

## **Gwendolyn Brooks** **1917 - 2000**

**An award-winning African American poet, Gwendolyn Brooks wrote about life in Chicago as a black American; her poetry was rooted in the poor and mostly African-American South Side of Chicago. She was seen as a leader of the Black Arts Movement. She was the first black author to receive a Pulitzer Prize in 1950 and was made Poet Laureate of Illinois in 1968. In addition to her writing, Brooks also lectured and taught at Northeastern Illinois, Columbia College, and Elmhurst College.**

**1917** – born in Topeka, Kansas, the granddaughter of a runaway slave. Her mother was at one time an elementary school teacher and her father was a janitor.

**1917+** – when a month old move to a sprawling black ghetto on south side of Chicago, where she grows up. Although economically deprived, she had a very respectable upbringing, enriched by her parent's love of education and culture.

**1930** – at age 13 one of her poems, "Eventide" was published in *American Childhood*, a popular children's magazine of the period.

**1830-34** - Attends 3 different high schools due to difficulty adjusting.

**1934** - graduates from Englewood High School.

**1936** – completes formal education at Wilson Junior College, now known as Kennedy King College. After obtaining college degree hoped to work at the *Defender* as a reporter. When not hired, she found temporary work as a domestic in a North Shore home, an embittered experience. Then found work as a typist for a "spiritual advisor."

**Late 1930s** – joins the NAACP Youth Council and soon becomes its publicity director. Meets promising writer Henry Blakely at one meeting.

**1939** - marries Henry Blakely, they eventually have 2 children.

**1941** – signs up for a poetry workshop at the South Side Community Art center in Chicago. Here she learned to master the techniques of modern poetry.

**1943** – earned the Poetry Workshop Award at the summer's Midwestern Writers' Conference at Northwestern University.

**1944** – wins the top prize at the annual Writers' Conference in Chicago.

**1940s** – many established literary magazines such as *Harpers*, the *Saturday Review of Literature*, the *Yale Review*, and *Poetry* began to publish Gwendolyn's poems.

**1950** – Awarded Pulitzer Prize for her second volume of verse, *Annie Allen*.

**1962** – JFK invites her to read at a Library of Congress Festival.

**1963** – begins teaching career at Chicago's Columbia College.

**1967** – attends Fisk University Writers' Conference in Nashville, TN where she "rediscovered her blackness."

**1968** – Named Poet Laureate of the state of Illinois, succeeding Carl Sandburg.

**1985** – Named Library of Congress's Consultant in Poetry, a one-year position.

**1994** – chosen as the National Endowment for Humanities Jefferson Lecturer, one of the highest honors in American literature.

**1997** – Mayor Richard M. Daley announces Gwendolyn Brooks Weeks in conjunction with her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday.

**2000** – passed away at her Chicago residence.

### Books & Articles by Gwendolyn Brooks:

*A Street in Bronzeville* (1945)

*Annie Allen* (1949)

*Maude Martha* (1953) (Fiction)

*Bronzeville Boys and Girls* (1956)

*The Bean Eaters* (1960)

*Selected Poems* (1963)

*We Real Cool* (1966)

*The Wall* (1967)

*In the Mecca* (1968)

*Family Pictures* (1970)

*Riot* (1970)

*Aloneness* (1971)

*Black Steel: Joe Frazier and Muhammad Ali* (1971)

*The World of Gwendolyn Brooks* (1971)

*Report from Part One: An Autobiography* (1972) (Prose)

*A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* (1975) (Prose)

*Aurora* (1972)

*Beckonings* (1975)

*Black Love* (1981)

*To Disembark* (1981)

*Primer for Blacks* (1981) (Prose)

*Young Poet's Primer* (1981) (Prose)

*Very Young Poets* (1983) (Prose)

*The Near Johannesburg Boy and other Poems* (1986)

*Blacks* (1987)

*Winnie* (1988)  
*Children Coming Home* (1991)  
*In Montgomery* (2003)

\* More than 75 poems printed in the *Chicago Defender*

#### Books about the Person

*Gwendolyn Brooks*, Harold Bloom (2004)  
*A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, her Poetry and Fiction*, Maria Mootry & Gary Smith (1988)  
*Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and Heroic Voice*, D.H. Melhem (1988)  
Report from Part One, Broadside Press (1956)  
*Uncommon Women*, Joan Kufrin (1985)

#### Notable Sources

[www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)  
[www.nathanielturner.com/gwendolynbrooksbio](http://www.nathanielturner.com/gwendolynbrooksbio)

#### Field Trips

Gwendolyn Brooks State Library  
(Springfield, IL)  
Bronzeville neighborhood, Chicago

#### Personal Essays/REMEMBER

"We Real Cool" is one Gwendolyn's most famous poems. What does it say to you?

#### Reports/DISCOVER

\* What are some of the common beliefs/views/opinions shared by Gwendolyn Brooks and Oprah Winfrey?

#### Opinions/DECIDE

\* Do you think Gwendolyn Brooks was at all bitter that she lived in relative poverty most of her life, despite being an award-winning author?

\* Why do you think *Mademoiselle* magazine named her one of its Ten Women of the Year of 1945?

\* Some saw Gwendolyn as a protest poet, although her protest evolves through suggestion and observation rather than through a bludgeon. Simple facts expressed uniquely and simply can be more convincing that something is amiss, needs more careful attention and usually a change for the better. Agree/disagree?

#### Historical Fiction/IMAGINE

\* Write a conversation between Gwendolyn Brooks and Lucy Parsons (who was a prominent feminist and early Civil Rights Pioneer in the late 1800's). Both were prominent black women in their time.