



A Street in Bronzeville

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The Work

A Street in Bronzeville, Gwendolyn Brooks's first poetry collection, poignantly reflects the reality of oppression in the lives of urban blacks. The poems portraying ordinary yet unforgettable individuals—from the flamboyant Satin Legs Smith to the sad hunchback girl who yearns for a pain-free life—launched Brooks's successful career. The poetic walk through Bronzeville begins with “the old-marrieds,” whose longtime exposure to crowded conditions has eliminated loving communication from their lives.

The long-married couple is followed closely by poems exploring how life in a “kitchenette building” thwarts aspirations. Brooks wonders how dreams can endure in a fight with fried potatoes and garbage ripening in the hall. With honesty and love she portrays resilient characters: Pearl May Lee, whose man has been falsely accused of raping a white woman; Mame, the queen of the blues, who has no family and endures the slaps and pinches of rude men in the club where she sings; Moe Belle Jackson whose husband “whipped her good last night”; and poor baby Percy, who was burned to death by his brother Brucie. Alongside this unblinking look at life's pain, Brooks now and then gently conveys humorous moments, such as the woman at the hairdresser's who wants an upsweep to “show them girls,” and the domestic worker who thinks her employer is a fool.

Alienation in city life is a theme Brooks explores unflinchingly. Matthew Cole seems to be a pleasant man, but in the dirtiness of his room, with fat roaches strolling up the wall, he never smiles. Maud, in the poem “Sadie and Maud,” tries to escape Bronzeville by going to college, but finds herself living alone, a thin brown mouse in an old house.

Composed of twelve poems, the last section of the book, “Gay Chaps at the Bar,” is dedicated to Brooks's brother, Staff Sergeant Raymond Brooks, and other soldiers who returned from the war trembling and crying. The second poem, “still do I keep my look, my identity” affirms a soldier's individuality even as he dons a government-issue uniform and goes off to meet death on some distant hill. Each body has its pose, “the old personal art, the look.”

Ultimately, the critique of America plays itself out in a critique of traditional literary form. Brooks parodies the sonnet in content and form. She uses slant rhyme for the entire collection because she thinks life in Bronzeville is “an off-rhyme situation.”

Suggested Readings

Kent, George E. *A Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990.

Melhem, D. H. *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry and the Heroic Voice*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987.

Mootry, Maria K., and Gary Smith. *A Life Distilled: Gwendolyn Brooks, Her Poetry and Fiction*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1987.

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