Arna Bontemps first made his name as a writer during the Harlem Renaissance, the black cultural movement of the 1920s. He is chiefly identified with that era even though he was still writing in the 1970s.

Of Creole stock, Bontemps used the Creole dialect in some of his early works. He wrote fiction and nonfiction, poetry and plays, novels and short stories, essays and articles, children’s stories and histories. Many of Bontemps’s books record the achievements of African Americans, such as his Famous Negro Athletes, which he wrote for young people in 1964. He also compiled collections of other people’s work, publishing anthologies of African American poetry and books of essays and personal reminiscences, which together greatly expanded the field of African American literature.

Knew and valued his own culture

Arnaud Wendell Bontemps gained his love of literature from his mother, Maria, who had
been a school teacher before her marriage. However, she died when he was twelve, and Arna’s father, Paul Bontemps, had no love of books and could not understand why the boy wanted to be a writer. The Bontemps men had been brick masons for three generations, and Arna was expected to learn the trade too.

Yet Arna’s father valued education, so he moved the family to Los Angeles in 1905 in the hope of escaping the blatant racism of the South. In 1917 he sent Arna to San Fernando Academy, a white boarding school, where Arna soon came to the conclusion that he was being “miseducated” and was in danger of losing his identity as a black American. He felt the same about the teaching at Pacific Union College, which he attended in the early 1920s. Black history and literature were virtually ignored, and Bontemps welcomed the time he spent with his family or with fellow African Americans, just to keep in touch with his culture. As a writer he intended to portray his own culture, not the one thrust upon him through his education.

The young poet

After graduating with a B.A. in 1923, Bontemps moved to New York to teach at Harlem Academy. Harlem was the best place for a budding black writer to be at that particular time, and Bontemps soon came to know such key figures of the Harlem Renaissance as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and Countee Cullen.

Langston Hughes became Bontemps’s close friend and colleague and collaborated with him on many projects. The two men were much the same age, and both were just beginning to have their poetry published. Bontemps’ first published poem appeared in the journal *Crisis* in 1924. It was not particularly notable, but in both 1926 and 1927 two vastly superior poems won him *Opportunity* magazine’s Alexander Pushkin Poetry Prize. Typical of other works of the era, they harked back to ancient times in Africa.

During this period Bontemps married Alberta Johnson, with whom he eventually had six children.

Wrote the novel that established his reputation

In 1931 Bontemps left Harlem to join the faculty of Oakwood Junior College in Huntsville, Alabama. That same year he had his first novel published, *God Sends Sunday*. The story was about a black jockey whose luck runs out, so that he becomes a penniless wanderer. With its dramatic plot and its use of the Creole dialect, the book was a considerable success,
and it was later adapted by Countee Cullen as the musical “St. Louis Woman,” which opened on Broadway in 1946. However, the novel did not make Bontemps rich, so he continued to teach at Huntsville, which gave him the idea to write books for children as a way of giving young people a positive image of black Americans. His first children’s book, *Popo and Fifina* (1932), was written in collaboration with Langston Hughes and was a moving story about two black children in Haiti. Bontemps later teamed up with Jack Conroy as co-author of his children’s books, but he also wrote many as sole author, including *You Can’t Pet a Possum* (1934), *Lonesome Boy* (1955), and *Mr. Kelso’s Lion* (1970).

From 1935 to 1937 Bontemps taught at Shiloh Academy in Chicago, and during this period he published his most celebrated novel, *Black Thunder* (1936). The story is based on a slave rebellion that occurred in Virginia in 1800 and was brutally put down. This book established Bontemps as a writer, and it enabled him to get a Rosewald Fellowship in 1938. At last he was able to give up teaching, spend more time writing, and complete his master’s degree.

**Historian and anthologist**

After earning his master’s degree in 1943, Bontemps was appointed head librarian at Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, a position he held until 1965, when he accepted a professorship at the University of Illinois. As librarian Bontemps pursued a longstanding goal of making black history and literature more readily available. The library housed the rudiments of such a collection, and over the years
Bontemps added many priceless original documents to it. As a result of his efforts, Fisk University Library is now a major source of material on African American life and culture.

Bontemps also published a wide range of books on African American achievement, including volumes of black history, anthologies of black poetry, collections of folklore, stories of black life during the Depression, and biographies of such outstanding figures as George Washington Carver and Frederick Douglass. Some of these books were written specifically for young people so they could get to know their culture.

In 1970 Bontemps returned to Fisk University as writer-in-residence, a position he held until his death three years later. He produced half a dozen more books, one of which was the collection *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (1972), a topic Bontemps lectured extensively on, for he had been one of the era’s last survivors.