

Chronology

1902

1 February James Langston Hughes is born in Joplin, Missouri, to Carrie Mercer Langston Hughes and James Nathaniel Hughes. Soon after his birth he is referred to simply as Langston Hughes.

1903

October Hughes's father begins work in Mexico and decides to remain there indefinitely. Carrie and Langston Hughes remain in the United States; Langston lives mainly with his maternal grandmother, Mary Langston, in Lawrence, Kansas, while his mother pursues employment in other states.

1907

April Hughes and his mother travel to Mexico, where Carrie and James Hughes attempt a reconciliation. Their efforts fail, and Carrie and her son return to Lawrence, Kansas.

1908

Late Summer Hughes is denied admission to Harrison Street School in Topeka, Kansas, because of his skin color. His mother successfully appeals to the school board, and Hughes enters the first grade class at Harrison.

1909

April Hughes returns to Lawrence to live with his grandmother and attend school.

1915

8 April Hughes's grandmother dies.

Late Summer Hughes moves to Lincoln, Illinois, to live with his mother, her second husband, Homer Clark, and Clark's son from a previous marriage, Gwyn "Kit" Clark.

1916

Spring Hughes is elected class poet at Central School in Lincoln, Illinois, where he was one of only two African Americans in the eighth grade class.

Fall Hughes moves to Cleveland, Ohio, where he enters Central High School.

1918

February Hughes publishes his first poems in the *Monthly*, the Central High School literary magazine.

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- December Hughes publishes his first short story, "Those Who Have No Turkey," in the *Monthly*.
- 1919**
- June James Hughes arrives in Cleveland. Hughes accompanies his father back to Toluca, Mexico, where he lives for the summer.
- 1920**
- June Hughes graduates from high school.
- July Hughes returns to Toluca to live with his father.
- 1921**
- June Hughes publishes the poem "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" in the *Crisis*, the official magazine of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).
- September Hughes enrolls at Columbia University in New York.
- Fall Hughes meets Jessie Redmon Fauset, W. E. B. Du Bois, and Countee Cullen.
- 1922**
- Late Spring After completing most of his final examinations, Hughes drops out of Columbia University. He begins working at a truck farm on Staten Island and continues to write poetry and prose.
- 1923**
- June Hughes joins the crew of the *West Hesseltine*, a freighter bound for Africa. On 3 July the ship lands at Dakar, Senegal. Hughes remains in Africa for three months.
- October Hughes returns to New York.
- December Hughes publishes the essay "Ships, Sea and Africa: Random Impressions of a Sailor on His First Trip Down the West Coast of the Motherland" in *Crisis*. He boards the freighter *McKeesport* as a messboy and sails to Europe.
- 1924**
- February Hughes jumps ship in Holland and goes to France, where he works for several months as a cook's helper in a Paris nightclub.
- Fall Hughes moves to Washington, D.C., to live with his mother.
- 1925**
- March Hughes gets a job as personal assistant to Dr. Carter G. Woodson, the founder of the Association for the Study of Negro Life and History.
- May Hughes wins first prize in a contest sponsored by *Opportunity* magazine for his poem "The Weary Blues." At the awards banquet he makes important connections with rising stars of the Harlem Renaissance, including Countee Cullen and Zora Neale Hurston. Carl Van Vechten facilitates a contract with the publisher Knopf for Hughes's first book of poems.

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- November While busing tables at the Wardman Park Hotel in Washington, Hughes meets poet Vachel Lindsay, who at a later reading to a large audience announces his “discovery” of a Negro poet.
- 1926**
- January *The Weary Blues*, Hughes’s first book of poems, is published by Knopf, the company that will publish most of his major poetic, fictional, and autobiographical works.
- February Hughes enrolls at Lincoln University in Pennsylvania.
- 23 June Hughes publishes his manifesto of the Harlem Renaissance, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in the *Nation*.
- 1927**
- January Hughes’s second book of poems, *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, is published by Knopf to mixed reviews. Some critics are offended by Hughes’s language and subjects, while others praise him for his blues aesthetic.
- February Hughes meets Charlotte van der Veer Quick Mason, a wealthy philanthropist who provides financial support to Hughes and other writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance.
- 9 April Hughes defends himself against harsh criticism of *Fine Clothes to the Jew* in “These Bad New Negroes: A Critique on Critics,” published in the *Pittsburgh Courier*.
- 1928**
- 16 August Hughes completes the first draft of *Not Without Laughter*.
- 1929**
- June Hughes graduates from Lincoln University, Pennsylvania.
- October The United States stock market crashes, signaling a downturn in the philanthropical support enjoyed by Hughes and other artists of the Harlem Renaissance.
- 1930**
- February Hughes sails to Cuba, where he meets the poet Nicolás Guillén.
- Spring Hughes collaborates with Zora Neale Hurston on *Mule Bone*.
- May Charlotte Mason ends her friendship with and financial support of Hughes because he is unwilling to submit to her artistic vision. The break leads to further conflicts between Hughes, Alain Locke, and Zora Neale Hurston, all of whom benefited from Mason’s patronage.
- July *Not Without Laughter*, Hughes’s first novel, is published by Knopf.
- 1931**
- April Hughes travels with artist Zell Ingram to Cuba and Haiti, gathering material for prose and poetry that he will publish in *Crisis* and the communist magazine *New Masses*.
- Spring Hughes meets poet Jacques Roumain in Port-au-Prince, Haiti.
- July Hughes returns to the United States and visits Mary McLeod Bethune, who encourages him to make a reading tour through the South.

- September Hughes is awarded a Rosenwald Fund grant for his Southern reading tour.
- October *The Negro Mother and Other Dramatic Recitations* is published by The Golden Stair Press, which Hughes and Prentiss Taylor, an artist and theater designer, co-founded in 1931 with the financial support of Carl Van Vechten. *Dear Lovely Death*, a collection of poems, is privately printed in an edition of one hundred copies at Amy Spingarn's Troutbeck Press. Spingarn, the wife of NAACP executive Joel Elias Spingarn, is a wealthy patron of Hughes and other black artists.
- 3 November Hughes begins a long reading tour through the South, Midwest, and West at the Downingtown Industrial and Agricultural School for Boys in Pennsylvania. The tour ends on 14 May 1932 at Berkeley High School in California.

1932

- January Hughes visits the Scottsboro Boys at the Kilby State Penitentiary in Montgomery, Alabama.
- Spring *Scottsboro Limited: Four Poems and a Play in Verse* is published by Golden Stair Press. The book shows Hughes's increasingly far-left political commitments.
- 8 May Hughes's first produced play, *Scottsboro Limited*, is performed in Los Angeles.
- June Hughes sails to the Soviet Union with a group of African Americans to make *Black and White*, a movie about U.S. race relations that is never completed. He remains in the Soviet Union for a year and writes about Soviet Central Asia after the Revolution.
- Summer *The Dream Keeper and Other Poems*, Hughes's first book for children, is published by Knopf.
- Fall *Popo and Fifina*, a children's novel that Hughes co-authors with Arna Bontemps, is published by Macmillan.
- December *The Negro Worker* publishes Hughes's controversial poem "Goodbye Christ."

1933

- Spring–Summer Hughes leaves the Soviet Union and visits Korea, Japan, and China. In August he returns to the United States and takes up temporary residence at Noel Sullivan's home in Carmel-by-the-Sea, California.

1934

- Spring *The Ways of White Folks*, Hughes's first collection of short stories, is published by Knopf.
- Summer Hughes attends meetings of the John Reed Club in support of the International Longshoremen's Association strike.
- July Hughes, who has received threats because of his support for workers in California labor disputes, leaves Carmel.
- 22 October Hughes's father dies.
- Winter Hughes travels to Mexico to attend to his father's estate.

1935

- Spring Hughes receives news that he has been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to work on a new novel.
- September Hughes returns to New York for the Broadway opening of his play *Mulatto*, which premieres at the Vanderbilt Theatre on 24 October.

1936

- Spring Hughes travels to Cleveland for the 24 March premiere of *Little Ham* at the Karamu Theatre, home to the predominantly black Gilpin Players theatrical troupe.
- July The Spanish Civil War begins after the military revolts against the republican Popular Front government. Hughes's sympathy with the battle against fascism leads him to travel to Spain the following year.
- 18 November *Troubled Island*, Hughes's play about Haiti, opens at the Karamu Theatre.

1937

- 1 April *Joy to My Soul* opens at the Karamu Theatre.
- Summer Hughes travels to France, and in July he makes a speech against fascism at the Second International Writers' Congress in Paris.
- July Hughes travels to Spain to report on the civil war for the Baltimore *Afro-American* newspaper.

1938

- Winter Hughes works with Louise Thompson to launch the radical Harlem Suitcase Theatre in New York.
- Spring *A New Song* is published by the International Workers Order. The booklet of poems is issued in an inexpensive edition of ten thousand copies.
- 21 April *Don't You Want to Be Free?* premieres at the Harlem Suitcase Theatre.
- 3 June Hughes's mother dies.
- July Hughes travels to France to deliver a speech at the Paris meeting of the International Writers Association for the Defense of Culture.
- 16 November *Front Porch* premieres at the Karamu Theater in Cleveland.

1939

- 18 July Hughes attends the Los Angeles premiere of *Way Down South*, a motion picture on which he collaborated with Clarence Muse.

1940

- August *The Big Sea: An Autobiography* is published by Knopf. Van Vechten and Bontemps had encouraged Hughes to write his life story.
- November At a promotional luncheon for *The Big Sea* in Pasadena, California, Hughes is picketed by followers of evangelist Aimee Semple McPherson for his poem "Goodbye Christ." The FBI begins assembling a file on Hughes.

1941

- January Hughes sends a statement to friends and publishers in which he repudiates radical writings such as "Goodbye Christ."
- Winter Hughes travels to Chicago and founds the Skyloft Players, a small theatrical company.

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- 7 December The United States enters World War II when Japan attacks Pearl Harbor. Hughes writes frequently about fascism and segregation in the armed forces during the war years.
- 16 December Hughes moves back to New York.
- 1942**
- 2 February Hughes joins the editorial board of *Common Ground*, a magazine sponsored by the Common Council for American Unity.
- 16 February *Shakespeare in Harlem* is published by Knopf. Hughes had protested to the publisher that the illustrations by the white artist E. McKnight Kauffer stereotyped blacks.
- 24 April *The Sun Do Move* is performed by the Skyloft Players in New York.
- August Hughes accepts an invitation to take up residence at the Yaddo artists' colony, where he meets the novelists Carson McCullers and Katherine Anne Porter.
- 29 October Hughes accepts an offer to become a regular columnist for the *Chicago Defender*.
- 21 November Hughes's inaugural column for the *Chicago Defender* is published, beginning a twenty-year relationship with the newspaper during which he writes hundreds of topical pieces.
- 1943**
- 13 February Hughes introduces the fictional character Jesse B. Semple ("Simple") to his *Chicago Defender* column.
- 18 May Hughes receives an honorary doctorate of letters from Lincoln University, Pennsylvania.
- 1944**
- October Hughes is denounced as a Communist by the House of Representatives's Special Committee on Un-American Activities.
- 1945**
- Summer Hughes collaborates with Mercer Cook on a translation of Haitian writer Jacques Roumain's novel *Masters of the Dew*.
- September Hughes begins working with Elmer Rice and Kurt Weill on *Street Scene*, an opera based on Rice's 1929 play of the same title.
- 1946**
- 6 January Hughes launches a long reading tour through the West and Midwest in Los Angeles.
- 1947**
- 9 January *Street Scene* opens on Broadway at the Adelphi Theatre.
- February Hughes begins work as a visiting professor of creative writing at Atlanta University.
- Spring *Fields of Wonder*, a book of lyrical poems, is published by Knopf to negative reviews from radical critics who accuse Hughes of abandoning his political commitments.
- 1948**
- July Hughes makes Harlem his permanent place of residence when he buys his first home, a brownstone row house at 20 East 127th Street.

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- September Hughes completes a draft of his experimental, book-length poem, *Montage of a Dream Deferred*.
- Winter *Cuba Libre: Poems by Nicolás Guillén*, which Hughes cotranslated with Ben Frederic Carruthers, is published by Anderson and Ritchie. Hughes and Guillén had traveled together in Spain during the Spanish Civil War.
- 1949**
- January *One-Way Ticket*, which introduced Hughes's humorous poetic persona Madam Alberta K. Johnson, is published by Knopf. *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746–1949*, which Hughes co-edited with Bontemps to garner black poets a broader audience, is published by Doubleday.
- 1 March Hughes begins work as a teacher at the Laboratory School at the University of Chicago, a three-month position.
- 30 March Hughes and William Grant Still's opera *Troubled Island* premieres in New York.
- November Blanche Knopf declines the manuscript of "Montage of a Dream Deferred," temporarily ending the long-term relationship of the publishing house with Hughes.
- 1950**
- 18 January Hughes and Jan Meyerowitz's opera *The Barrier* opens at Columbia University.
- 14 April *Simple Speaks His Mind*, the first book made up from Hughes's *Chicago Defender* columns, is published by Simon and Schuster. It has better initial sales than any of Hughes's previous books.
- 1951**
- February *Montage of a Dream Deferred* is published by Henry Holt, the company that accepted the book after it had been declined by Blanche Knopf.
- Fall Hughes's translations of Federico García Lorca's *Gypsy Ballads* are featured in the first *Beloit Poetry Chapbook*.
- 1952**
- January *Laughing to Keep from Crying*, Hughes's first book of short fiction in nearly twenty years, is published by Henry Holt.
- Winter *The First Book of Negroes* is published by Franklin Watts, a New York firm specializing in books for children and adolescents. Hughes writes five more volumes in the *First Book* series.
- 1953**
- 26 March Hughes testifies before Senator Joseph McCarthy's Senate Permanent Sub-Committee on Investigations and is grilled about his radical affiliations and publications.
- 1954**
- Winter *The First Book of Rhythms* is published by Franklin Watts, and *Famous American Negroes* is published by Dodd, Mead. Both nonfictional books are part of Hughes's commitment to provide children with a deeper appreciation of the rich history and culture of black people.
- 17 July Hughes begins writing his second autobiography, *I Wonder as I Wander*.

1955

November *The Sweet Flypaper of Life*, in which Roy DeCarava's black-and-white photos of Harlem life are juxtaposed with Hughes's fictional narrative, is published by Simon and Schuster.

1956

November *I Wonder as I Wander* is published by Rinehart, which had offered Hughes a large advance, and *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America*, co-authored with Milton Meltzer, is published by Crown.

1957

21 May *Simply Heavenly* premieres in New York.

1958

Spring *The Langston Hughes Reader* is published by George Braziller, a small, independent publishing house. Hughes selected and arranged the contents, revising some of the pieces. *Famous Negro Heroes of America* is published by Dodd, Mead.

Winter *Tambourines to Glory*, Hughes's second novel, is published by John Day after having been rejected by Rinehart and Simon and Schuster. *The Book of Negro Folklore*, co-edited with Bontemps, is published by Dodd, Mead.

1959

March *Selected Poems*, in which Hughes selected and often revised his poems, is published by Knopf.

1960

Spring Hughes brings two books of African history and culture to press with *The First Book of Africa*, published by Franklin Watts, and an edited collection, *An African Treasury: Articles, Essays, Stories, Poems by Black Africans*, published by Crown.

26 June In St. Paul, Minnesota, Hughes delivers a speech and accepts the NAACP's Spingarn Medal, awarded for distinguished achievement by a black American.

1961

24 May Hughes is inducted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters at a ceremony in New York.

Fall *Ask Your Mama*, a long experimental poem, is published by Knopf, and *The Best of Simple* is published by Hill and Wang.

3 November Hughes attends a luncheon at the White House in honor of Léopold Sédar Senghor, president of Senegal.

11 December *Black Nativity* premieres in New York.

13 December Hughes travels to Africa to participate in an African American and African arts festival in Lagos, Nigeria.

1962

Spring Hughes becomes a regular columnist for the *New York Post*. His weekly column features his opinions on topical events as well as the philosophical musings of his fictional character Jesse B. Semple.

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- Summer Hughes speaks at a writers' conference in Kampala, Uganda, and then travels to Egypt and Italy, where his musical *Black Nativity* is featured at a festival in Spoleto.
- Fall *Fight for Freedom: The Story of the NAACP* is published by Norton. Hughes wrote this official history at the request of the civil rights organization and is gratified by the praise it receives from leaders such as Thurgood Marshall.
- 1963**
- March *Something in Common and Other Stories*, Hughes's last volume of short fiction, is published by Hill and Wang.
- April *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, edited by Webster Smalley, is published by Indiana University Press. It is the first Hughes book prepared by someone other than himself and the first to be published by an academic press.
- Summer Hughes's anthology *Poems from Black Africa, Ethiopia and Other Countries*, the culmination of his efforts to help non-American black writers gain broader audiences, is published by Indiana University Press.
- 3 November The musical *Tambourines to Glory* premieres in New York.
- 1964**
- 12 January *Jerico-Jim Crow* opens in New York to enthusiastic reviews.
- 10 June Hughes is awarded an honorary degree by Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio.
- Fall *New Negro Poets USA*, an anthology Hughes edited to help young black poets establish their careers, is published by Indiana University Press.
- 1965**
- 20 May *The Prodigal Son* premieres in New York.
- 1966**
- 8 January Hughes publishes his final "Simple" column in the *New York Post*.
- 1 February *The Book of Negro Humor* is published by Dodd, Mead.
- Spring–Summer Hughes travels to Africa, where he is honored at the First World Festival of Negro Arts in Dakar, Senegal. After the festival he tours Africa as a speaker for the U.S. State Department.
- Winter Hughes begins working on his last volume of poems, *The Panther and the Lash*.
- 1967**
- Winter *The Best Short Stories by Negro Writers: An Anthology from 1899 to the Present* is published by Little, Brown.
- 12 May Hughes undergoes surgery for an enlarged prostate gland at New York Polyclinic Hospital.
- 22 May Langston Hughes dies from complications following surgery. Many posthumous editions of his work are published after his death, including his final book of poems, *The Panther and the Lash: Poems of Our Times*, published by Knopf in July 1967. From 2001 to 2004 the sixteen-volume *Collected Works of Langston Hughes* is published by the University of Missouri Press.