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GWENDOLYN BROOKS

We Real Cool

WHEN GWENDOLYN BROOKS (b. 1917) was a little girl, her mother said "You're going to be the first lady Paul Laurence Dunbar," a powerful and well-known black poet. Brooks met her mother's challenge and then some, becoming the first African American writer to win the Pulitzer Prize (for Annie Allen in 1950) and the first African American woman to be elected to the National Institute of Arts and Letters or to serve as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. A 1936 graduate of Chicago's Wilson Junior College, Brooks has received over seventy honorary degrees.

In her most distinguished career, Brooks has drawn on the traditions of African American sermons and musical forms—especially the blues, jazz, and the spiritual—to explore the American condition and, in particular, the realities of African American life. Her brief poem "We Real Cool" depicts a group of young hookey players who have rejected—or been rejected by—their schools. This is the first poem by Brooks I ever read, and it inspired me to seek out her other poetry and prose and to be a lifelong fan of her work. It also made me think about what my life would have been like if I had "left school." — A.L.

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel.

We real cool. We
Left school. We
Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We
Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We
Jazz June. We
Die soon.

IN RESPONSE

1. What message do you take away from Brooks's poem? In what ways does it speak personally to you? If you keep a reading log, answer this question there.
2. How do you think the students in the reading by Mike Rose on p. 97 might respond to the poem?
3. Brooks's poem was written in 1960, and it refers to and uses the style of an even earlier jazz tradition. Write your own 1990s version of "We Real Cool," calling on contemporary music and culture to do so.

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