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Artists to gather to celebrate late poet Gwendolyn Brooks

More than 60 authors and celebrities set to attend 'Brooksday' event



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Haki Madhubuti is seen with a portrait of Gwendolyn Brooks at the headquarters of Third World Press in Chicago. (Terrence Antonio James, Chicago Tribune / May 30, 2013)

Dawn Turner Trice

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Haki Madhubuti met the late, great poet Gwendolyn Brooks in 1967 in a South Side church where she was teaching poetry writing to members of the Blackstone Rangers street gang.

Back then, Madhubuti was a young, published poet who wasn't in a gang, just eager to participate in Brooks' workshop.

"In the early days, my work was rough because I was rough," said Madhubuti, the founder and president of Third World Press. "I came from the streets of the West Side of Chicago and didn't take criticism lightly. We had blow ups and the last one was so difficult that we didn't speak for a couple of weeks."

But he and Brooks sat down over a cup of coffee and made amends. "From that point on, I became her cultural son," he said.

Brooks, who died in 2000, was in a class of her own. An extraordinarily gifted writer, she was the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize. She was also the poet laureate of Illinois from 1968 until her death. Most of all, she was kind to writers and giving of herself and her resources.

For years, Madhubuti has worked to keep her memory alive, and on Friday, his Third World Press will join the Guild Literary Complex and the American Writers Museum Foundation as sponsors of a daylong birthday celebration honoring Brooks at the Chicago Cultural Center.

Sara Paretsky and Sterling Plumpp are among a list of more than 60 authors and celebrities who will participate in a marathon reading of Brooks' work.

Reginald Gibbons, a poet, writer and co-founder of the Guild Literary Complex, titled the event "Brooksday" after "Bloomsday," an all-day annual celebration of James Joyce and his novel "Ulysses," which is held on June 16 in Dublin and other places around the world.

Gibbons said he didn't know Brooks well, but he had a tremendous amount of respect for her as a poet and a person. He said he encountered her several times at the Guild Complex, where she often gave readings and sponsored poetry slams for youths.

"She had an open mic contest and young poets would get up and recite poetry — it was performance poetry, really — and she would sit in the front row," said Gibbons, a professor at Northwestern University. "The audience would vote and she would sit there and write out a check from her pocket book."

He hopes Brooksday will grow each year and be one of the city's great literary events by 2017, the 100th anniversary of her birth.

"We had a poet before her, who was Carl Sandburg, who wrote terrific poems about working people and immigrants," said Gibbons. "That was his Chicago. But Gwendolyn Brooks is the poet of our Chicago. It doesn't matter how good the person's work is and how great the person's legacy if it's not sustained by other people."

Malcolm O'Hagan agrees. As president of the American Writers Museum Foundation, he's

been working for three years to open the first national museum dedicated to American writers, here in Chicago.

"We would have a central gallery honoring and celebrating Chicago, and we knew from the beginning that Gwendolyn Brooks would have a huge presence," said O'Hagan.

He said the plan is to open the "first edition" of the museum by the end of 2015 and the entire museum by 2020.

When I first learned about the Brooksday readings, it reminded me of the story I heard about the day Gwendolyn Brooks died. Several people who loved her stopped by her home and sat by her bedside, reading to her.

"We had turned her bed toward the window so she could see the lake," said Madhubuti. "I was holding her right hand and (Brooks' daughter) Nora was holding her other hand."

As Brooks' death grew imminent, Nora Brooks Blakely, understanding how much writing and verse meant to her mother, placed a pencil in her hand.

I love that story.

Madhubuti started the Gwendolyn Brooks Center at Chicago State University, and Third World Press published Brooks' last 10 books. I have several of them, including one titled "Blacks." In it is one of my favorite poems, which I'll leave you with. It's titled "Sadie and Maud."

Maud went to college.

Sadie stayed at home.

Sadie scraped life

With a fine-tooth comb.

She didn't leave a tangle in.

Her comb found every strand.

Sadie was one of the livingest chits

In all the land.

Sadie bore two babies

Under her maiden name.

Maud and Ma and Papa

Nearly died of shame.

Every one but Sadie

Nearly died of shame.

When Sadie said her last so-long

Her girls struck out from home.

(Sadie had left as heritage

Her fine-tooth comb.)

Maud, who went to college,

Is a thin brown mouse.

She is living all alone

In this old house.

For more information regarding Brooksday, go to <http://www.guildcomplex.org/brooksday/>

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