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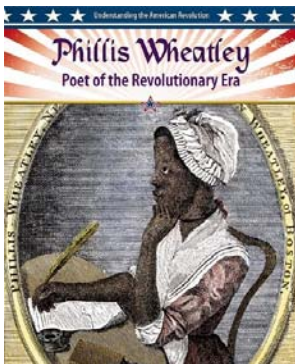
TO KNOW

AFRICAN AMERICAN POETS best known for work done before 1945



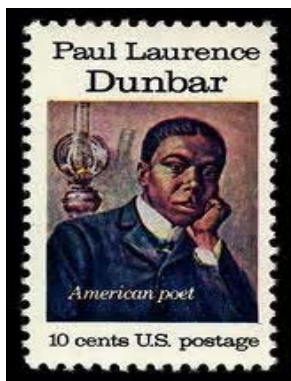
Langston Hughes. Born in 1902 in Joplin, Missouri, Hughes was the leading poet of the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. His many notable poems from the 1920s include “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” “I, Too, Sing America,” and “The Weary Blues.” Hughes’ later poems include the bebop-influenced “Theme from English B” and “Harlem,” which asks the famous question, “What happens to a dream deferred?” Though best known for poetry, Langston Hughes did notable work in nearly every genre of literature, including a dozen children’s books, more than 25 plays, and several short story collections featuring the character Jesse B. Semple. Hughes is also an HBCU grad, having earned a degree from Lincoln University-Pennsylvania in 1929.

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Phillis Wheatley. Wheatley’s *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral* was the first book by an African American to be published, and it was the first work of any kind published by an African American woman. Probably born in 1753, Wheatley was brought to Boston from West Africa in 1761. Not only did she soon learn to read and write, but she learned to read Greek and Latin by age 12, and she began to read poets like Homer, Virgil, and Alexander Pope. *Poems on Various Subjects* contains 39 poems, including her first popular work, a 1770 tribute to Reverend George Whitefield. Wheatley was emancipated in 1778 and continued to work as a poet, but she passed away in 1784.

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Paul Laurence Dunbar. Born in Dayton in 1872, Dunbar had a brief but influential career as a poet and playwright. His first collection, 1892’s *Oak and Ivy*, featured both poems written in standard English and poems written in dialect. He followed *Oak and Ivy* with *Majors and Minors* and the very popular *Lyrics of Lowly Life*. Dunbar criticized the racism of his era in works like the short story collection *Folks from Dixie* and the novel *The Sport of the Gods*. His career was cut short by tuberculosis, but his work had a great influence on later poets. Dunbar’s poem “Sympathy” is the source of the title of Maya Angelou’s *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*.

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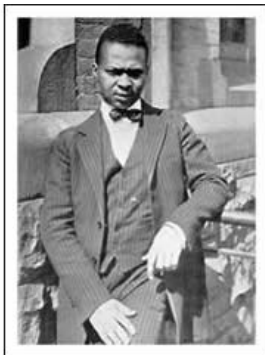
James Weldon Johnson. Johnson was a man of many talents: in addition to his literary work, he was a diplomat, a lawyer, and the first Black head of the NAACP, serving as executive secretary for more than a decade. Johnson might be best known today for the poem “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” set to music by his brother John Rosamond Johnson in 1900. His poetic works include the 1927 collection *God’s Trombones*, inspired by the sermons of Black preachers. Johnson’s best known novel is *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, published anonymously in 1912 and then under Johnson’s own name in 1927. A graduate of Clark Atlanta, Johnson taught at Fisk in his final years.

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Jupiter Hammon. Jupiter Hammon’s “An Evening Thought,” written on Christmas Day in 1760 and published in 1761, was the first poem by an African American to be published. Though he was a slave of the Lloyd family in New York for his entire life (1711-1806), Hammon was educated with the Lloyds’ children, worked alongside the Lloyds in business, and even negotiated trade deals on behalf of the family. His other notable works include the 1778 poem “An Address to Miss Phillis Wheatley” and the 1786 sermon “Address to the Negroes of the State of New York.”

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Countee Cullen. Cullen was a leading poet of the Harlem Renaissance. His 1925 collection *Color* contains some of his best known poems, including “Yet Do I Marvel,” “Heritage,” and “Incident.” Unlike the jazz-influenced style of Langston Hughes, Cullen’s style was more influenced by traditional poets like Keats or Wordsworth. Other notable works by Cullen include *Copper Sun* and “The Black Christ.” In 1951, the Harlem branch of the New York Public Library was renamed the Countee Cullen Library in his honor.

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Jean Toomer. Toomer was born Nathan Pinchback Toomer, the grandson of former Louisiana governor P.B.S. Pinchback. Toomer is best known for the 1923 novel *Cane*, considered by some the greatest literary work of the Harlem Renaissance. *Cane* features short poems intermixed with prose vignettes that give a glimpse into the lives of assorted characters. Some of Toomer’s poems include “The First American,” “Banking Coal,” “Harvest Song,” and “Portrait of Georgia,” the latter two of which are from *Cane*.

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Jessie Redmon Fauset. As literary editor of the NAACP magazine *The Crisis* from 1919-26, Jessie Redmon Fauset helped launch the careers of many Harlem Renaissance writers, including Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Countee Cullen. Fauset earned a B.A. from Columbia in classical languages and a master's degree in French from Penn, and she represented the NAACP at the 2nd Pan-African Congress in 1921. Noting a lack of portrayals of the Black middle class, she wrote four novels featuring middle class characters, including 1928's *Plum Bun* about a black woman passing as white. She also contributed poems, short stories, and essays to *The Crisis*. Fauset is most remembered today for her work as an editor; Langston Hughes called Fauset a midwife of Harlem Renaissance literature for her pivotal role in the careers of many of its top writers.

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Sterling A. Brown. A professor at Howard University for 40 years, Sterling Brown wrote the 1932 collection *Southern Road*. Brown was particularly interested in African American folklore, and he viewed vernacular speech as an integral part of that folklore; thus poems like "Ma Rainey" and "Riverside Blues" are written in dialects he heard while teaching in rural Virginia. In addition to his later poetry and literary criticism, Brown edited several anthologies of works by Black writers.

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Georgia Douglas Johnson. Johnson was perhaps the best known female poet associated with the Harlem Renaissance. She came to prominence as a poet for 1918's *The Heart of a Woman*, of which Jessie Fauset wrote, "Here are the little sharp experiences of life mirrored poignantly, sometimes feverishly, always truly." Johnson wrote the 1928 collection *An Autumn Love Cycle*, and she became an anti-lynching activist and a prolific playwright. Georgia Douglas Johnson played another important role in the Harlem Renaissance: writers gathered and socialized at her weekly "S Street Salons" for 40 years.

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