

## Not So Simple: The "Simple" Stories by Langston Hughes

By Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper



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The "Simple" stories, Langston Hughes's satirical pieces featuring Harlem's Jesse B. Simple, have been lauded as Hughes's greatest contribution to American fiction. In *Not So Simple*, Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper provides the first full historical analysis of the Simple stories.

Harper traces the evolution and development of Simple from his 1943 appearance in Hughes's weekly *Chicago Defender* column through his 1965 farewell in the *New York Post*. Drawing on correspondence and manuscripts of the stories, Harper explores the development of the Simple collections, from *Simple Speaks His Mind* (1950) to *Simple's Uncle Sam* (1965), providing fresh and provocative perspectives on both Hughes and the characters who populate his stories.

Harper discusses the nature of Simple, Harlem's "everyman", and the way in which Hughes used his character both to teach fellow Harlem residents about their connection to world events and to give black literature a hero whose "day-after-day heroism" would exemplify greatness. She explores the psychological, sociological, and literary meanings behind the Simple stories, and suggests ways in which the stories illustrate lessons of American history and political science. She also examines the roles played by women in these humorously ironic fiction. Ultimately, Hughes's attitudes as an author are measured against the views of other prominent African American writers.

Demonstrating the richness and complexity of this Langston Hughes character and the Harlem he inhabited. *Not So Simple* makes an important contribution to the study of American literature.

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
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## **Not So Simple: The "Simple" Stories by Langston Hughes** By Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper **Bibliography**

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### Editorial Review

From Library Journal

One night in 1942, Langston Hughes overheard a New Jersey war plant worker tell his girlfriend that he made cranks, though he didn't know "what them cranks crank." From this encounter came Hughes's one great fictional character, Harlemitte Jesse B. Semple, a sidewalk sage who was introduced in a weekly column for the Chicago Defender and went on to star in six books and a play. Harper, a professor at Spellman College, has written the definitive account of the birth and development of a wise commoner who compares favorably with Sholem Aleichem's Tevye and Leo Rosten's Hyman Kaplan, as well as the creations of Garrison Keillor and Will Rogers. She also fully describes Hughes the working journalist as he planned publishing strategies, dodged political potholes, and haggled with editors and agents. Highly recommended for academic and public libraries. —David Kirby, Florida State Univ., Tallahassee  
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Review

"The fictional works of Langston Hughes have not yet received the scholarly attention they deserve. Harper's book will help to rectify this neglect. Harper traces the history of Hughes's short stories about Jesse B. Semple ("Simple"), published from 1943 to 1965, putting them into the context of their times and explaining the reasons for their long-standing appeal."—*Choice*

"In *Not So Simple*, Donna Akiba Sullivan Harper examines the character as he emerged in Hughes's columns, from the beginning to Semple's farewell in *The New York Post* in December 1965, by which time Semple was being decried by many as an anachronism that failed to reflect the growing complexity of black life in a turbulent time....Ms. Harper...uses Hughes's own writings and other research material to place Jesse B. Semple against the backdrop of a rapidly changing America."—*New York Times Book Review*

"Harper...has written the definitive account of the birth and development of a wise commoner."—*Library Journal*

"Exhaustive research and a succinct prose style make Harper's text necessary for any complete analysis of Langston Hughes as a writer."—*Studies in Short Fiction*

From the Back Cover

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