



## KANSAS LEGEND BIOGRAPHY

### Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

“Very early in life I became fascinated with the wonders language can achieve. And I began playing with words.” For more than 50 years, Gwendolyn Brooks enriched readers’ lives with an honest, accurate and vivid portrayal of the struggles against racism and poverty many African-Americans experienced during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Gwendolyn Elizabeth Brooks was born in Topeka, Kan., in 1917, but moved to Chicago with her parents and younger brother shortly thereafter. Growing up on the South Side, Brooks experienced a great deal that she would later incorporate into her writings. The Brooks family was a loving one, where the children were often exposed to stories and songs. Brooks life outside her home was less positive, and when children teased her about her hair and skin color, she began to write about it at home.

At just age 7, Brooks composed her first poem, and it wasn’t long before she saw some of her works published. She then met James Weldon Johnson and Langston Hughes, and the two encouraged her to read modern poetry from e.e. cummings, T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. In 1934, Brooks became an adjunct member of the “Chicago Defender” staff and had published more than 100 works in her weekly poetry column.

Brooks graduated high school the following year and attended Wilson Junior College, from which she earned an English degree. In 1937, she became the publicity director of the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Youth Council and was married to Henry Blakely in 1938.

Brooks received the Midwestern Writers Conference Poetry Award in 1943 after spending two years participating in poetry workshops at Chicago's South Side Community Art Center. Her first poetry collection, “A Street in Bronzeville,” chronicled the everyday lives of African-Americans. It was published in 1945 and received widespread critical acclaim. Brooks garnered a Guggenheim fellowship, nomination as a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and recognition by Mademoiselle as one of the Ten Women of the Year.

Brooks followed one success with another, releasing her second collection “Annie Allen” in 1945. For this, she received the first Pulitzer Prize ever given to an African-American writer. In 1953, “Maud Martha” was published as Brooks’ first and only fictional novel. In 1962, President Kennedy asked Brooks to read at a Library of Congress poetry festival.

Brooks continued to write poetry, although the tone and focus of her writing changed some following her increased involvement with the Black Arts movement in 1967. She became well known as a leader of the movement, and began writing in free verse with increased urban vernacular. In 1972, Brooks wrote a prose autobiographical piece titled “Report from Part One: An Autobiography.”

Brooks spent much of her later years teaching creative writing and hosting poetry workshops at a variety of universities. In 1985, she was appointed poetry consultant to the Library of Congress, and the National Endowment for the Humanities selected Brooks as the 1994 Jefferson Lecturer, the highest award in the humanities given by the federal government. In December of 2000, Brooks passed away, but will always be remembered for her phenomenal literary contributions.

