



Gwendolyn E. Brooks: A Poetic Play

A. Hakim Steele

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I was one of Gwendolyn's students and a lifelong follower of her work. I remember reading some of my own attempts at poetry to our group and I still remember her words to me, "Antonio, we sing poetry. Yours sounds like the sports page of the Tribune." Well, I appreciated her criticism. It would have been easier for her to just write me off and say nothing or a perfunctory "nice". But she woke me and my next attempts started to progressively loosen until I was singing my poems. And she smiled at me and I was thrilled. She listened to my every word and to every student's every word. She didn't just drift away and let us go on and on. She hung with us. Attentive. All the students loved her and appreciated her presence with us. After all, she was quite a celebrity. She attained all four of the biggest awards in poetry. She succeeded Carl Sandburg as Poet laureate of Illinois, she became the Poetry Consultant at The Library of Congress, she won the Guggenheim Fellowship and, of course, she was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for her second book, *Annie Allen* in 1950. It is difficult to summarize a life as fruitful and varied as hers in what I assume is a one hour play. I worked about 15 of my favorite Gwendolyn Brooks poems into the play. I have tried to capture her love of the life around her and her powers of observation. She just let the words flow like a river and I float upon it. Sit back and groove with her. That's what I do. I just go with it. I don't analyze anything. No explanations. I just groove. I am very happy that I knew her and I am happy that she lived.

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