emphasizes how his lover treats him like a child and "exults in her power." In Hurston's world, life is domination and struggle all the way down. You get what your strengths bring you.

Seen in this light, Hurston resembles nothing so much as an American answer to Nietzsche, who shared her attraction to the pagan underside of Christianity and the conviction that "all religions are at bottom systems of cruelty." She admires nothing so much as strength and vitality and despises above all weakness and, still more intensely, ressentiment. Time and time again, her novels return to the situation dramatized by Pearson's struggles with his congregation—the tension between strong, sometimes tyrannical leaders and their often treacherous followers. The craven unreliability of the mob was, to use her own terms, one of Hurston's "disfavorite" subjects, and it points toward an earnest, yet rarely noted political sensibility in her work.

To be fair, the seriousness of Hurston's political concerns is easy to miss. Unlike Richard Wright, she never possessed anything approaching a coherent ideology or a sincere interest in the details of institutions or policies. Her publicly expressed opinions not only tended to the far right end of the spectrum, they were notoriously erratic, as evidenced by her denunciation of Jim Crow and

her equally vehement repudiation of desegregation. Yet Hurston's fiction amounts to a significant political meditation in a different respect. Consistently preoccupied with the energies of admiration and resentment that always run between rulers and the ruled, Hurston focused on an essential feature of political life that her contemporaries in the Harlem Renaissance ignored. Longing to discover a common destiny in racial identity, those writers frequently imagined that culture could trump the antagonisms of class and the dynamics of power. Hurston, by contrast, returned obsessively to just those tensions, placing them at the core of the issue she identified as a prime concern: the problem of "self-government."

In Hurston's world, "self-sovereignty" is a commanding good, but it has little to do with ideologies or institutions. Rather, much as in the tradition of classical republican philosophy, the capacity for self-rule depends above all on strength of character, on honor and "self-love." Those were the qualities, Hurston implied, that were necessary to make "citizens" out of the ordinary, unreliable material of human beings and that were constantly threatened by pettiness and envy. In fact, it was exactly this emphasis on the vital role of amour-propre that rendered Hurston blind to structural accounts of injustice and that explains what Kaplan calls her "paradoxical blend of militancy and conservatism." "There is another reason for the lower class of society besides the greed of the ruling class," Hurston wrote a patron in the 1920s. "It is the lack of something in the ruled."

Hurston turned all but explicitly to this theme in her third novel, *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, the work that she claimed came closest to approximating her "ideal." An attempt to record the elaborations that black preachers and storytellers worked on the Mosaic legend, this novel is also a patent allegory of the African American struggle for self-determination. That effort, Hurston's novel suggests, hinges on necessarily despotic leadership. For Hurston's

Like pity and mercy, law is impotent in Hurston's world. Power is what counts.

Moses is not only a fearsome Old Testament patriarch, he is also, like John Pearson, a charismatic leader and something of a man on horseback. Determined to make a "great state" out of a "horde of slaves," Moses badgers and chastises his people and hectors them into warfare. "The future of Israel," he declares, "is higher than pity and mercy." Most tellingly, Hurston's Moses is not the lawgiver portrayed in the traditional account. Deeply suspicious of courts and officials—as any black person born into the depths of the Jim Crow South might reasonably be—Hurston never had much to say in favor of the egalitarian promises of the law, preferring like many other southern writers to stress the values of honor and virtue. Her novel accordingly begins by announcing that Moses's authority "does not flow from the Ten Commandments," but from "his rod of power, the terror he showed before all Israel and to Pharaoh, and THAT MIGHTY HAND." Like pity and mercy, law is impotent in Hurston's world. Power is what counts.

3.

At first glance that message hardly seems consistent with the story Hurston told in her greatest and best-loved novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God.* An intensely felt story of a southern black woman's pursuit of self-realization, Hurston's second novel has long moved readers with its defense of female autonomy, as well as its stirring renditions of the delights of love and the pleasures of communal belonging. But placed in the context of her other writings, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* takes on a complexity that Hurston's sentimental image has managed to obscure. Like *Jonah's Gourd Vine* and *Moses, Man of the Mountain*, Janie's tale is the story of a gifted orphan's struggle to carve a place for herself in a beloved but unreliable and often cruel community, and it dramatizes that effort through events of lightly rendered, but often brutal combat.

When the novel opens, Janie confronts a suspicious town eager to break her pride; just before its conclusion she will be forced to face down another hostile community that, although it loves her, nearly lynches her. "So many were against her," Hurston writes, "that a light slap from each of them would have beat her to death." Every step in Janie's maturation will be marked by the death or utter defeat of one of her antagonists. When complaining about the "lavish killing" she saw in Wright's fiction, Hurston might have been referring to a crucial, though more subtly expressed, aspect of her own.

For many readers, the lightness of Hurston's comic touch has made the underlying violence of her novel easy to pass over. Those critics who have noted it have typically ascribed

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the brutality of *Their Eyes* to Hurston's dissatisfaction with patriarchal authority. And indeed each of Janie's marriages, even her grand love affair with the charismatic Tea Cake, finds Janie the subordinate but impatient spouse of a powerful man, and each ends in the death of her partner. As Boyd astutely notes, the message of Hurston's novel would seem to be that "marriage . . . is a deadly proposition: someone has to give up his or her life."

But wanting to see that implication as a sign of Hurston's latent feminism, Boyd and others pass too quickly over what may be a still more disquieting suggestion. For Hurston doesn't merely imply that patriarchal marriage is deadly, she consistently emphasizes that violence and power are the core of passion itself: "Love ain't nothing *but* compellment." One of Hurston's early descriptions of the glamorous Tea Cake, who looks like "the love thoughts of women," nicely captures the inevitable link between eros and domination. He comes "crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps."

However beautiful Janie's relationship with Tea Cake may be, it is, like the love affairs of John Pearson, neither placid nor egalitarian. In fact, their marriage is a classic story of the pupil who outstrips her master. A walking embodiment of the vernacular culture Hurston admired, Tea Cake appears in the novel at least in part to allegorize the delighted rediscovery Hurston made of the great beauties of the world of her childhood. Janie notes suitably that "he done taught me de maiden language all over." But, if in Hurston's world there are no egalitarian relations, there are also few stable or permanent ones for the same reason. Tea Cake also teaches Janie how to handle a shotgun. As her ability with the gun quickly surpasses his own, the once carefree Tea Cake begins to grow passionately jealous, tortured by fears that Janie will abandon him for a lighter skinned, more educated man. His anger soon bleeds out to color the whole of the world Hurston has created until it reaches a kind of literal apotheosis, first in a terrifyingly rendered hurricane (which occasions the awestruck reaction that gives the novel its title) and then in the case of rabies Tea Cake contracts from a vicious dog in the midst of that storm. In the novel's climactic scene, Janie is forced to shoot the rabid Tea Cake to death in the exact moment that he sinks his teeth into her arm. "Tea Cake, the son of Evening Sun, had to die for loving her."

Like Hurston's Moses, Janie is strong willed and astute. She ultimately triumphs over every obstacle and, facing down the envy and suspicion of her people, ends the novel in a scene of glorious satisfaction. But the effect of the many violent events that run through Hurston's novel should be to cast a shadow on its reassuring conclusion and leave us with the awareness that Janie could easily have ended up a defeated figure like John Pearson. In the novel's concluding frame narrative, Janie speaks to her close friend Pheoby, recounting the events of her story in a rendition of intimate friendship so moving that many readers have wanted to see it, and not Janie's marriage to Tea Cake, as the novel's erotic center. Even Kaplan, who in addition to being the editor of Hurston's letters is perhaps her most astute critic, cannot resist the temptation to turn the scene into a model of egalitarian feminism. Janie's narration to her friend becomes for Kaplan a redemptive vision of "mutual revelation and understanding."

Appealing though it may be, this

is plain wishful thinking. For what makes Pheoby Janie's perfect audience is precisely the fact that their friendship, like all relationships in Hurston's world, is not mutual at all. Janie's relation to Pheoby is exactly like John Pearson's to his loyal friend Hanbo, or like Moses's bonds with his less reliable acolytes Aaron and Joshua, or even like Janie's affair with Tea Cake: that of bold leader and willing retainer, of master and pupil. In what is perhaps the novel's most famous line, Janie announces that "mah tongue is in my friend's mouf," but there is nothing egalitarian about that image. As Pheoby herself happily notes, the line turns Janie's friend into her intermediary to the threatening world of Eatonville. Janie's survival in her community depends precisely on her ability to retain the loyalty of a willing subordinate.

The inability of Hurston's critics to see this evident aspect of her greatest novel suggests a deeper resistance—an unwillingness to recognize that in Hurston's world neither love nor domination is ever at an end. Hurston herself emphasizes that implication by failing to resolve one of her novel's crucial questions: Is Janie still infected with the rabies that Tea Cake must certainly have passed on to her? Leaving open the possibility that she carries the disease may be Hurston's way of suggesting that Janie cannot assume Tea Cake's knowledge without his power, that she cannot transmit the legacy of vernacular creativity Tea Cake represents without preserving the violence that comes along with it. The message is one that runs throughout her work: no grandeur without cruelty, no love without suffering, no beauty without pain. ●

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