



Winter 1-25-1999

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Recommended Citation

Aaron, Bob, "Pulitzer Prize-Winning Poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, To Speak at Illinois Wesleyan's Soul Food Dinner, Feb. 7" (1999). *News and Events*. 713.
<https://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/713>

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Jan. 25, 1999

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**Pulitzer Prize-Winning Poet, Gwendolyn Brooks,
To Speak at Illinois Wesleyan's Soul Food Dinner, Feb. 7**

*"She has been called a poet who has discovered the neglected miracles of everyday
existence.*

For Brooks, it has all been a matter of telling her truth."

The National Women's Hall of Fame
commenting on Gwendolyn Brooks

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.--The first African-American recipient of a Pulitzer Prize will speak at Illinois Wesleyan University Feb. 7 as part of festivities marking Black History Month.

Gwendolyn Brooks--poet laureate of Illinois since 1968--will speak at IWU's annual soul food dinner at 7:30 p.m. in the Shirk Center, 302 E. Emerson, Bloomington. The soul food dinner will begin at 6 p.m. in the Shirk Center.

Admission to the soul food dinner is \$5 for students and \$10 for the general public. Tickets may be obtained at the Main Desk, IWU Memorial Student Center, 104 E. University St., Bloomington.

First African-American Pulitzer Prize Winner

Brooks won the 1950 Pulitzer Prize for poetry for her verse narrative "Annie Allen." She is the first black recipient of a Pulitzer Prize in any category. Brooks also is the first black woman admitted to the National Institute of Arts and Letters (1976).

Brooks' credo is simply: "I am interested in telling my particular truth as I have seen it."

Brooks as Writer

She is the author of poetry collections, including: "A Street in Bronzeville" (1945), "Annie Allen" (1949), "The Bean Eaters" (1960), "In the Mecca" (1968), "Riot" (1969), "Family Pictures" (1970), and "Beckonings" (1975).

According to a biography, "Gwendolyn Brooks' first published collection, 'A Street in Bronzeville' (1945), reveals her talent for making the ordinary life of her neighbors extraordinary. 'Annie Allen' (1949), for which she won the Pulitzer Prize, is a loosely connected series of poems related to a black girl's growing up in Chicago. The same theme was used for Brooks's novel 'Maud Martha' (1953)."

Her autobiography, "Report from Part One," appeared in 1972. Among Brooks' later works are "Primer for Blacks" (1980), "Young Poets' Primer" (1981), and "Blacks" (1987), a collection of her published works. "Report from Part Two," the second installment of her autobiography, was published in 1996.

Recent Accomplishments

"Children Coming Home" is Brooks' latest volume of poetry. It's about elementary school children coming home from school--not always to cocoa and cookies. It has won numerous accolades, according to a Brooks' biography, "for being a very strong, honest, contemporary commentary on today's society. When she read some of these poems at [New York City's] Lincoln Center for the National Literacy Conference, with [former First Lady] Barbara Bush as host, she was given a standing ovation."

Brooks was invited to the Washington, D.C., swearing-in ceremony for U.S. Sen. Carol Moseley Braun (D-Ill.) in January 1993, where she read her poem, "Aurora."

The Gwendolyn Brooks Center for Black Literature and Culture was dedicated in May 1993 at Chicago State University, where Brooks is a Writer-in-Residence.

The following month, Brooks was one of 100 Chicago women honored with temporary monuments placed around the Windy City, recognizing their achievements. Brooks was the principal speaker at the event's opening ceremony.

Brooks was honored in February 1994 with the federal government's "highest Honor for Achievement in the Humanities." The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) named Brooks its 1994 Jefferson Lecturer for Distinguished Intellectual Achievement in the Humanities. Her May 4 lecture at Washington, D.C.'s John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts was repeated in Chicago on May 11, when NEH representatives also honored her.

A bronze bust of Brooks was placed in Chicago's Harold Washington Library in June 1994. She was the second Illinois writer and the first African-American and first woman so honored.

The National Book Foundation honored Brooks in November 1994 with the Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters in New York City.

January 1995 found Brooks reading her poem, "Martin Luther King, Jr.," at a special performance of the Chicago Sinfonietta at Orchestra Hall in Chicago in honor of the slain civil-rights leader's birthday. King's daughter, Yolanda, participated in the program.

Awards

Brooks has received two Guggenheim Fellowships and has served as a poetry consultant to the Library of Congress.

She succeeded poet and Abraham Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg as Illinois' poet laureate three decades ago. Annually, she celebrates the Illinois Poet Laureate's poetry contest for elementary and high school students.

Brooks received the "Chicago Pioneers Award" in June 1995, sponsored by the Before Columbus Foundation at the American Book Award Conference in Chicago.

Washington, D.C.'s National Portrait Gallery announced in June 1995 that a commissioned copy of a Brooks' bronze bust was placed in the gallery.

The Smithsonian Institution honored Brooks in 1996 as its "Living Portrait" and she presented a special reading of her poetry.

Then-Illinois Gov. Jim Edgar (R) presented Brooks with a Lincoln Laureate Award--the state's highest award--in April 1997.

When Brooks marked her 80th birthday in 1997, the city of Chicago celebrated the occasion with Gwendolyn Brooks Week. The Chicago City Council presented her with a proclamation and resolution. On June 7, 80 poets and writers came together at the Harold Washington Library to pay tribute to Brooks in a five-hour reading marathon. The event was called "Eighty Gifts," a reading tribute to each of her years.

Brooks' Background

She was born in Topeka, Kan., in 1917. Her parents moved to Chicago's South Side when she was less than a year old.

The National Women's Hall of Fame describes Brooks as an "introverted, shy child," who grew up "reading the Harvard classics and the black poet Paul Lawrence Dunbar. And she grew up writing. Her first poem was published when she was 14."

She graduated from Chicago's Wilson Junior College in 1936. During these Depression years, Brooks could only find work as a domestic and as a secretary to a spiritual advisor.

Later, Brooks was publicity director for the youth organization of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Chicago, a leading civil-rights organization.

Her early verses appeared in the Chicago Defender, a newspaper written primarily for the city's black community. By the early 1940s, Brooks' poetry was appearing in Harpers, Poetry, and The Yale Review.

"In 1967," the National Women's Hall of Fame points out, "an established and respected poet, she [Brooks] attended a writer's conference at Fisk University where, she says, she rediscovered her blackness. Her subsequent poetry broke new ground for her, reflecting the change that occurred at Fisk. The 'Mecca,' a book-length poem about a mother searching for her lost child in a Chicago housing project, shows this new direction. This volume was nominated for the National Book Award for poetry."

About IWU

IWU, founded in 1850, enrolls about 2,000 students in a College of Liberal Arts, and individual schools of Music, Theatre Arts, Art, and Nursing. Since 1994, these facilities have been added to the IWU campus: a \$15 million athletics and recreation center, a \$25 million science center, a \$6.8 million residence hall, and a \$5.1 million Center for Liberal Arts.