Brooks, Gwendolyn (Elizabeth)

(b. June 7, 1917, Topeka, Kan., U.S.), American poet whose works deal with the everyday life of urban blacks. She was the first black poet to win the Pulitzer Prize, and in 1968 she was named the poet laureate of Illinois.

Brooks graduated from Wilson Junior College in 1936. Her early verses appeared in the Chicago Defender, a newspaper written primarily for the black community of Chicago. Her first published collection, A Street in Bronzeville (1945), reveals her talent for making the ordinary life of her neighbours 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).

The Bean Eaters (1960) contains some of her best verse. Her Selected Poems (1963) was followed in 1968 by In the Mecca, half of which is a long narrative poem about people in the Mecca, a vast, fortresslike apartment building erected on the South Side of Chicago in 1891, which had long since deteriorated into a slum. The second half of the book contains individual poems, among which the most noteworthy are "Boy Breaking Glass" and "Malcolm X." Brooks also wrote a book for children, Bronzeville Boys and Girls (1956). The autobiographical Report from Part One (1972) was an assemblage of personal memoirs, interviews, and letters. Later works include Primer for Blacks (1980), Young Poets’ Primer (1980), and Blacks (1987), a collection of her published works.

In 1985-86 Brooks was Library of Congress consultant in poetry. In 1990 she became professor of English at Chicago State University.

BIBLIOGRAPHY.
