This preparatory guide accompanies a virtual program inspired by the Coretta Scott King Award-winning book by Suzanne Slade and illustrated by Cozbi A. Cabrera, *Exquisite: The Poetry and Life of Gwendolyn Brooks*. This video introduces viewers to one of Chicago’s most treasured poets, who found inspiration in colorful clouds and the people in her neighborhood, including children. The program includes music by composer Florence Price, who was the first African-American woman to have a symphony premiered by a major orchestra — the Chicago Symphony Orchestra — in 1933.

The video can be found on the websites of the [CSO](http://www.cso.org) and [Chicago Children’s Theatre](http://www.chicagochildrenstheatre.org).

**HOW TO ENGAGE WITH THE VIRTUAL PROGRAM**

Introduce the story to your children by purchasing the book at your local bookstore or checking it out of a public library. You can learn more about the book at this [website](http://www.exquisitekids.org).

- Read the story and then ask your children what music they would use to help tell the story.
- Examine the beautifully painted illustrations by Cozbi A. Cabrera that capture the life of Gwendolyn Brooks. Give your children watercolors and ask them to create their own illustrations for the story.
- Engage your children in the wonderful literacy activities, beginning on Page 2, developed by Amanda Torres, an educator, writer and cultural organizer.

**ABOUT THE COMPOSER**

Originally from Little Rock, Arkansas, Florence Price moved to Chicago in 1927. As a Chicagoan, she wrote String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor in 1935. Price and other Black Renaissance composers purposely introduced African rhythms into the symphonic form (which also developed in Africa and other non-Western places centuries ago).

String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor features a movement entitled “Juba.” Patting juba is a form of music-making created by African Americans in the 19th century. Juba came from dances in Africa (where it was called giouba) and Haiti (known as djouba). Another name for the dance is hambone. This name, which had origins in slavery, supposedly originated from “hand-bone,” the hard part of the hand that makes the most sound. The most well-known rhyme, used by juba and hambone performers alike, is called juba juba.

This recording of “Juba,” sung by Sweet Honey in the Rock, gives children a sense of the origins of juba.

These two videos give children the opportunity to view this form of music-making:

- The International Body Music Festival offered this performance of traditional African American hambone, performed by Derique McGhee at New York City's Lincoln Center on Aug. 12, 2010.
- Master artist Danny “Slapjazz” Barber and his apprentice Sekani Thomas participated in this Alliance for the California Traditional Arts 2009 Apprenticeship Program in hambone, or patting juba, an African-American tradition that stemmed from life under slavery in the United States.
- In this video, CSO musicians perform “Juba” from the String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor. Ask your children to move the way the music makes them feel.
EXQUISITE: THE POETRY AND LIFE OF GWENDOLYN BROOKS

A LEARNING GUIDE DEVELOPED BY AMANDA TORRES

TABLE OF CONTENTS
INTRODUCTION 2
CREATIVE PROMPTS & ACTIVITIES 3
DISCUSSION GUIDE 4

INTRODUCTION

Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000) remains one of Chicago’s most treasured authors. While she wrote poems that described how she was shaped by Chicago, she also shaped the city with her vast literary contributions. This children’s book describes her early life in Bronzeville, where she wrote her first two poetry volumes, A Street in Bronzeville and Annie Allen. Bronzeville, also known as the Black Metropolis, was shaped by the Great Migrations of the 20th century and became an enduring site of Black art, politics and power. Exquisite shows Brooks living and writing poems of struggle, joy and celebration during the difficult times of the Great Depression. Her legacy and her work continue to influence generations of readers and writers in Chicago and beyond.

CREATIVE PROMPTS & ACTIVITIES

Poetry and performance

- Find your favorite book, story or poem. Try reading it out loud in different ways. How fast can you read it? How slow? Read it high and read it low! Read it with different emotions: joy, sorrow, humor, anger. How does reading it aloud in different ways and voices change how you experience the text? How do others experience it?
- Play with arrangement, just like Gwendolyn did when she “strung her words together like jewels.” Take a short text or poem and copy the words down or print them out. Cut up the words or lines into pieces and then rearrange the words to make different meanings.
- Rejoice! You’ve made it! You’ve achieved your most exquisite dreams. Write a letter poem to your past self, filled with words of encouragement. What does your future self know that your current self might not know yet? What does your current self need to hear in order to keep dreaming?

Portraiture

- Gwendolyn wrote about the beauty and struggles of her people; she painted poetic portraits of the people she knew and places she lived. How would you paint your own portrait? With paint and/or with words, show us what you look like on the inside. What are the sounds, colors, shapes, things and/or feelings that best express who you are?
- Gwendolyn wrote about the beauty of Black people and herself as a Black woman. Look at your skin, find three other things that are the same color as you and talk/write about their uses and their beauty.
- You are a researcher of where you are from. Write a “Where I’m From” poem. Take a walk around your home and/or neighborhood. What sounds do you hear? What smells do you notice? What and who do you see? What are they doing? Write a poem in which every line starts with “I’m from” and then lists our some of your observations.
- The author describes the shelves of books in Gwendolyn’s home as “treasures.” Go on a treasure hunt in your own house! What can you find that is most special to you or your family? What makes it special? Is it
something that you use or do regularly? Is it kept hidden and protected? Describe with art or words the object or activity without actually naming it. Show us how you and/or your family uses this treasure.

Literary devices and style:

- Gwendolyn used many different literary forms in her writing. Some of the ones mentioned in Slade’s book are free verse, ballads and sonnets. Choose one and explore writing in that form. What does it feel like? How does it affect what you are trying to say?
- Poetry often uses metaphors and similes to make comparisons between things that people don’t usually think of, such as “Gwendolyn’s future seemed as bright as morning’s first clouds. But then a terrible storm blew in — the Great Depression.” Write a poem using similes and/or metaphors.
- Brooks is known for the rhythm, the meter and time in her poetry. Find a poem of hers in which you can hear the beat or the rhythm (for example, “We Real Cool”). What gives the poem that rhythm? How long are the lines? What parts rhyme? Write your own poem using the same rhythms as Brooks’ poem.

History and social studies:

- Slade’s book examines Gwendolyn’s early life in the 1930s and writing A Street in Bronzeville and Annie Allen in the 1940s. What was happening in the United States during that time? What was happening in Bronzeville?
- Bronzeville has a significant history for Black Chicagoans. What do you know about the history of places you are from or live now? How did you and your family come to live there? Make an annotated map that details as much as you know of the story of your origins and how you came to be there.
- This book cites Paul Laurence Dunbar as a major influence on Gwendolyn’s work. Do some research. Who was he? Who are other Black American* literary, art and political figures from Gwendolyn’s early life (1930s-1950s)? *Bonus if they’re from Bronzeville, too :)
- When Gwendolyn thought about publishing her work, she thought about what the country needed to hear and what she had to say. What would you want your city or country to hear? What is important for you to say? Write it as a declaration or people’s address.

DISCUSSION GUIDE

Dreams

- What do you think that her mother’s encouragement did for Gwendolyn’s confidence and belief in herself as a writer? Who encourages you? What were the least encouraging words that you said today? What are some words of encouragement that you’d like to say to someone you love and believe in?
- How do you talk about dreams and dreaming in your family and with your friends? What would you want to be if you had the time and space to dream? Take a moment to look up at the sky, just like Gwendolyn did. When you look at the clouds, what do you see possible for you and the people you love?
- What would you keep doing even if it didn’t bring you money or fame or even if it was difficult? Why would you keep doing it? What or who drives you to do the things you do?
- What are three things you’ve learned about Gwendolyn Brooks that you didn’t know before reading this book? How would you tell the story of your own life? What do you love, what do you struggle with, what do you dream about?

Identity

- How does your race and/or ethnicity affect how people see you? Do you think people have expectations of you, based on the color of your skin? What expectations do you have of yourself? How do you see yourself?
- Gwendolyn expressed that she felt most herself when writing. What do you do that makes you feel like yourself? How and where do you show people who you are?
• Why Gwendolyn was afraid people might not like poems about her people and neighborhood? Whose stories do you hear or see the most in books or on television? Whose stories matter most to you? Why?
• Have you ever been judged because of the way you look or the things you like? What did it feel like? What do you wish could have happened instead? Have you ever judged someone else because of the way they look or the things they like?
• What role did reading play in Gwendolyn’s writing and work? What do you like to read? How does reading influence how you think about yourself or other people?

Places and People

• Gwendolyn said she “wrote about what I saw and heard in the street” and in doing so created a snapshot of Blacks’ lives in Bronzeville in the 1940s that we can learn from now and in the future. If your life is a historical archive, what needs to be documented? What are the places, people, sounds and smells of your life and neighborhood that need to be remembered in the future?
• Bronzeville has a meaningful history for Black Chicagoans. What do you know about the history of places you are from or live now? How did you and your family come to live there?
• Gwendolyn wrote that she was “proud to feature people and their concerns — their troubles as well as their joys.” Why was important to her to feature both the joys and troubles? What did Gwendolyn know about her neighborhood only because she lived there and was from there? What do you know about your neighborhood that outsiders might not know?
• Who is Paul Laurence Dunbar? How did he influence Gwendolyn’s writing and career? What about him made Gwendolyn feel more possible?

Poetry

• On Page 2, the author describes the many shelves of poems in Gwendolyn’s home as treasures. How would you define a treasure: Is a treasure something you can own, look for or do? What are your or your family’s treasures? What makes a treasure a treasure?
• The author writes that Gwendolyn “set her words free” by sending them out to be published. What does it look, sound and feel like to set your words free? What feelings, ideas, talents or words do you keep close to you? What words are for you and which ones are for the world?
• What does it feel like to be read to? How did hearing poems read aloud by her father (Page 3) influence how Gwendolyn felt about poems? What does it feel like to hear and set poems out into the world?
• Memorizing a poem can be like holding special words in your body to recall again and again. What is something you have read or heard that is worth memorizing by heart?
• Do you think poems can change the way people think and act toward themselves and one another? Why or why not?

The Negaunee Music Institute at the Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chicago Children’s Theatre acknowledge with gratitude the contribution to these materials by Amanda Torres, an educator, writer and cultural organizer. [www.amandatorreswrites.com](http://www.amandatorreswrites.com).

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