

NOTES ON BRONZEVILLE BOYS AND GIRLS

Gwendolyn Brooks's *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*, a collection of thirty-four poems, portrays the lives of children living on the South Side of Chicago. While this area called Bronzeville has been known as an economically challenged and violence-plagued section of town, it was home to Brooks for her entire life, and she portrays its vibrancy with the assistance of illustrator Faith Ringgold, whose bold use of color captures the dynamic nature of the community and of the children who inhabit it. While Brooks's first book of poetry, *A Street in Bronzeville* (1945), centered on the adults of the community, *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*, by concentrating on its youth, offers hope not only to children who live in communities such as Bronzeville but also to all children who are trying to figure out who they are and where they belong in the world.

The title of each poem in Brooks's collection contains the name of one or two children. Some titles describe the children's conditions or situations, as in "Cynthia in the Snow," "John, Who Is Poor," or "Robert Who Is Often a Stranger to Himself." Most of the titles, however, consist solely of children's names, a convention that serves not only to emphasize their subjects' identities as individuals but also to help readers identify with those subjects.

In "Mexie and Bridie," for example, two girls have a tea party much as any other two children might, with "Pink cakes, and nuts and bon-bons on/ A tiny, shiny tray." They enjoy the weather and watch the ants and birds. With Mexie in her white dress and Bridie in her brown one, they stand out against the blue sky and green grass, considering themselves proper ladies. The title character of "Val," on the other hand, is not quite so proper. He does not enjoy the sound of grownups laughing at parties and does not mind when his father chases him away. After all, he says, he would rather be in the basement, outside, or on his bicycle. "Timmy and Tawanda" describes two kids who think it is "a marvelous thing and all/ When aunts and uncles come to call," because the children are "almost quite forgot" and "are free to plan and plot." Whether trying to fit with established conventions or rebelling against them, the children in these three poems test social boundaries.

In some of the book's other poems, Brooks portrays children doing things that set them apart from their peers. The subject of "Narcissa," for instance, does not play jacks or ball with the other girls. In fact, she does not play "Anything at all." Instead, she sits in her backyard, dreaming that she is "an ancient queen," "a singing wind," or a nightingale. All the while, she is "sitting still, as still, as still/ As anyone ever sat!" Here, Brooks shows how imagination can be as active as recreation. "Keziah" and "Charles" also portray children who go to secret places, Keziah "when the wind is rough" or his mother is scolding his big brother, and Charles at "Sick-times," when he goes inside himself, then looks outside himself "At people passing by." In these poems, Brooks portrays the need for children to have a psychological retreat.

That place of solace could also be helpful to John of "John, Who is Poor." He "lives so lone and alone," because his mother works all day and his father is "dead and done."

The poem's narrative voice entreats the other children to be good to him and "not ask when his hunger will end" or "when it began." A similar disappointment pervades "Otto," which portrays a child who is not deprived of a father but does not receive the Christmas presents he wanted. He is careful, though, not to let his father know, for "It's hard enough for him to bear." What is hard for the father to bear is not stated explicitly. Perhaps it is the lack of money needed to buy the desired presents, the hard work that it takes to make what little money he has, or the absence of a wife and mother. In any case, Brooks depicts the sensitivity of a child to his father's feelings.

Brooks also portrays appreciation for parents in poems such as "Andre," "Eunice in the Evening," and "The Admiration of Willie." Andre dreams that he has to choose a mother and father and is confused by all of the possibilities. Just before he awakens, though, he knows what parents he would take: "the ones I always had!" Eunice is grateful to see everyone in the dining room, with "Daddy on the long settee—/ A child in every chair" and "Mama pouring cocoa." Similarly, Willie appreciates the wisdom of "Grown folks" and all of the things that they can do, such as tying ties, baking cakes, and finding balls, not to mention "kissing children into bed/ After their prayers are said." "The Admiration of Willie" ends *Bronzeville Boys and Girls* on a comforting note.

The forty poems included in African American poet Gwendolyn Brooks's first collection for children, *Bronzeville Boys and Girls*, depict society from the children's perspective. Many of the poems are brief, rhythmic, and childlike, while a few are told from an omniscient, third-person point of view, such as "Maurice" and "Eppie." The characters include Robert, who is a stranger to himself; Gertrude, who is touched when she hears Marian Anderson sing; and Marie Lucille, whose process of maturation is like a ticking clock.

The settings, like the characters, are uncomplicated and are presented realistically. The city is confining because the buildings are too close. It is so unlike the country, where one is free to go "A-SPREADING out-of-doors." The narratives in the poems are easy to follow, especially when the persona describes his or her situation in the first person, as in "Rudolph Is Tired of the City." As Rudolph says, "These buildings are too close to me./ I'd like to push away./ I'd like to live in the country,/ and spread my arms all day."

Ideas that children can easily comprehend are depicted in these poems. Some of the verses present clear themes such as that uprooting can be painful, as one learns from "Lyle":

Tree won't pack his bag and go.
Tree won't go away.
In his first and favorite home,
Tree shall stay and stay.
Once I liked a little home.
Then I liked another.
I've waved Good-bye
to seven homes
And so have Pops and Mother.

In "Narcissa," readers learn that some children enjoy their individuality. Some dare to be different from other children, who enjoy playing jacks or ball. Little Narcissa prefers sitting in her backyard gazing at tiger lilies while daydreaming about being an ancient queen dressed in finery; she imagines being a singing wind or a nightingale. Her imagination allows her to be anything that she wants to be.

An inviting rhythm is created because of the rhymes in these poems, as in "Skipper":

I looked in the fish-glass, And what did I see.
A pale little gold fish Looked sadly at me.
At the base of the bowl, So still, he was lying.
"Are you dead, little fish?" "Oh, no! But I'm dying."

The rhyme scheme of abcbdece is not perfect, but for children it makes the poem easier to read.

Figurative language is another element of Brooks's poems. Lightning, thunder, and rain are personified in "Michael Is Afraid of the Storm": "Lightning is angry in the night./ Thunder spans our house./ Rain is hating our old elm—/ It punishes the boughs." Metaphors abound in "Narcissa": "First she is an ancient queen./ Soon she is a singing wind./ And, next, a nightingale." A simile and hyperbole can be found in "Cynthia in the Snow" as the color of the snow is "Still white as milk or shirts./ So beautiful it hurts."

These poems appeal to young readers because of their themes, characters, and poetic elements. They also appeal to more mature readers because of their no-nonsense way of looking at life from a child's point of view.