



APPENDIX

SUMMARY

Not Without Laughter, Langston Hughes' first novel, was published in 1930. It tells the story of Sandy Rodgers, a young boy growing up in the fictional town of Stanton, Kansas during the early part of the twentieth century. Sandy lives with his mother, Annjee, and his grandmother, who is called Aunt Hager. Annjee works as a cook and housekeeper for a wealthy white family, and Aunt Hager takes in laundry. Sandy's father, Jimboy, comes and goes as he travels around looking for work. When Annjee leaves Stanton to join Jimboy in Detroit, she leaves Sandy with his grandmother. After her death, Sandy goes to live with his mother's well-off sister and her husband. Mr. Siles is a railroad mail clerk and Aunt Tempy is a social climber, and Sandy is unhappy living with them. Eventually he leaves Stanton to join his mother in Chicago. Jimboy is gone again, this time to serve in Europe during the war.

Much of *Not Without Laughter* is semi-autobiographical. Hughes admitted that he based Stanton, and many of the people and places in it, on his experiences in Lawrence. There are differences between Hughes' life and Sandy's, however. As Hughes explained in his first autobiography, *The Big Sea*:

"I wanted to write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West, about people like those I had known in Kansas. Nevertheless, mine was not a typical Negro family. My grandmother never took in washing or worked in service or went much to church. She had lived in Oberlin and spoke perfect English, without a trace of dialect. She looked like an Indian. My mother was a newspaper woman and a stenographer then. My father lived in Mexico City. My granduncle had been a congressman. And there were heroic memories of John Brown's raid and the Underground Railroad in the family storehouse."

"But I thought maybe I had been a typical Negro boy. I grew up with the other Negro children of Lawrence, sons and daughters of family friends. I had an uncle of sorts who ran a barber shop in Kansas City. And later I had a stepfather who was a wanderer. We were poor--but different. For purposes of the novel, however, I created around myself what seemed to me a family more typical of Negro life in Kansas than my own had been. I gave myself aunts that I didn't have, modeled after other children's aunts whom I had known. But I put in a real cyclone that had blown my grandmother's porch away. And I added dances and songs I remembered. I brought the boy to Chicago in his teens, as I had come to Chicago--but I did not leave behind a well-fixed aunt whose husband was a mail clerk."

The fictional Aunt Hager was a former slave, but Mary Langston was not. She and her first husband, Lewis Leary, were conductors on the underground railroad in Ohio. Leary was a member of John Brown's party at Harper's Ferry, and was killed during the raid. Charles Langston's distinguished brother, John Mercer Langston, was a United States Congressman and served as U.S. minister to Haiti. Like her mother, Carrie Hughes did not do domestic work. While in Topeka, she worked as a stenographer for a black lawyer and for the *Topeka Plain dealer*, a black newspaper. Carrie's older half-brother, Desalines Langston, whom Hughes occasionally visited, was a barber in Kansas City.

Despite the differences between Hughes' life and the one he created for Sandy, *Not Without Laughter* provides an accurate picture of African American life in Lawrence during the early twentieth century.

Source: http://www.continuinged.ku.edu/hughes/files_city/laughter.html retrieved on 10 June 2010.