Authoring America: A Survey of American Literature from the Beginnings to 2020

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This open textbook was developed as an adaptation of the textbook Writing the Nation a Concise Introduction… by Amy Berke, Robert Bleil, Jordan Cofer and Doug Davis, developed at the University of Georgia and the Galileo Open Learning Materials program. We appreciate the editors and creators making the text available for adaptation. The current work includes literary works representative of additional periods in the history of American literature, and intentionally includes non-canonical, ethnic, and/or countercultural writers. Also included here are essays providing information about the texts’ cultural contexts and historical relevance not included in the work referenced above.

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5.1 Introduction to Contemporary Literature

The following is a revised version of the introductory essay to Chapter 6 of Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present. Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. Link to ebook

Since the end of the Second World War to the present day, the people of the United States of America have witnessed the incredible economic and technological growth of their nation into a global cultural and military superpower. These years of growth also have often been times of radical cultural transformation, during which the nation reassessed its traditions. Americans in this period lived through times of war and times of peace, decades of cultural conformity and decades of social revolt. For the first two decades of this period, Americans lived in a racially segregated nation; they now live in a multicultural nation that has twice elected a black president. For much of this period, Americans lived in a world of ideologically warring superpowers poised on the brink of nuclear annihilation; they now live in a world intimately connected by massive computer networks and a complex global economy, yet one still riven by dangerous religious and economic disputes. In popular culture, Americans’ tastes in music have moved from jazz and rock and roll to hip-hop and electronic music. In the visual arts, Americans have seen the explosive canvases of abstract expressionists such as Jackson Pollock become the Campbell’s Soup cans of pop artists such as Andy Warhol and then the video screens of cable television’s MTV and multimedia artists on YouTube. Their art and entertainment have come to them increasingly through technologies, starting with film and radio, then television, and now the Internet. In the literature of this amazingly transformative era, we find a record of how the nation has known, questioned, and even redefined itself.

When the United States ended the Second World War by dropping atomic bombs on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the nation was well positioned to assume a role of global leadership. While the cities and factories of both its enemies Germany and Japan and its allies Britain and the Soviet Union were destroyed in the war, the continental U.S. was never attacked. The American industries that won the war quickly retooled to win the peace, selling cars, radios, and washing machines within an increasingly global economy and ushering in an era of unparalleled American prosperity. The United States government spent tens of billions of dollars in
foreign aid to rebuild its former enemies Germany and Japan, ensuring that they would be both economic and military allies in the future. The GI Bill paid for an unprecedented number of young American men to attend colleges and buy homes, creating a huge professional middle class eager to work for the nation’s mighty high-tech corporations and live in its swiftly growing new suburbs. The decade and a half following the Second World War is often called the age of conformity, as the nation’s large, college-educated middle class embraced the values of the nuclear family and sought happiness, after years of desperate war, in their society’s newfound abundance of consumer goods.

Yet the peace was short lived, and there was dissent at home. In the midst of this postwar era of prosperity, Allen Ginsberg composed his great poem “Howl,” in which he lambasted the nation’s conformist culture for destroying its best and brightest citizens. Authors of the Beat movement of the 1950s such as Ginsberg celebrated America’s countercultures and sought to free literature from traditional formalism and align it more closely with the improvisatory musical solos of jazz, the spontaneous drips and splashes of abstract expressionist action painting, and the everyday utterances of the American street. Storytellers of the second wave of the Southern Renaissance resisted America’s culture of conformity and embraced their distinctive regionality, with Georgia author Flannery O’Connor lamenting in her essay, “The Fiction Writer and His Country,” that the traditional American South was “getting more and more like” the rest of the materialistic, money-hungry nation. Poets during this period, such as Theodore Roethke and Sylvia Plath, began sharing intimate, sometimes disturbing details from their lives in a newly confessional mode of poetry that showed how the nuclear family could be a source of stress as well as stability, ultimately showing the nation how the personal situation of the writer could represent the politics of the nation as a whole.

On the world stage, the Soviet Union organized the Eastern European nations it had conquered during the Second World War into a political bloc dedicated to Russian-led state socialism under which the state owns all businesses and administers all social services as opposed to American-led free-market capitalism, under which private individuals own all businesses. The former allies found themselves competing for the hearts and minds of the world over the value of their respective social systems. When the Soviet Union tested its own atomic bomb in 1949, the U.S. and the Soviet Union entered into a conflict called the Cold War. The two enemies proceeded to build tens of thousands of nuclear weapons over the following decades to deter each from attacking the other, accumulating enough atomic bombs to destroy human civilization many times over. The U.S. committed itself to a policy of Soviet containment, checking the influence of the so-called red menace abroad through foreign aid and
limited military action, and prosecuting American artists and activists with leftist sympathies at home through such venues as the House Un-American Activities Committee. Some of the authors in this chapter had their careers curtailed during this fearful period because of their political beliefs, as when poet William Carlos Williams was stripped of his consultancy to the Library of Congress in 1952 for once having written a poem titled “Russia.”

In addition to grappling with the threats of nuclear war and the red menace, Americans at this time were also grappling with the homegrown injustice of racial segregation. Up until 1965, Americans in many states lived under Jim Crow laws that disenfranchised African Americans, keeping black American citizens socially separate from and legally inferior to white citizens. The civil rights and black power movements of the 1950s and 60s, led by Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, increasingly showed the nation that the experience of its prosperous, college-educated white middle class was not the experience of all Americans. The often-violent struggle to desegregate America was televised across the nation, unifying the country within a new television culture in the very act of displaying its deep ideological divisions. The works in this volume by Toni Morrison, James Baldwin, and Ralph Ellison present a good record of what life was like in segregated America and during the civil rights movement.

In 1963, American President John F. Kennedy was assassinated. In 1974, another American president, Richard M. Nixon, resigned from office in disgrace. The tumultuous decade in between these two events is known as the Sixties. During this decade, America was fighting a seemingly endless war of containment in Vietnam. Students on college campuses protested the war and the policies of their own government. Urban populations rioted against racism and economic disparity. Artists and intellectuals radically reassessed America’s prosperous postwar era, challenging the gendered depictions of corporate men trapped in skyscrapers and servile women trapped by what feminist critic Betty Friedan called the feminine mystique. Led by author-activists such as Betty Friedan and Gloria Steinem, women in the 1960s and ’70s launched a second wave of feminist political activity, demanding full social and economic equality with men. Poets such as Adrienne Rich embodied the radical politics of their era, composing feminist poems.

America returned to a Cold War culture of conformity in the decade preceding the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Yet the changes the Sixties had wrought in the nation’s culture were permanent. From the time of the civil rights movement to the present day, American writers have increasingly come to see the U.S. as being home to several different kinds of Americans—African-Americans, Native Americans,
Asian Americans, Straight Americans, Queer Americans—each with their own unique experience of life in America. The civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s were followed by the gay rights and multicultural movements of the 1980s, 1990s, and early twenty-first century. Western culture itself became more welcoming of difference after the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War as the nations of Europe cast aside millennia of enmities and joined in a European Union, sharing a common currency, the Euro, and a common economic fate. While the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 illustrated how economically and technologically connected the world had become, they also drove home how socially and ideologically divided it remains in the early twenty-first century.

America’s growing multicultural sensibility and tolerance of diversity has been both empowering and challenging, reflecting new kinds of political identity that often conflict with Americans’ senses of who they are. Beholding the diversity within America, authors of the 1960s once worried about the “death of the novel.” It no longer felt possible for a single story to represent the American experience as a whole. Back in 1949, Arthur Miller’s salesman Willy Loman in his play, *Death of a Salesman*, could stand on stage as an American Everyman dreaming the American dream. Yet Willy’s life is far from representative of every life in America, starting with the lives of every American woman and extending to every member of an American minority. American authors of the following decades began to represent America multiculturally as a nation of indigenous peoples and immigrants from other lands. The short stories by Alice Walker and Leslie Marmon Silko are good examples of multicultural literature. Silko draws specifically on her Native American heritage while Alice Walker shows us the tensions that arise as her characters negotiate an identity that is grounded in both Africa and America.

The changes that the nation has undergone since 1945 have often been disorienting. The United States has remained an economic and cultural global superpower since 1945, but the politics of both the nation and the world during this time have been radically in flux, seeing the rise and fall of global empires, the emergence of new social justice movements, and the creation of new senses of national identity. Science and technology, so important to winning the Second World War, have penetrated more and more parts of American society. The computer has been the most influential invention of the era, changing the way Americans both work and play. The media of the book, radio, and film have been joined by the new media of the television and computer screen, giving Americans since 1945 an overwhelming variety of often contradictory ways to know themselves, their fellow citizens, and their world.
With so many media in which to see, know, and communicate with one another, Americans in the final decades of the twentieth century developed a growing sense of the “textuality” of experience, the recognition that their lives are increasingly lived through signs and images seen on life’s many screens, that videos and computer simulations have become an indispensable part of, and perhaps have even taken the place of, their reality. This sensibility is reflected in the transition from literary modernism to Postmodernism during this period. Postmodernist authors playfully use all the experimental literary techniques developed by the Modernists in the first half of the century to represent the many lives Americans live in the century’s second half and beyond.

American literature since 1945 has seen the rise of countercultural Beats and the confessional poets. It contains the voices of radical feminists, conservative regionalists, and proud multiculturalists. It presides over the reinvention of America as its modernist storytellers of one American experience now stand beside the postmodernist storytellers of many American experiences. In all these ways and more, the American writers who lived through the extraordinary era since 1945 present us with an insightful record of what their nation and its people once were, of what they are, and of what they may become.
5.2 Tennessee Williams (1911-1983)

Born Thomas Lanier Williams III in Mississippi, Williams later adopted the pen name “Tennessee” after he began his writing career. Williams’s early life was fraught with family dysfunction. Williams’s father was a shoe salesman who struggled with alcoholism and at times exhibited violent tendencies. Williams’s mother, Edwina, covered for her husband’s often embarrassing behavior, attempting to maintain a veneer of Southern gentility. Williams and his two siblings, Dakin and Rose, weathered the family dynamics for a time, until Rose was diagnosed with schizophrenia. After years of treatment proved inadequate, Williams’s mother eventually approved a lobotomy for Rose, and after the procedure, the young woman was never the same, spending the rest of her life in an institution. Williams, who was very close to Rose, was tormented about his sister, and many of his plays dealt in some way with the trauma Rose endured. Williams attended college for a time as he developed his writing skills, attempting to garner attention for his work. It was not until the 1940s that Williams enjoyed his first success with *The Glass Menagerie*, which opened in Chicago and eventually made its way to New York and enjoyed a long run on Broadway. Williams followed that success in 1947 with *A Streetcar Named Desire*, one of his most enduring plays. Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, Williams enjoyed a string of successes and saw a number of his plays adapted for film. By 1959, he had won multiple Pulitzer prizes for his work. In the 1930s, Williams had accepted his sexual orientation as a gay man but maintained a private life. In later years, Williams struggled with alcoholism and prescription drug addiction. After the painful loss of his partner of fourteen years, Frank Merlo, Williams faced serious depression, and over the last twenty years of his life, Williams struggled to reignite his writing career while his health and mental state deteriorated. In February 1983, Williams was found dead in a hotel room in New York after apparently choking on a bottle cap.

Tennessee Williams’s style is often referred to as poetic realism or poetic expressionism. Expressionism is a part of the modernist movement in art and literature, where the expression of emotion or emotional experience takes precedence over the materialistic depiction of physical reality. Williams’s plays typically contain stage directions that call not for a physical setting but for a creation of mood. Physical setting is often altered, augmented, or distorted in order to create a mood or to suggest an emotion. Music, lighting, and screen legends are used symbolically to create this kind of effect. In terms of characterization, Williams’s plays often center on misfits or outcasts—outsiders who are often very sensitive and completely out of tune with contemporary times. Characters may be at odds with restrictive Southern mores, and they may struggle with sexual repression. In *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Blanche DuBois is a complicated character who
at times performs the role of Southern Belle, slightly down on her luck but steeped in Southern
gentility with fine manners. At other times, the mask slips, and we see Blanche the sexually
hungry woman, who gives a predatory stare at the young newspaper boy. At still other times, we
see Blanche in all of her raw vulnerability, terrified of being “played out,” of having lost her
youth and looks, of being utterly alone.

The Tennessee Williams biography was reproduced from Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to
American Literature 1865 to Present.
Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction
to American Literature 1865 to Present (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. Link to ebook

5.2.1 A Streetcar Named Desire (1947)

Link to A Streetcar Named Desire
5.3 Elizabeth Bishop (1911-1979)

Born February 8, 1911, in Worchester, Massachusetts, Elizabeth Bishop was an American poet and short-story author. She was first raised by her maternal grandparents due to her father’s untimely death and her mother’s institutionalization. Her paternal grandparents, who were very wealthy and lived in Nova Scotia, brought Bishop to live with them back in Massachusetts. Growing up, Bishop attended the Walnut Hills School for Girls and Vassar College. Upon graduating, she relocated to New York, but traveled extensively throughout the world.

In 1938, Bishop moved to Key West, where she wrote two poetry collections; her second, Poems: North & South / A Cold Spring won the Pulitzer Prize in 1955. In 1944, she left Key West and moved to Brazil with her architect partner, Lota de Macedo Soares. Soares committed suicide in 1967, and Bishop then took a teaching position at Harvard in 1970. Her poetry moved many people, and her popularity continued to soar even after her death in 1979, in Lewis Wharf, Boston, Massachusetts.

Journalist Ernie Hilbert wrote the following about Bishop’s work: “Bishop’s poetics is one distinguished by tranquil observation, craft-like accuracy, care for the small things of the world, a miniaturist’s discretion and attention. Unlike the pert and wooly poetry that came to dominate American literature by the second half of her life, her poems are balanced like Alexander Calder mobiles, turning so subtly as to seem almost still at first, every element, every weight of meaning and song, poised flawlessly against the next” (Elizabeth Bishop, Poetry Foundation).

Some of Bishop’s works include “The Armadillo,” reproduced here, “Arrival at Santos,” “Little Exercise,” and “A Miracle for Breakfast.” People continue to be inspired by Bishop’s writing and poetry, praising her artistry and vision.

The Elizabeth Bishop biography was written by Samantha Walter, a University of Delaware student.

5.3.3 “The Armadillo” (1979)

Link to “The Armadillo”
5.4 Robert Hayden (1913-1980)

The first black faculty member in University of Michigan’s English department and the first African American to be appointed as Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress, Robert Hayden was born Asa Bundy Sheffey in Detroit, Michigan, on August 4, 1913. His parents, Ruth and Asa, had separated prior to his birth. He was given up to the foster care system, where he witnessed his foster parents, Sue Ellen Westerfield and William Hayden, physically and verbally abuse each other. Due to growing up in a dysfunctional household and being much smaller than the rest of the children at school, he became depressed and isolated himself from his classmates. However, literature is where he found his escape, taking a liking to it from a young age and completely engulfling himself in it.

Hayden attended Wayne State University after graduating high school, but left in 1936, one credit short of graduating, to work for the Federal Writers’ Project. While working for the FWP he studied African American history and folklore, which were his main inspirations for his early works until he met his wife. Hayden only worked here for a couple of years and released his first collection of poetry *Heart-Shape in the Dust* in 1940 after leaving the Federal Writers’ Project. It was later this year when he met his wife, Erma Inez Morris. He converted to her faith, Baha’i. This faith marked a new direction in his work, as Hayden informed others through his poem about his new faith.

Hayden returned to school at the University of Michigan seeking a Master’s degree. Here he met Professor W.H. Auden, who helped him hone his writing style and technique. Upon graduating from Michigan, Hayden became a professor at Fisk University for over 20 years. He returned to the University of Michigan, but this time as a professor, an 11-year run that concluded his career.

Hayden wrote poetry on a range of topics, including his faith, his struggles as an African American man, his traumatic childhood, and current events such as the Vietnam War. Two poems in particular focused on slavery: “Middle Passage” and “Frederick Douglas,” the latter of which is reproduced here. He gained an international reputation in the 1960s. “Those Winter Sundays,” reproduced here, is a poem about his father’s hard work. Hayden received many awards and was even regarded as one of the most accomplished African American poets. However, because of his faith’s teaching on unity, he claimed he was an American poet and not an African American poet, which alienated him from some of his fellow African American writers. In 1980, Hayden died in Ann Arbor, Michigan, at 66 years old.

*The Robert Hayden biography was written by Nicholas Pallis, a University of Delaware student.*
5.4.1 “Those Winter Sundays” (1966)

Link to “Those Winter Sundays”

5.4.2 “Frederick Douglass” (1966)

Link to “Frederick Douglass”
5.5 Ralph Ellison (1914-1994)

Ralph Waldo Ellison was born in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Ellison’s father, Lewis, a manual laborer who delivered ice and coal, was an avid reader who named his son after Ralph Waldo Emerson and who hoped that his son would grow up to be a poet. Unfortunately he died of a work-related accident when Ellison was three, which left the two brothers, Robert and Herbert, to be raised by their single mother, Ida. The absence of his father would remain a recurring theme in Ellison’s work.

As a young man, Ellison was interested in arts and culture, specifically, music. In 1933, he enrolled at the Tuskegee Institute, a historically black college which offered one of the nation’s top programs in music. During his time at Tuskegee, Ellison gained a reputation for spending long hours in the library, reading heavily from several Modernist writers. Ellison cites T. S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land* as a major influence in his life, inspiring him to be a writer. After college, Ellison moved to New York, where he met influential artist Romare Bearden as well as writer Richard Wright, both of whom were important influences on Ellison’s life. During this time in New York, Ellison began to publish short stories, essays, and book reviews.

In 1952, Ellison published his debut novel, *Invisible Man*, a critical best seller which won the National Book Award. The novel vaulted him into the international spotlight as a writer, a position that he did not always embrace. *Invisible Man* describes how the protagonist (who is never named and is, hence, “invisible”) experiences various incidents of racism throughout his life after moving from the South to New York. The novel, Ellison’s only one published during his lifetime, has remained one of the most famous and most influential novels in American literature. He spent the remainder of his life working on a follow-up novel. In 1967, he claimed to be near completion of this novel when a house fire consumed his drafts. After his death, his posthumous follow-up was published under the title *Juneteenth* (1999); later a longer version of this novel was published under the title *Three Days Before the Shooting* (2010).

Although he never published a second novel in his lifetime, he did publish several essays, including essays about his lifelong love of music. His essay collection *Shadow and Act* (1964) was named one of the top 100 best non-fiction books of the twentieth century. One of the common themes of Ellison’s work, both in fiction and non-fiction, was the idea of cultural ancestry—the idea that our cultural ancestors could be as influential as our biological ancestors. “Battle Royal,” the opening chapter of *Invisible Man*, describes the protagonist’s humiliating experience accepting a scholarship from a local civic organization. It was first published as a short story.
The Ralph Ellison biography was reproduced from *Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present.*
Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, *Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present* (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. [Link to ebook](#)

### 5.5.1 From *Invisible Man* (1952)

[Link to Chapter 1](#)
5.6 Dudley Randall (1914-2000)

The son of a minister and teacher, Dudley Randall was born in Washington, D.C., in 1914. When Randall was only four years old he began writing poems. Five years after that, his family moved to Detroit. His first poem was published with Detroit Free Press when he was 13. He won one dollar for his efforts. In addition to his writing, Randall worked at Ford Motors for five years and served in the South Pacific in World War II. He also attended Wayne State University, earning a Bachelor of Arts in English, and the University of Michigan, earning a Master’s in Library Science.

Randall was fluent in Russian and translated Russian poems to English. Friends with Robert Hayden, he attended readings by prominent African-American writers including W. E. B. Du Bois and James Weldon Johnson and was inspired by their message. During his career as a poet, he published several collections such as Cities Burning, More to Remember: Poems of Four Decades, After the Killing, and A Litany of Friends: New and Selected Poems. Randall’s work has influenced many people, especially the black community.

Labeled “the father of the black poetry movement of the 1960s,” Randall founded Broadside Press, a pioneering publishing company that published many leading African-American writers, including Gwendolyn Brooks, Audre Lorde, and Etheridge Knight. It was one of the most important literary forums of the Blacks Arts Movement, which Randall became involved with in the 1960s.

His work, which focuses on racial and historical themes, draws from Western traditional poetry and the Harlem Renaissance. His poems have served as an inspiration for younger African-American writers. Reproduced here is a poem from Cities Burning called “The Melting Pot”; it tells of problems of identity for immigrants.

In 1981, Randall became Detroit’s first poet laureate. He died in 2000. A year after his death, the University of Detroit initiated the Dudley Randall Poetry Prize, which is given to a student at UD Mercy every year.

The Dudley Randall biography was written by Vernon Patterson, a University of Delaware student.

5.6.1 “The Melting Pot” (1968)

Link to “The Melting Pot”
5.7 Randall Jarrell (1914-1965)

Poet and literary critic Randall Jarrell was born on May 6, 1914, in Nashville, Tennessee. While a high school student at Hume-Fogg, he wrote satirical essays for the school magazine. At Vanderbilt University, he studied under Robert Penn Warren, Allen Tate, and John Crowe Ransom, all of whom were part of the Southern Agrarian Movement. Although Jarrell did not join the Movement, these three men had a profound influence on launching his career: Warren first published Jarrell’s criticism, Tate first published his poetry, and Ransom gave him his first teaching job at Kenyon College. While at Kenyon, Jarrell roomed with future poet Robert Lowell.

Jarrell then went to work at the University of Texas at Austin, where he met his first wife Mackie Langham. His first collection of poems, Blood for a Stranger, was published in 1942. Following the release of his book, he enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He did not end up staying in that position very long, and eventually became a control tower operator with the Army. "Little Friend, Little Friend", published in 1945, established his reputation as a first-rate poet. Published in that collection is Jarrell’s most widely known work, “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner,” reproduced here. After being discharged from the service, Jarrell joined the faculty at Sarah Lawrence College in Bronxville, New York; however, by the following year, he left to teach at the Woman’s College of the University of North Carolina, where he worked for the remainder of his short life. Jarrell divorced and remarried, temporarily moving to Washington, D. C. while he served as the consultant in poetry at the Library of Congress, later titled Poet Laureate.

Jarrell’s struggles with depression intensified as he approached 50. After a negative review of The Lost World, he attempted suicide and was hospitalized. Shortly after that incident, he was struck dead by a car at the age of 51. Many close friends of his believed his death a suicide rather than the accident it was declared to be.

The Randall Jarrell biography was written by Kendall Chin, a University of Delaware student.
5.7.1 “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (1945)

Link to “The Death of the Ball Turret Gunner”
5.8 Shirley Jackson (1916-1965)

Self-proclaimed “practicing amateur witch,” Shirley Jackson was born on December 14, 1916, in San Francisco, California. She felt like an outcast in her conservative, middle-class family. She was verbally abused by her mother, Geraldine, who belittled her for not being conventionally feminine and told her on more than one occasion that she was the result of a failed abortion. As a result, Jackson turned to writing, where she could express her thoughts.

When Jackson was 17, her family moved East. She started taking classes at the University of Rochester, but left after a year. She devoted her days to writing, averaging an impressive 1,000 words per day. In 1937, she entered Syracuse University and published her first story. While at Syracuse, she met her husband, Stanley Edgar Hyman, who was an aspiring literary critic. The couple moved to New York City after graduating. Jackson continued at her craft, writing every day.

In 1945, Hyman and Jackson moved to Vermont when Hyman took a teaching position at Bennington College. During this time, Jackson raised her four children. 1948 was a momentous year for Jackson: she published her first novel and her most recognized work, “The Lottery,” reproduced here. The short story was written in under two hours. She submitted it to The New Yorker, who were unanimous in their decision to print the story. Published on June 26, 1948, Jackson and The New Yorker received backlash almost immediately. Hundreds of people called, sent in letters, and even went as far as canceling their subscription. The public was outraged, disgusted, and confused by Jackson’s work. Many even believed that the story was a retelling of a real event. Some even asked where it took place so they could witness it themselves. Jackson refused to comment on what her purpose behind the story was, leaving it up to the reader’s interpretation. “The Lottery” was translated into many different languages and adapted for different types of media.

In 1949, the family moved to Connecticut so Hyman could work for The New Yorker. Jackson entertained many local artists and writers, including Ralph Ellison, who lived with them while he finished Invisible Man. In 1951, the family returned to Vermont. Being married to an unfaithful husband who controlled the finances (even though Jackson out-earned Hyman) affected Jackson’s health, which began to deteriorate at a young age. She was a heavy smoker and drinker and suffered from extreme anxiety and agoraphobia. Jackson began writing stories with the
recurring theme of a lonely woman who was trying to escape her surroundings. Release came on August 8, 1965, when Jackson had a heart attack at the age of 48.

The Shirley Jackson biography was written by Kelsey Rigney, a University of Delaware student.

5.8.1 “The Lottery” (1948)

Link to “The Lottery”
5.9 Gwendolyn Brooks (1917-2000)

One of the most widely read poets of the twentieth century, Gwendolyn Brooks was born in a Topeka, Kansas, in June of 1917 to a janitor and a teacher. When Brooks was just six weeks old, the family moved from Topeka to Chicago, where she lived most of her life. Brooks began writing when she was a teenager. She published her first poem at the age of 13 and had been published about 75 times by the age of 16. She received an associate’s degree in literature from Wilson Junior College in Chicago and multiple honorary degrees from universities.

She developed her craft for decades, and her first book of poetry was published in 1945: *A Street in Bronzeville* was immediately successful. By 1949, Brooks published another book of poetry, *Annie Allen*, for which she won a Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1950, becoming the first African American recipient. Both *A Street in Bronzeville* and *Annie Allen* delved into her thoughts and experiences as a young Black woman during the 1940s. *A Street in Bronzeville* highlights the conditions African Americans were subjected to while living in Chicago, using various South Side residents as characters in the poems. The themes within the book include violence, grief, racism, trauma, and resiliency. *Annie Allen* features a young woman who progresses from birth to youth, to womanhood, and finally to death. Its themes involve acceptance, perseverance, resilience, unhappiness, and dreams of a better life. The setting for both collections reflects Chicago’s inadequate living conditions for African Americans.

She published more than 20 poetry collections, including *The Bean Eaters* (1960), *In the Mecca* (1968), and *Children Coming Home* (1991). Reproduced here is a poem from *The Bean Eaters*: “We Real Cool,” is an often anthologized jazz poem. Brooks authored a fictional work called *Maud Martha* (1953), and nonfiction works such as *A Capsule Course in Black Poetry Writing* (1975) and *Young Poet’s Primer* (1981). Part of Brooks’s craft development involved attending poetry workshops, particularly one by Inez Cunningham Stark, and receiving critiques from known poets including James Weldon Johnson, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes.

Brooks was an advocate for Black Americans. An active member of the NAACP, she served as the Director of Publicity for the organization. During her writing career, she made of habit of publishing through small Black-run publishing houses, leaving Harper & Row for Dudley Randall’s Broadside Press.

Gwendolyn Brooks is a decorated author and poet. She not only received the Pulitzer, but was also appointed Poet Laureate of Illinois from 1968 to 2000 and Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress (the first Black woman to hold the office); she received the National Book Foundation’s Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. She passed in December of 2000 at 83 years old in Chicago, Illinois.

The Gwendolyn Brooks biography was written by Abby Haney, a University of Delaware student.
5.9.1 “We Real Cool” (1960)

Link to “We Real Cool”
5.10 Robert Lowell (1917-1977)

Related to poets Amy Lowell and James Russell Lowell, Robert Lowell was born with poetry in his blood. From Boston, Massachusetts, he set many of his poems in the New England city, influenced by his upbringing there. He came from a family that could trace its roots back to the *Mayflower*. His mother was a descendant of Jonathan Edwards. During his lifetime, he suffered from bipolar disorder.

Lowell found his passion for poetry while a student at St. Mark’s School in Southborough, Massachusetts. He attended Harvard University for two years. During his freshman year, he brought one of his poems to Robert Frost for feedback. In an interview, Lowell recalls: “I had a huge blank verse epic on the First Crusade and took it to him all in my undecipherable pencil-writing, and he read a little of it, and said, ‘It goes on rather a bit, doesn’t it?’” Frost instructed Lowell to work on making his poems more concise.

Following the advice of his psychiatrist, Lowell left Harvard after his sophomore year and went to study poetry with Allen Tate. The eccentric Lowell pitched a tent on the Tate’s lawn and lived in it for two months. Lowell followed Tate to Kenyon College, receiving a degree in Classics in 1940. While working on his master’s degree in English literature at Louisiana State University, he taught introductory English courses.


By the mid-1950s, Lowell began to write more directly from personal experience and in looser meter and form. In 1959 the most influential book that he would ever publish was released, *Life Studies*, which marked a turning point in his career and in American poetry. The poems from this collection were written in a mix of free and metered verse. Described as featuring “a new emphasis on intense, uninhibited discussion of personal, family, and psychological struggles,” it won the 1960 National Book Award and made Lowell a leader of the confessional poetry movement. Poet Stanley Kunitz wrote that *Life Studies* was “perhaps the most influential book of modern verse since T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*.” Reproduced here is “Skunk Hour,” a poem inspired by Elizabeth Bishop’s “The Armadillo” and first published in *Life Studies*. It is an
example of poetry written in the confessional vein; in the piece, Lowell declares, in a way that no other American writer had to that point, that his “mind’s not right.”

In the following years, Lowell published translations of works, including *Imitations* and *Phaedra*; new volumes of poetry, namely *For the Union Dead* and *Near the Ocean*, a trilogy play, and a verse journal called *Notebook 1967-68*. Three books of sonnets were published in the 1970s: *History*, *For Lizzy and Harriet*, and *The Dolphin*. *Day by Day*, Lowell’s last volume of poetry, was published in 1977, the year of his death. Many of his works juxtapose personal with public history.

Lowell won a second Pulitzer Prize for Poetry in 1974 for *The Dolphin* and the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977 for *Day by Day*. Influenced by William Carlos Williams and Elizabeth Bishop, he is “widely considered one of the most important American poets of the postwar era.”

Lowell taught at a number of universities: the Iowa Writers’ Workshop; Boston University, where Sylvia Plath and Anne Sexton were his students; the University of Cincinnati; Yale University; Harvard University; and Essex University.

He served as a chancellor of the Academy of American Poets from 1962 until his sudden death. Lowell died on September 12, 1977, of a heart attack he suffered in a NYC cab on his way to see one of his ex-wives, Elizabeth Hardwick. He was laid to rest in Stark Cemetery in New Hampshire, where generations of his family are buried.

The Robert Lowell biography was written by Michela Pozzi, a University of Delaware student.

**5.10.1 “Skunk Hour” (1956)**

[Link to “Skunk Hour”](#)
5.11 James Baldwin (1924-1987)

James Baldwin was born in Harlem, the oldest of nine children. Although he did not know his biological father, Baldwin’s rocky relationship with his stepfather, a lay preacher who shared his name of James Baldwin, was a major influence in both Baldwin’s writings and life. At the age of fourteen, a young Baldwin tried to follow in his stepfather’s footsteps as a preacher, but his interest was short lived. In high school, Baldwin joined the school’s literary magazine and began making trips to Greenwich Village. These trips only further sparked his interests in the arts and befriended many professional artists, including Beauford Delaney, an African-American painter who found fame during the Harlem Renaissance. As he recounts in his essay, “Notes on a Native Son,” Baldwin’s stepfather died in 1943 and was buried on Baldwin’s nineteenth birthday, which was, subsequently, both the day his youngest brother was born as well as the day of the Harlem Riot.

In 1944, after the death of his stepfather, Baldwin moved to Greenwich Village, to focus on becoming a writer. It was here that Baldwin found an artistic community, forming friendships with artists such as Marlon Brando and his literary hero, Richard Wright. With Wright’s help, Baldwin was awarded the Eugene Saxton fellowship (1945). Baldwin began to publish essays in influential magazines, such as The Nation and Partisan Review; however, in 1948, due to his disillusionment as a black, gay man in America, Baldwin followed in the path of other expatriates, including Wright, by moving to Paris. Although he would live in both Switzerland and Turkey, Baldwin eventually settled in Saint-Paul de Vence, South of France.

Baldwin’s first novel, Go Tell It on the Mountain (1953), was a major critical and commercial success. Despite being fiction, the biographical similarities in the novel about a young man, John Grimes—who questions the hypocrisy of the church, his own religious upbringing, his own sexuality, and his frustrations with being an African-American—were quite transparent. In 1955, he released his first collection of essays, the influential Notes on a Native Son, but it was his follow up novel, Giovanni’s Room (1956), which was the subject of international controversy for its homoerotic content. The novel follows David who, after his girlfriend leaves him, has an affair with an Italian bartender, Giovanni.

The debut of Baldwin’s book of essays The Fire Next Time (1963) only further cemented his reputation as one of the most famous and influential American writers of the twentieth century. Baldwin, despite living in France, was an extremely influential figure during the American Civil Rights movement, aligning himself with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee.
(SNCC), making several trips to the American South, working with figures such as Martin Luther King Jr. In 1963, he was featured on the cover of *Time* magazine for his work on the Civil Rights movement.

In his famous short story, “Sonny’s Blues,” Baldwin deals with the conflict between two brothers, one a math teacher and the other, Sonny, a musician recently released from jail. Throughout the story, it becomes clear that the two brothers do not know each other very well and that, although Sonny’s troubles are explicit, the narrator’s troubles are more implicit.

The James Baldwin biography was reproduced from *Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present.*

Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, *Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present* (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. [Link to ebook](#)

### 5.11.1 “Sonny’s Blues” (1957)

[Link to “Sonny’s Blues”](#)
5.12 Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964)

Mary Flannery O’Connor was born in Savannah, Georgia and lived there until 1938. An Orthodox Catholic family, the O’Connor family lived in Lafayette Square, a largely Catholic neighborhood of Savannah, mainly through the generosity of her second cousin, Kate Semmes (whom O’Connor would call “Cousin Katie”). In 1936, O’Connor’s father, Edwin, was diagnosed with lupus and was hospitalized in Atlanta; his diagnosis would later force the family to leave Savannah. While Edwin sought treatment, both Regina and Flannery would often stay with family in Milledgeville.

In 1941, Edwin’s death would imprint itself on O’Connor, who was close with her father. Both Flannery and her mother, Regina, subsequently moved to live at Andalusia, the maternal family farm in Milledgeville. After high school, O’Connor enrolled in Georgia College for Women (now Georgia College) in Milledgeville, where she completed a degree in English and Sociology. In college, O’Connor was active with both the literary magazine, The Corinthian, and the yearbook, The Spectrum. After college, O’Connor enrolled in journalism school at the University of Iowa but, once there, enrolled in the Iowa Writer’s Workshop, where she was able to work with many of the most influential writers of her time.

At the Writer’s Workshop, O’Connor established herself as one of their most promising writers, winning a book contract, as well as a prestigious Yaddo fellowship at the Yaddo Writers Colony in New York. However, after being diagnosed with lupus in 1951, Flannery O’Connor returned to Andalusia, where she remained. At the age of twenty-five, she published her first novel, Wise Blood (1952) and followed it up with her first collection of short stories, A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories (1955). Her second published novel, The Violent Bear It Away (1960), was nominated for a National Book Award. Up until her death from lupus, at the young age of thirty-nine, she was working on her second collection of stories, Everything That Rises Must Converge (1965). In 1971, O’Connor’s friend and literary executor, Sally Fitzgerald, helped publish The Complete Stories of Flannery O’Connor which won the National Book Award and was later awarded the Reader’s Choice Best of the National Book Award (2010).

O’Connor’s fiction is famous for its Southern gothic settings and her use of dark humor. Other themes in her fiction include the following: her relationship with her mother, life at Andalusia, and her Orthodox Catholicism. “A Good Man is Hard to Find” is O’Connor’s most anthologized story and one of her most violent. The story follows a family of six that, while on vacation to Florida, encounter the Misfit, a pensive, yet troubled serial killer, and one of O’Connor’s most
famous characters. The Misfit states that his troubles center on Christ’s claims of resurrecting the dead.

The Flannery O’Connor biography was reproduced from Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present. Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. Link to ebook

5.12.1 “A Good Man Is Hard to Find” (1953)  
Link to “A Good Man Is Hard to Find”

5.12.2 “Parker’s Back” (1965)  
Link to “Parker’s Back”

5.12.3 “Revelation” (1965)  
Link to “Revelation”
5.13 Allen Ginsberg (1926-1997)

Ever since he read his groundbreaking poem “Howl” in 1954 to a shocked and enthralled audience at the Six Gallery in San Francisco, Allen Ginsberg has been the poetic voice of America’s counterculture. Ginsberg grew up in Patterson, New Jersey and attended Columbia University in New York City, where he met fellow authors Jack Kerouac (author of *On the Road* published in 1957) and William S. Burroughs (author of *Naked Lunch* published in 1959). Although a distinguished student, Ginsberg was temporarily expelled from Columbia for profanity and later spent eight months in a mental institution after pleading insanity when caught storing stolen goods for a drug addict friend. Upon his release, he was befriended by the poet William Carlos Williams, who recognized in Ginsberg a singular talent. After graduating from Columbia and supporting himself with a series of menial jobs in Harlem, Ginsberg moved to San Francisco in 1953 and began a successful, if brief, career as a market researcher. Yet his true calling remained poetry; he was soon fired from his job and, while on unemployment, wrote the poem that would make his reputation as a major American poet: the explosive, furious “Howl,” whose opening lines famously read, “I have seen the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness, starving hysterical naked, / dragging themselves through the negro streets at dawn looking for an angry fix, / angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machine of night...” In San Francisco, Ginsberg found a welcoming community of poets centered around Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Book-shop. In 1956, City Lights Books published Ginsberg’s first collection, *Howl and Other Poems* (which includes the poem selected here, “A Supermarket in California”) only to have the book seized and prosecuted by U.S. Customs for its allegedly indecent depiction of sexuality. From that point on, in numerous volumes of poetry as well as direct political actions from sit-ins to Congressional testimonies, Ginsberg became a singularly oppositional voice in American culture, howling against conformity and war, championing environmentalism and gay rights, and finding beauty in all that American society has beaten down.

Ginsberg’s *Howl and Other Poems* and his friend Jack Kerouac’s novel *On the Road* (a *roman à clef* in which the leftist Ginsberg is the character “Carlo Marx”) are the two definitive works of Beat literature, depicting the countercultural lives of their artists in an improvisatory, spontaneous style akin to jazz music. In 1948, while still living in Harlem, Ginsberg experienced a days-long cosmic vision in which he beheld the beauty of all divine creation and heard the godly voice of British romantic poet William Blake in the sky reciting his *Songs of Innocence and Experience* (1798). Inspired by this vision and writing under the mentorship of William Carlos Williams, Ginsberg began crafting the poetic style for which he is now known: long, free
Whitmanesque lines that find their rhythms in everyday American speech and contain the shockingly personal confessions of the poet himself on topics ranging from his mother’s mental illness to his own open homosexuality. For Ginsberg, the American experience is often one of oppression and loss; Ginsberg’s poetic mission, accordingly, is to recover the beauty of those people and things America herself has cast aside. In the poem “A Supermarket in California” included here, Ginsberg imagines walking with his poetic ancestor Walt Whitman through a modern-day super-market, showing the great American romantic what his beautiful nation has become.

The Allen Ginsberg biography was reproduced from Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present.
Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. Link to ebook

5.13.1 “Howl” (1956)

Link to “Howl”
5.14 James Wright (1927-1980)

James Wright was born in Martins Ferry, Ohio, during the month of December in 1927. Throughout his childhood, he felt the enormous impact of the Great Depression. His father, Dudley Wright, worked at a glass factory for 50 years to sustain his family. His mother, Jessie Wright, worked at a laundromat for many years, setting herself apart from the average housewife at the time. Even with both parents working, he experienced poverty and financial struggle. As a result, in 1943, Wright suffered a nervous breakdown that led him to miss one year of high school.

Because both parents had dropped out of school before the age of 16, they ensured that Wright received a good education. Fortunately, he was given the opportunity to complete his high school education and graduate in 1946. During his time in high school, he was influenced by his teachers to pursue his talent in languages. However, shortly after graduating, he joined the army and was stationed in Japan. Upon returning, Wright enrolled into Kenyon College on the G.I. Bill, studying under John Crowe Ransom. He became successful as a poet during his time at college with his numerous published works in the Kenyon Review. A member of Phi Beta Kappa, he graduated cum laude in 1952.

Wright married another Martins Ferry native, Liberty Kardules. The two later travelled to Austria on a Fulbright Fellowship. When in Austria, Wright studied the works of Theodor Storm and Georg Trakl at the University of Vienna. When returning to the United States, he pursued his masters and doctoral degree at the University of Washington where he studied with Theodore Roethke and Stanley Kunits, both successful American poets at the time.

Wright’s poetry transitioned from incorporating meter and stanza to loose form. He was inspired by Thomas Hardy and Robert Frost for their strong involvement with human issues and emotions in their poetry. Wright’s engagement with political and social issues is apparent in The Green Wall and Saint Judas, the latter of which contains “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave,” reproduced here. Both collections focus on individuals who have been marginalized by society for their economic status and sexual orientation. The isolated narrator resonated with many readers. As a result, these works won the Yale Series of Younger Poets award in 1957 and 1959. He went on to teach at several universities and colleges, including the University of Minnesota and Macalester College. In 1971, Wright was elected as a fellow of the Academy of American Poets due to his published works and teachings. The following year, he received the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for his Collected Poems. He passed away in 1980, yet his footprint on American poetry remains.

The James Wright biography was written by Idalia D. Briceno Comacho, a University of Delaware student.

5.14.1 “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave” (1990)

Link to “At the Executed Murderer’s Grave”
5.15 Adrienne Rich (1929-2012)

Adrienne Rich is one of the most important poets and feminists of the middle to late twentieth century. Taken together, the twenty-five collections of poetry and numerous essays she published in her lifetime are a powerful literary expression of this period’s radical politics. Born in Baltimore, Maryland, Rich was encouraged to write poetry at an early age by her father, a pathologist at Johns Hopkins Medical School with a passion for English verse. She distinguished herself as a poet early in life, publishing her first book of poems, A Change of World, in 1951 while still a senior at Radcliffe College. The renowned poet W. H. Auden selected Rich’s work for publication in the prestigious Yale Younger Poets Series based on what he perceived as the delicacy and restraint of her style. In 1952, Rich won her first of two coveted Guggenheim Fellowships, which funded a year-long trip to England and Italy. In 1953, she married an economics professor from Harvard, giving birth to three children before the end of the decade. In this formative decade, Rich faced a dilemma still familiar to women today: how to maintain her career while shouldering full responsibility for her children and home. In the volumes of poetry she published in the early 1960s, Rich turns an increasingly critical eye on an American society that subordinates women to the will of men and that asks only women to choose between family and career. Rich’s delicate and restrained poetry became radicalized over the course of the 1960s as she realized that her personal situation was also political, an expression of social forces and institutions that the poet herself could change. From then on, as she writes in her 1968 poem “Implosions,” “I wanted to choose words that even you/ would have to be changed by.”

From the 1960s until she published her final collection in 2010, Rich used poetry to criticize war, sexism, and environmental destruction and to imagine a world free of gender divisions and male domination. Beginning in the 1970s, Rich became an outspoken advocate for lesbian rights in her poetry as well. As she describes in her book Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution (1976), over the course of the 1960s Rich came to realize that she had been living as a “suppressed lesbian” her entire life. She separated from her husband in 1970 and entered into a relationship with the novelist Michelle Cliff in 1974, with whom she remained partners until her death 2012. Rich’s National Book Award winning collection of 1973, Diving into the Wreck, exemplifies her poetry of political conviction. Published during the second wave feminist movement, the poems in this volume describe women as a vast global sisterhood that has been written out of history. Rich optimistically imagines that this oppressive situation can change as society itself changes, in part through the force of the poet’s voice. The history of Western
civilization, as Rich writes in in the closing lines of the titular poem presented here, “Diving into the Wreck,” is “a book of myths / in which / our names do not appear.” The wreck in this poem is the wreck of western civilization itself, containing the ruins of both patriarchy and poetry. The poem’s narrator is a person unimaginable in traditional Western society: someone who identifies with both genders at once and who transforms the decline of one civilization into the art of its successor. This hybrid narrator takes the reader on a dramatic journey into this dangerous wreck so that the reader, too, can imagine the end of a divisive civilization in which men dominate women.

The Adrienne Rich biography was reproduced from Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present. Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. Link to ebook

5.15.1 “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers” (1951)
   Link to “Aunt Jennifer’s Tigers”

5.15.2 “Diving into the Wreck” (1973)
   Link to “Diving into the Wreck:"

Page 36
5.16 Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968)

Leader of the Civil Rights Movement from 1955 until 1968 and Nobel Peace Prize winner, Martin Luther King Jr. was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia. He was initially named Michael after his father but sometime after his birth, both of their names were changed to Martin. Dr. King’s father had worked as a sharecropper on the outskirts of the small town of Stockbridge, Georgia. King Sr. was a hard worker, but the pay was not cutting it and so he moved to Atlanta with just a pair of shoes and a 6th-grade education to his name. Over time, King’s father built a reputation as a preacher. He married Alberta Christine Williams, who had previously studied at the Hampton Institute of Virginia and graduated from Atlanta’s Spelman College. After King Sr. had taken over Alberta’s father’s place as assistant pastor following his death in 1931, King Jr. and his two siblings were born. The family was financially secure and of the middle-class, so the children received an exceptionally better education than others of their race at that time. Although King Jr. was young, he recognized this difference in opportunities between his family and others in the Black community, which led to his nearly lifelong activism for social justice and reform. Additionally, when King Jr. was a young boy he was not able to attend the same school as his white friends, and their parents eventually would not allow them to play with King Jr. anymore; this was a huge inspiration for him to try to make a change in our country and the world.

Dr. King married Coretta Scott and moved down south where he became pastor of Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama. He began his social rights endeavor by leading a 382-day boycott of Montgomery’s bus lines, experiencing victory when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled bus segregation unconstitutional. A few years later, Dr. King’s peaceful nature was put to the test in Birmingham, Alabama, where he had participated in a large-scale protest for fair-hiring and desegregation of department stores. During this protest, police brutality was used against the protestors and King himself was arrested. He author “Letter from Birmingham Jail” during this ordeal. Following his release, he organized and was the speaker at the March on Washington, where he delivered a powerful, moving speech titled “I Have a Dream,” linked here, that landed him the Nobel Prize in 1964. King was also involved in anti-Vietnam War efforts. He supported peace, even when the NAACP thought peaceful protest was a tactical mistake. However, King knew struggle when he saw it and pleaded for the discouragement of violence, the end of poverty, and the organization of the workforce.

King Jr.’s life was cut entirely too short; he was assassinated on April 4, 1968, as he stood outside the Lorraine Hotel in Memphis, Tennessee. He was shot in the neck and ultimately died.
shortly after. Thankfully, his legacy did not die with him; his wife Coretta organized the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, the Lorraine Hotel is now the Civil Rights Museum, and his birthday, January 15, is a national holiday.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. biography was written by Joshua Ginsberg, a University of Delaware student.

5.16.1 “I Have a Dream” (1963)

[Link to “I Have a Dream”]
5.17 Toni Morrison (1931-2019)

The first African-American to win a Nobel Prize for Literature, Toni Morrison is one of the most important American authors of the past century. In the eleven exquisitely crafted novels she has published, Morrison combines folk and postmodernist storytelling techniques to explore what it means to be both black and a woman in America. Morrison was born in Loraine, Ohio, and earned a Bachelor’s degree in English from Howard University and a Master’s Degree from Cornell University. Although she began writing creative fiction at Howard, Morrison worked primarily as a college professor in the decade following her graduation from Cornell, teaching at Texas Southern University and then at Howard. In 1964, Morrison divorced the husband she met at Howard, moved to New York, and worked as a senior editor for Random House publishers, where she championed the writing of several notable African-American authors including Angela Davis and Toni Cade Bambara. Morrison continued to write and teach at colleges while working at Random House, publishing her first novel, The Bluest Eye, in 1970. Since then she has taught at numerous institutions, including schools in the New York state university system, Yale, Bard, and finally Princeton, where she is currently an emerita professor. In addition to working as an editor, novelist, and professor, Morrison is also a prolific essayist and public intellectual, publishing editorials in venues such as The New York Times and appearing on popular TV programs such as The Late Show with Stephen Colbert. She has also written three children’s books with her son, Slade Morrison, and the libretto for an opera based on the life of the American slave Margaret Garner, who is also the inspiration for her Pulitzer Prize winning novel, Beloved (1987).

Morrison describes the postmodernist literary technique she has developed in her novels as that of “enchantment,” a blending of historical realism with the myths and supernatural tales she learned as a child. “That’s the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew,” she tells Christina Davis in a 1986 interview in Conversations with Toni Morrison. “There was this other knowledge or perception, always discredited but nevertheless there, which informed their sensibilities and clarified their activities...they had some sweet, intimate connection with things that were not empirically verifiable.” Examples of enchantment abound in Morrison’s work. In her novel Song of Solomon (1977), a story of a man coming to terms with his African-American identity, one character gives birth to herself—and thus does not have a navel—while another learns to fly as legendary African tribesmen once did. In Tar Baby (1981), a novel about people who trap themselves in self-deceptions, Morrison structures her tale around the African-American fable of the trickster rabbit who gets caught by a deceptive figure made out of tar. In Beloved, a powerful novel about the legacy of slavery, the ghost of a slain baby haunts the home of an escaped slave. The short story “Recitatif” linked here, originally published in Amiri and
Amina Baraka’s anthology *Confirmation* (1983), is the only short story that Morrison ever published. While it does not directly reference the supernatural, “Recitatif” features other postmodernist techniques common to Morrison’s work, from its estranging opening lines to the historical revisionism that the two central characters, Twyla and Roberta, engage in over the story’s course.

The Toni Morrison biography was reproduced from *Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present.*

Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, *Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present* (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. [Link to ebook](#)

### 5.17.1 “Recitatif” (1983)

[Link to “Recitatif”](#)
5.18 Carter Revard (1931- )

American born writer, poet, and medieval scholar, Carter Revard was born in 1931 in Pawhuska, Oklahoma. He is half Scottish-Irish descent and half Osage, which is a Native American tribe. In 1952, he received his Osage name, Nompehwahthhe, from his grandmother, which translates to “fear inspiring.” He grew up on an Osage reservation in Oklahoma where he received early education in a small schoolhouse. At school Carter was also tasked with farming jobs and other peculiar activities, such as training Greyhounds for racing. As a student at Bartlesville College High, he found his love for literature and science.

After winning a radio quiz, Revard was granted a scholarship to the University of Tulsa, where he received his BA. He credits his Professor Franklin Eikenberry for two monumental events in his life. Professor Eikenberry encouraged Revard to apply to the Rhodes scholarship at Oxford University. In 1952, he became the first Native American to receive the award. Additionally, Professor Eikenberry advised him to seek graduate degrees. Revard clearly regarded Eikenberry highly because he went on to complete his PhD in English literature at Yale University.

Carter Revard is known for developing a style of writing that encompasses both his Native American heritage and his love for medieval England. One of his more famous works is his first collection *Ponca War Dances*, which was published in 1980. It contains “Discovery of the New World,” reproduced here, in which he writes from a Native American’s perspective upon meeting the Europeans when they discovered his land. One of the books he is most known for is called *An Eagle Nation* (1993), which infuses morality issues into the poems.

Aside from writing his many books and poems, he also had a career in teaching, working at the University of Amherst. Later he became a professor at Washington University in St. Louis. His deep-rooted interest in medieval England led him to developing language classes instructing high school teachers on best teaching practices. Revard also worked on a military project to transform the Webster Collegiate Dictionary into a computer form, which was a great technological advancement in 1967. Carter Revard received various awards for his contributions to the English society, one most notable being the Writer of the Year in 2003.

The Carter Revard biography was written by Nicholas Pallis, a University of Delaware student.

5.18.1 “Discovery of the New World” (1980)

Link to “Discovery of the New World”
5.19 Etheridge Knight (1931-1991)

Prisoner-turned poet, Etheridge Knight was born in Corinth, Mississippi, on April 19, 1931, one of eight children. He frequently ran away from home when he was a child. At 16 years old, he dropped out of high school. His time working as a shoe shiner and hanging out in juke joints, pool halls, and poker games led him to develop an interest in language and Black vernacular.

In 1947, Knight enlisted in the Army and served as a medical technician during the Korean War. In November 1950, he was seriously wounded by shrapnel, suffering both physically and psychologically. The injury led to a drug addiction: to cope, he began using morphine. Upon his return to the States, Knight was hooked on opiates. He spent several years dealing drugs and stealing to support his habit. In 1960, he was found guilty of armed robbery and served eight years in the Indiana State Prison.

Knight began writing poetry while in prison and, in 1968, he published his first collection, *Poems from Prison*, which established him as an important voice of the Black Arts Movement. Reproduced here is “Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane,” which was first published in *Poems from Prison*. This debut volume was published by Dudley Randall’s press, Broadside Press. Randall praised Knight’s poetry. He, along with poets Gwendolyn Brooks and Sonia Sanchez, corresponded with Knight and visited him in prison. Brooks wrote the preface to *Poems from Prison*. Knight credited poetry with saving him, writing, “I died in 1960 from a prison sentence and poetry brought me back to life.” Upon his release, Knight married Sonia Sanchez. The marriage was short-lived because of his drug addiction. He married again in 1972 but separated five year later.

Knight’s second poetry collection, *Black Voices from Prison*, was published in 1970. It was first published in Italy with the title *Voce negre dal carcere*. It includes his own writing along with works by his fellow inmates. In 1972, Knight won a National Endowment for the Arts grant. *Black Voices from Prison* was followed in 1973 by *Belly Song and Other Poems*, which earned him nominations for the National Book Award and Pulitzer Prize. He was awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1974. He continued to publish collections, including *Born of a Woman* (1980) and *The Essential Etheridge Knight* (1986).

Knight was a writer-in-residence at many universities. He also taught at the University of Pittsburgh, University of Hartford, and Lincoln University. He died of lung cancer on March 10, 1991. The year before his death, he earned a bachelor’s degree in American poetry and criminal justice from Martin Center University in Indianapolis.

*The Etheridge Knight biography was written by Samantha Walter, a University of Delaware student.*
5.19.1 “Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane” (1986)

Link to “Hard Rock Returns to Prison from the Hospital for the Criminal Insane”
Sylvia Plath was born in Boston, Massachusetts. Plath’s father, a professor of biology at Boston University and an authoritarian figure within the family, died when Plath was eight years old, and Plath struggled for the rest of her life to come to terms with her complicated feelings for him. Plath’s mother went to work to provide for Plath and her brother. From a young age, Plath was a high achiever, showing an early talent as a writer and poet. She received a scholarship to Smith College and, after graduating, was awarded a Fulbright Scholarship to Cambridge University. In spite of a history of depression and one suicide attempt, Plath excelled at academics and worked diligently on her writing, periodically publishing her work. At Cambridge, Plath met the young, upcoming British poet Ted Hughes; the two shared an intense and immediate attraction, marrying only a few months later. Plath and Hughes enjoyed their first years together as writing partners, encouraging each other as poets. The two lived for a time in America, travelled broadly, and eventually returned to England to live. Plath gave birth to two children and engaged in domestic routines while still working on poems which would eventually be included in her posthumous collection, *Ariel* (1965). She continued to struggle with depression, and after discovering Ted Hughes’s affair with a mutual friend, Assia Wevill, Plath’s depression worsened. She eventually separated from Hughes and moved to London with her children in an attempt to start over on her own. Most of the poems that comprise *Ariel* were written while she lived in London. During a particularly difficult winter where she saw her novel *The Bell Jar* published to less than enthusiastic reviews in January 1963, Plath’s mental state deteriorated. She committed suicide in February 1963, leaving her children behind, as well as the new collection of poems that would eventually make her famous after her death.

Plath’s most critically acclaimed poems are those that appeared in her posthumous collection, *Ariel*. In these last poems composed before her suicide, Plath appears to have reached a new level of creative complexity in imagery and theme. Her poems exhibit a raw power and anger, as she battles with despair and attempts to find the fortitude to endure her psychic pain. Within the postmodern milieu and contributing to its innovations, Plath does not create a distinct persona through which she filters these intense, private emotions. Poetic form and tradition become less significant with postmodern poets, and the poet’s voice achieves primacy, especially in the school of poetry termed “Confessional.” Poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Anne Sexton, and Plath in the 1950s were willing to probe their psyches in very private, personal ways, “confessing” their deepest, most private, even disturbing feelings. In the time period, this kind of psychological probing of the self was new and provocative. From a feminist perspective, Plath in the *Ariel* poems openly explores her feelings of rage against the men in her life and against patriarchal authority in general. Plath also explores her feelings of ambivalence about being a mother, the cultural pressures she experienced of becoming a wife and mother, the pain she
endured as a result of her husband’s infidelity, and her battle with depression that culminated in suicide attempts. In “Daddy,” the prevalent Nazi imagery is not autobiographical but is used to depict the extreme emotions at work in the narrative voice’s desperate, raging attempt to cut the cord of paternalistic domination. The narrative voice urgently and angrily wants to break from daddy’s control, domination, and influence in order to forge her own identity as a woman and as a person.

The Sylvia Plath biography was reproduced from Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present.
Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. Link to ebook

5.20.1 “Daddy” (1965)

Link to “Daddy”
5.21 Linda Pastan (1932- )

Author of more than 15 books of poetry and essays, Linda Pastan was born to a Jewish family in the Bronx, New York, on May 27, 1932. As an undergraduate student at Radcliffe College, she won the Mademoiselle Poetry Prize, beating out Sylvia Plath, who took second place. She graduated with a bachelor’s degree in 1954 and earned a master’s degree from Brandeis University in 1957. Calling herself a “product of the fifties,” she then spent the next ten years as a full-time, stay-at-home mother to her three children. Her first book, *A Perfect Circle of Sun*, was published when she was 39 years old. At the encouragement of her husband, physician and researcher Ian Pastan, she began a prolific career publishing. Unsurprisingly, her poems center on domestic themes of family life and motherhood, as she probes the silent anxieties that are masked by everyday habits.

Publishing consistently since the 1970s, Pastan has garnered many prizes and honors, including being named Poet Laureate of Maryland from 1991 to 1995. Two of her collections were nominated for the National Book Award and one for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. Other awards include the Dylan Thomas Award, the Pushcart Prize, and the Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize. She was on the staff of the Bread Loaf Writers’ Conference for 20 years.

One of her more popular books, *The Five Stages of Grief*, deals with the hard topic of loss and, of course, the five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. She brings a unique feminine perspective to the topics of aging, human frailty, and death. Her “natural impulse to condense” is illustrated in her signature short poems that pack a punch, including “On the Steps of the Jefferson Memorial,” reproduced here. She has lived most of her life in the Washington D.C.-Maryland area and has vowed to help her seven grandchildren through college.

The Linda Pastan biography was written by Karyme Lopez, a University of Delaware student.


[Link to “On the Steps of the Jefferson Memorial”](#)
5.22 Lucille Clifton (1936-2010)

Discovered by Langston Hughes (through mutual friend and writer Ishmael Reed), Lucille Clifton was a Black female poet. She was born on June 27, 1936, in Depew, New York, to a family descended from slaves. She grew up in Buffalo. Clifton studied at Howard University and the State University of New York at Fredonia, graduating in 1955. In 1958, she got married and mothered six children. Clifton worked for the state and federal government. In 1969, her first book, *Good Times*, was published. Inspired by her children who were growing up in an urban setting, the collection of poems was listed as one of the best ten books of the year by *The New York Times*. Collected in her first book and reproduced here, “in the inner city” is a celebration and affirmation of vibrant black urban living.

Clifton was poet-in-residence at Coppin State College in Baltimore from 1971-1974; Poet Laureate of the state of Maryland from 1974-1985; and visiting writer at the Columbia University School of the Arts and George Washington University from 1982-1983. She taught at a number of universities including the University of California at Santa Cruz, St. Mary’s College of Maryland, and Dartmouth College.

Hughes published some of Clifton’s poetry in his popular 1970 work, *The Poetry of the Negro*, which helped her gain exposure in the literary world. Her work has beenanthologized in many books, including Dudley Randall’s *The Black Poets*. Her poetry often centers around themes of overcoming adversity through strength with focus on the struggle of Black Americans, particularly Black mothers. She created brief yet incisive poems, as most are under 20 lines but have a great impact on the reader. Her diction is plain, and her poems lack capitalization and punctuation, a choice that makes her stand out and forces the reader to look deeper into the meaning of her words. Poet Elizabeth Alexander said Clifton was able to write “physically small poems with enormous and profound inner worlds” (Poetry Foundation).


In addition to her numerous poetry collections, Clifton authored over 20 children’s books, most of which were written with a Black audience in mind. One of these books was an award-winning series about a boy named Everett Anderson.

Lucille Clifton had a gift for writing graceful poetry that touched the lives of many readers and led her to well-earned success. She died on February 13, 2010, in Baltimore and wanted to be remembered “as a woman whose roots go back to Africa, who tried to honor being human,” and whose “inclination is to try to help” (Poetry Foundation).
The Lucille Clifton biography was written by Victoria Delgadillo, a University of Delaware student.

5.22.1 “In the Inner City” (1969)

Link to “In the Inner City”
5.23 Joyce Carol Oates (1938- )

American writer known for her vast literary output, Joyce Carol Oates was born on June 16, 1938 in Lockport, New York. She was raised in a working-class farming community, the eldest of three children. She read at an early age and started writing at 14 when she received her first typewriter. The first in her family to complete high school, Oates graduated as valedictorian from Syracuse University where she worked on her writing, “writing novel after novel and always throwing them out when I completed them.” In 1961, she earned an M.A. degree from the University of Wisconsin—Madison. She started work on a Ph.D. but left to pursue her writing.

During her teaching career, Oates worked at the University of Detroit, University of Windsor in Ontario, and Princeton. She and her husband co-edited the literary quarterly, The Ontario Review.

Her first published book was the 1963 short-story collection By the North Gate, followed by her debut novel With Shuddering Fall in 1964. In 1966, she published “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” reproduced here. Dedicated to Bob Dylan, the story, originally titled “Death and the Maiden,” was written after Oates listened to his song “It’s All Over Now, Baby Blue” and was loosely based on the serial killer Charles Schmid, known as “The Pied Piper of Tucson.” In 1985, the story was adapted to film, Smooth Talk. Oates said in 2008 that of all her published work, she is most noted for this story. In 1966, Oates also published her second-short story collection Upon the Sweeping Flood. Since she started publishing, she has averaged an impressive two books per year; her publications span genres including young adult fiction, poetry, and essays. She describes herself as a highly prolific “scribe.” She has published 58 books and counting.

Her awards include two O’Henry Awards (1967 and 1973), the National Book Award (1970), National Humanities Medal (2010), Stone Award for Lifetime Literary Achievement (2012), and Jerusalem Prize (2019). She was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 1978. Influenced by Flannery O’Connor, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, Henry David Thoreau, and Sylvia Plath, Oates has said of the latter that her Bell Jar is a “near perfect work of art.”

In 2011, Oates published the memoir A Widow’s Story, in which she mourns her husband’s death. The Lost Landscape: A Writer’s Coming of Age, published in 2015, recounts her
childhood. As of this writing, her most recent work is *Night. Sleep. Death. The Stars.: A Novel* (2020).

The Joyce Carol Oates biography was written by Justin Sparks, a University of Delaware student.

5.23.1 “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been?” (1966)

[Link to “Where Are You Going, Where Have You Been”?]
5.24 Raymond Carver (1938-1988)

Chronicler of the everyday lives of the working class, Raymond Carver was born in a logging town in Oregon on May 25, 1938. Son of a sawmill worker and waitress/retail worker, Carver captured the lives of blue collar workers in his realistic, often minimalistic, writing. He seemingly followed down the same path as his parents, marrying just one year out of high school, having two children, and supporting them by working low-paying, odd jobs such as gas station attendant, janitor, and delivery driver. In 1958, however, Carver took a creative writing course at Chico State University (now called California State University at Chico) that launched his writing career.

While a student at Humboldt State University, Carver published his first short story and poem. He graduated with his bachelor’s degree from Humboldt in 1963. His first success came in 1967 when he released “Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?” After losing his job as a textbook editor in 1970, he devoted his time to writing. He attended the Iowa Writer’s Workshop. His reputation as a serious writer was established in 1976 when the acclaimed short-story collection Will You Please Be Quiet, Please? was published. Following his success he started drinking heavily, which led him to be hospitalized many times in the 1970s.

With his drinking problem under control, Carver taught at the University of Texas at El Paso and Syracuse University. What We Talk About When We Talk About Love was published in 1981. In 1983, an award that came with a generous annual stipend allowed Carver to stop teaching and focus full time on his writing. A year later, he published Cathedral, the title story of which is reproduced here. Carver’s short stories often reflect his own life as they incorporate heavy drinking, financial issues, and marital problems. These themes are seen largely in his story “Cathedral.” The collection of short stories was followed by Where I’m Calling From in 1988.

Best known as a short-story writer—and, according to The New York Times, as “the most influential writer of American short stories in the second half of the 20th century”—Carver also wrote poetry. A collection of poetry, A New Path to the Waterfall, was published shortly before his death. He was inspired to write another volume of poetry upon being diagnosed with lung cancer, which ultimately claimed his life in 1988 when he was just 50 years old.

Carver once said: “You know, as far as I am concerned, I’d be happy if they simply put ‘poet’ on my tombstone. ‘Poet’—and in parentheses, ‘and short story writer.’”
The Raymond Carver biography was written by Nicholas Pallis, a University of Delaware student.

5.24.1 “Cathedral” (1983)

Link to “Cathedral”
5.25 Robert Pinsky (1940- )

Three-time U.S. Poet Laureate (the first and only poet to hold such honor), Robert Pinsky was born on October 20, 1940, in Long Branch, New Jersey, to Jewish parents. He received a B.A. from Rutgers University and a master’s degree and a Ph.D. from Stanford University. At Stanford, he was a Stegner Fellow in creative writing.

In 1975, Pinsky’s first collection, Sadness and Happiness, was published. Some critics compared the poems in this volume to those by Robert Lowell and James Wright. Pinsky’s second volume was the book-length poem, An Explanation of America (1980), which share characteristics with Robert Lowell’s work, such as juxtaposing personal and national history. Many additional books followed, including History of My Heart (1984) and The Figured Wheel (1996), which some consider his finest works. History of My Heart won the William Carlos Williams prize. The Figured Wheel received the 1997 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, the Ambassador Book Award of the English Speaking Union, and was a Pulitzer Prize nominee. The Want Bone, published in 1990, includes “Shirt,” reproduced here. A former saxophonist and influenced by the dynamism of jazz, Pinsky’s poems emit musical energy and range. He often performs his poems with leading jazz musicians.

In 1994, he published a translation of Dante’s Inferno. Although it is one of over fifty English translations of the poem published in the 20th century, it has been singled out for its “narrative velocity” and “fresh and natural” rhyme scheme. He has also authored several prose titles, including Singing School: Learning to Write (and Read) Poetry by Studying with the Masters (2013), The Life of David (2006), Democracy, Culture, and the Voice of Poetry (2002), The Sounds of Poetry (1998), Poetry and the World (1988), The Situation of Poetry (1977), and the computerized novel/interactive fiction game, Mindwheel (1985). The Sounds of Poetry was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Pinsky was Poet Laureate of the United States from 1997-2000. With a mission to make poetry not just an intellectual pursuit but a necessary part of the democratic American life, he initiated the Favorite Poem Project (www.favoritepoem.org) in which everyday citizens were asked to name their favorite poem and to read it for a permanent audio archive at the Library of Congress. Americans’ Favorite Poems: The Favorite Poem Project Anthology was published, which was praised for its selections that are “as diverse as the nation that chose them.” Its popularity led to subsequent collections. Pinsky has been celebrated for bringing poetry to the public. As one critic stated: “no other living American poet—no other living American, probably—has done so much to put poetry before the public eye.”
Published in 2000, *Jersey Rain* was Pinsky’s first collection of new poems in a decade. *Gulf Music* followed in 2007 and *At the Foundling Hospital* in 2016.

His worldwide honors include an American Academy of Arts and Letters award, the Shelley Memorial prize from the Poetry Society of America, the PEN/Voelcker Award for Poetry, the *Los Angeles Times* Book Award, Italy’s Premio Capri, the Korean Manhae Award, the Harold Washington Award from the City of Chicago, the Theodore Roethke Prize, and fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. He has been called the “finest American poet-critic since Randall Jarrell” and has received the following compliment: “Since the death of Robert Lowell in 1977, no single figure has dominated American poetry the way that Lowell, or before him Eliot, once did…But among the many writers who have come of age in our fin de siècle, none have succeeded more completely as poet, critic, and translator than Robert Pinsky.”

Pinsky served as a Chancellor for The Academy of American Poets from 2004 to 2010 and poetry editor of the weekly Internet magazine *Slate* from 1996 to 2013. He has taught at Wellesley College and the University of California, Berkeley, and currently teaches in the graduate writing program at Boston University. In 2015, Boston University named him a William Fairfield Warren Distinguished Professor, which is the highest honor bestowed on senior faculty members actively involved in teaching, scholarship, and civic life. He has appeared on *The Colbert Report* and *The Simpsons*.

The Robert Pinsky biography was written by Hannah E. Willey, a University of Delaware student.

5.25.1 “Shirt” (1990)

[Link to “Shirt”](#)
5.26 Billy Collins (1941- )

Referred to as “the most popular poet in America” by the New York Times, Billy Collins was born in New York, New York, on March 22, 1941, the only child of William and Katherine Collins. His mother, who often recited verse, cultivated his love of language. He began writing poetry as early as the age of twelve. After earning a bachelor’s degree from the College of the Holy Cross, he went on to obtain a master’s and doctorate degree in Romantic poetry from the University of California of California-Riverside. Influenced by the Beat Generation poets, Collins founded The Mid-Atlantic Review with friends Walter Blanco and Steve Bailey.


This most celebrated and widely read poet is known for his conversational, clever, wise tone and distinct “American voice.” Poet-critic Richard Howards adds that this voice is recognizable “immediately as being of the moment and yet has real validity besides, reaching very far into what verse can do.” His poems are about the everyday, the profound, and even poetry itself. He served two terms as the US Poet Laureate (2001-2003) and was New York State Poet Laureate (2004-2006). While US Poet Laureate, he was asked to write a poem for the first anniversary of the collapse of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on 9-11. He is a regular guest on National Public Radio, presented a popular TED talk, and during the pandemic, appeared daily on Facebook Live to read his poetry and discuss literature.

A former Distinguished Professor at Lehman College of the City University of New York, Collins has taught at Columbia University and Sarah Lawrence College and had led summer poetry workshops in Ireland at the University College Galway. As of 2020, he teaches in the MFA program at Stony Brook Southampton.
In addition to enjoying unprecedented commercial success—with readings regularly selling out and a six-figure advance when he switched publishers—Collins is the recipient of numerous awards, including the Mark Twain Prize for Humor in Poetry and fellowships from the New York Foundation for the Arts, the National Endowment for the Arts, and the Guggenheim Foundation. He was chosen to serve as “Literary Lion” by the New York Public Library. His work has been featured in the Pushcart Prize anthology and has been chosen several times for the annual Best American Poetry series. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2016.

During his over 40-year career, Billy Collins once noted that “In times of crisis, it’s interesting that people don’t turn to the novel…It’s always poetry.” His poetry continues to connect us to the history of human emotion and to remind us of how precious and precarious life is.

The Billy Collins biography was written by Cameron Larimore, a University of Delaware student.

5.26.1 “Introduction to Poetry”

[Link to “Introduction to Poetry”]
5.27 Joseph Bruchac (1942- )

Poet, novelist, and short story writer, particularly of stories focused on the Indigenous peoples of the Americas, Joseph Bruchac was born on October 16, 1942, in Greenfield Center, New York. He still lives in the house where his maternal grandparents raised him. A member of the Abenaki tribe, he started writing poetry when he was in the second grade. He attributes his passion for writing to his grandmother: “Reading poetry and hearing it aloud (by my grandmother before anyone else) seemed to touch something very deep in me. The music and the messages of poems gave me ideas of my own that I wanted to share.”

An avid reader since a young boy, Bruchac did not receive formal poetry training until college. For three years, he was a wildlife conservation major. He switched his major to English, earning a bachelor’s degree from Cornell University. He won a creative writing fellowship at Syracuse University where he did his master’s degree. Bruchac earned a doctorate degree in comparative literature from the Union Institute of Ohio.

Bruchac began publishing in 1971, releasing Indian Mountain, and Other Poems, and has gone on to author more than 120 books for adults and children. In 1975, he published “Ellis Island,” reproduced here, in which the speaker describes the process of immigrating to the United States. His books include When the Chenoo Howls (1998), co-authored with his son, James; Tell Me a Tale: A Book About Storytelling (1997); The First Strawberries: A Cherokee Story (1993); and Keepers of the Earth (1988), co-authored with Michael Caduto. His autobiography, Bowman’s Store: A Journey to Myself, was published in 1997. Novels for young readers include The Heart of a Chief (1998) and Dawn Land (1993). He has edited a number of highly praised anthologies of contemporary poetry and fiction, including Songs from this Earth on Turtle’s Back, Breaking Silence (winner of an American Book Award) and Returning the Gift. Keepers of the Earth: Native American Stories and Environmental Activities for Children is a best-selling series that continues to receive critical acclaim and to be used in classrooms throughout the country.

For eight years, Bruchac directed a college program for Skidmore College inside a maximum security prison. He founded the Greenfield Review Literary Center and The Greenfield Review Press with his wife.

His honors include a Rockefeller Humanities fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Writing Fellowship for Poetry, the Cherokee Nation Prose Award, the Knickerbocker Award, the Hope S. Dean Award for Notable Achievement in Children’s Literature and both the 1998 Writer of the Year Award and the 1998 Storyteller of the Year Award from the Wordcraft Circle of
Native Writers and Storytellers. In 1999, he received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the Native Writers Circle of the Americas.

Bruchac has traveled throughout the United States and Europe performing the traditional tales of the Adirondacks and the Native peoples of the Northeastern Woodlands. He has been storyteller-in-residence for Native American schools, including the Institute of Alaska Native Arts and the Onondaga Nation School. He plays several Native instruments and performs with his sister and sons as part of the Dawnland Singers. Bruchac was one of the founders of the Wordcraft Circle of Native American Writers and Storytellers, which helps Native authors get their work published.

The Joseph Bruchac biography was written by Mik Adbullah, a University of Delaware student.

5.27.1 “Ellis Island” (1979)

[Link to “Ellis Island”]
5.28 Pat Mora (1942- )

Pat Mora is a leading figure in contemporary Chicana poetry, authoring books for adults, teens and children. During the Mexican Revolution, her grandparents moved to Texas from northern Mexico. Mora was born on the border in El Paso, Texas, on January 19, 1942 and grew up in a mostly Spanish-speaking home. She earned a BA in English from Texas Western College in 1963 and an MA from the University of Texas, El Paso in 1967.

Her professional writing career began in the 1980s, with the publication of *Chants*, a collection of poetry released in 1984. As in most of her work, *Chants* revolves around the magic of the desert. She focuses on the livelihood that comes from it despite its harsh conditions and relates it to the resiliency and beauty of her family. Mora draws much inspiration for her work from her hometown and her cultural heritage, including her grandparents’ immigration. “Legal Alien,” linked here, was collected in *Chants*. In 1986, *Borders* was published, which includes “Immigrants,” also linked here.

The Mexican-American author remained in El Paso until 1989. During that time, she worked as a teacher at El Paso Independent School District, instructor at El Paso Community College, Assistant to Vice President of Academic Affairs, Director of University Museum, and Assistant to President at University of Texas, El Paso. She then moved to Cincinnati, Ohio.


As demonstrated in the two poems reproduced here, Mora is resolute in the subject matter of her writing. Having grown up in the El Paso community, she draws on the setting of that area and inspiration for the protagonists from the Chicanos she has gotten to know and love. She also incorporates her own familiarity with life in the Southwest as a Chicana woman. Mora strives to publish works in both Spanish and English, along with creating Chicano characters, so as to preserve her heritage in literature.
Mora has been awarded for her dedication to her craft. She is the recipient of a Poetry Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and a recipient and advisor of the Kellogg National Leadership Fellowships. She also received many merit awards for her writing and for her advocacy of Chicano/Latino literature in America as early as 1983. Just a few of the dozens of Mora’s honors include the Award for Creative Writing from the National Association for Chicano Studies in 1983, the Poetry Award from the Conference of Cincinnati Women in 1990, and a Notable Books for a Global Society designation from the International Reading Association in 1996. She earned honorary doctorates from North Carolina State University and SUNY Buffalo, an honorary membership in the American Library Association, a Civitella Ranieri Fellowship to write in Umbria, Italy, and a Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of Texas at El Paso.

Mora’s style of writing often incorporates code-switching between English and Spanish words. She is an advocate for promoting bilingual literacy. One of her successes was her founding of Children’s Day (El día de los niños), Book Day (El día de los libros), celebrated all across the United States on April 30, the last day of National Poetry Month.

Pat Mora currently resides in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with her husband Vern Scarborough. She continues to write, and enjoys reading, gardening, traveling, and being with friends and family. Mora remains passionate about writing books for Spanish-speaking children, bilingual family literacy, and cultural preservation.

The Pat Mora biography was written by Abby Haney, a University of Delaware student.

5.28.1 “Legal Alien” (1984)

[Link to “Legal Alien”]

5.28.2 “Immigrants” (1986)

[Link to “Immigrants”]
5.29 Alice Walker (1944- )

Born in Eatonton, Georgia, Alice Walker grew up in rural middle Georgia. Her father was a sharecropper, and her mother was a maid. Although they lived under Jim Crow laws in Georgia, in which African-Americans were discouraged from education, Walker’s parents turned her away from working in the fields, espousing instead the importance of education and enrolling her in school at an early age. Walker describes writing at the age of eight years old, largely as a result of growing up in what was a strong oral culture.

In 1952, Walker injured her eye after her brother accidentally shot her with a BB gun. Since the family did not have a car, it was a week before Walker received medical attention. By this time, she was blind in that eye, with scar tissue forming. As a result, Walker became shy and withdrawn, yet, years later, after the scar tissue healed, she became more confident and gregarious, graduating high school as the valedictorian, Walker writes about this in her essay, “Beauty: When the Other Dancer is the Self.” Walker left Eatonton for Atlanta, attending Spelman College, a prestigious Historically Black College for women, and later receiving a scholarship to Sarah Lawrence College in New York. Walker considers her time in New York as critical for her development. While there, Walker became involved in the Black Arts movement before her work in the Civil Rights movement brought her back to the South. In 1969, Walker took a teaching position as Writer-in-Residence at Jackson State College in Jackson, Mississippi before accepting the same position at Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Mississippi. While there, she published her debut novel, The Third Life of Grange Copeland (1970). However, Walker soon returned to New York to join the editorial staff of Ms. magazine. Her second novel, Meridian (1976), received positive reviews, but her third novel, The Color Purple (1982), perhaps best showcases her writing talents. This novel draws on some of Walker’s personal experiences as well as demonstrates Walker’s own creativity. For it, she won the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize. This novel was later adapted as a popular film.

In addition to her engagement as an activist in many key issues, Walker has continued to write, publishing the famous book of essays, In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens (1983), as well as several other novels, such as Possessing the Secret of Joy (1992). One theme that emerges in Walker’s work is acknowledging the contributions of, often under-appreciated, African-American writers, such writers as Zora Neale Hurston. Furthermore, Walker’s writing calls attention to the discrepancies in America’s treatment of African-Americans, while also acknowledging the importance of all Americans’ shared past. In “Everyday Use,” we see many of these themes coalesce in the conflict between sisters Dee and Magee. Although they are
sisters, these two have very different lives, which leads to the central tension of the story—their argument over the quilt.

The Alice Walker biography was reproduced from Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present. Berke, Amy; Bleil, Robert; Cofer, Jordan; and Davis, Doug, Writing the Nation: A Concise Introduction to American Literature 1865 to Present (2015). English Open Textbooks. 5. Link to ebook

5.29.1 “Everyday Use” (1973)

Link to “Everyday Use”
5.30 August Wilson (1945-2005)

One of the most important voices in modern American theater, August Wilson, whose birth name was Frederick August Kittel, was born in the Hill District in Pittsburgh (“Pittsburgh’s Harlem”), Pennsylvania, on April 27, 1945, to Daisy Wilson and Frederick Kittel. Wilson’s mother, Daisy, was of African-American heritage whereas his father was a German immigrant. The product of an interracial relationship, Wilson came of age in a hostile environment that discriminated against African-Americans. Wilson was one of seven children; his mother worked as a cleaning lady and his father as a baker. His family was a part of the working class with little economic security. He was raised in a two-room, cold-water flat. Frederick left Daisy and the seven children. Daisy’s second husband, David Bedford, was a Black man. The family relocated to Hazelwood, a predominantly white suburb of Pittsburgh.

A student at St. Richard’s Parochial School, Wilson attended Central Catholic High School in 1959, one of just 14 African-American students. As a result of the extreme prejudice towards African-Americans, Wilson was a victim of racism and harassment that led him to transfer schools. He attended Connelly Vocational High School, faced similar experiences, and then transferred to Gladstone High School. After being accused of plagiarism in his 10th grade year, Wilson dropped out of high school altogether at the age of 15. Despite his many troubling experiences, he still maintained the desire to continue his education. Ultimately a self-taught writer, Wilson read intensively at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh (particularly works by Ralph Ellison, Richard Wright, and Langston Hughes), went to the Hill District to absorb the voices of its residents, discovered the blues, and adopted the pen name August Wilson.

Participant of the Black Arts Movement, Wilson co-founded in 1968 and directed at the Black Nationalist theater company called the Black Horizons Theatre in Pittsburgh. As the director of the theater, Wilson produced a variety of plays that celebrated his identity as an African-American. The tickets for his first play, Recycling, sold for 50 cents. He also published poetry in such journals as Black World and Black Lines.

After moving to St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1978, Wilson began to focus on playwriting. Recognized for his exemplary efforts in Penumbra Theater with his first play, Jitney, he earned a Minneapolis Playwrights Center fellowship, which led to his acceptance into the National Playwrights Conference at the O’Neill Theater Center in Connecticut. There he met director
Lloyd Richards, a “legend in dramatic circles.” *Jitney* was revised and included as one of Wilson’s “American Century Cycle” or “Pittsburgh Cycle” plays, which became a ten-play series set in each decade of the twentieth century. Wilson’s play for the 1920s, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, was his first major play; it opened on Broadway in 1984 and was a critical and financial success.

His plays *Fences*, reproduced here, and *The Piano Lessons* expose systemic racism, drawing on parts of his childhood. For the complexity of these plays, Wilson earned a Pulitzer Prize for both (1987 and 1990). *Fences* was also awarded a Tony.

In addition to two Pulitzers and a Tony, Wilson’s honors include seven New York Drama Critics’ Circle Awards for best play, Guggenheim and Rockefeller fellowships, American Theater Hall of Fame induction, a Doctorate of Humanities from the University of Pittsburgh, and an honorary degree from the Carnegie Library, the only one ever given. May 27 was named “August Wilson Day” by St. Paul’s mayor George Latimer. Wilson’s plays have been acted out by many talented performers, namely James Earl Jones, Denzel Washington, Viola Davis, Angela Bassett, Phylicia Rashad, and Samuel L. Jackson.

Referred to as the “theater’s poet of Black America,” Wilson passed away in 2005 due to liver cancer. He was 60 years old. He continues to impact American literature as his play *Fences* is a staple in the American high school curriculum. Shortly after his death, the Virginia Theater on Broadway was renamed in his honor (the first one on Broadway to bear the name of an African American), the August Wilson Center for African American Culture opened in Pittsburgh in 2009, and two of his plays were adapted to film. Denzel Washington, who was instrumental in the production of the films, promises to continue Wilson’s legacy by adapting the rest of the plays. He’s said: “The greatest part of what’s left of my career is making sure that August is taken care of.”

The August Wilson biography was written by Idalia D. Briceno Comacho, a University of Delaware student.

**5.30.1 Fences (1985)**

[Link to Fences]
5.31 Tim O’Brien (1946– )

Born and raised in Minnesota, Tim O’Brien graduated from Macalester College. Upon graduating in 1968, he was drafted into the army during the Vietnam War and served from 1969 to 1970 even though he was against the War. His division contained a unit involved in the aftermath of the infamous My Lai massacre. O’Brien has said that when his unit got to the area surrounding My Lai (referred to as “Pinkville” by the U.S. forces), “we all wondered why the place was so hostile. We did not know there had been a massacre there a year earlier. The news about that only came out later, while we were there, and then we knew.”

O’Brien attained the rank of sergeant. After completing his tour of duty, he attended graduate school at Harvard University and worked as an intern at the Washington Post. In 1973, his writing career was launched with the publication of If I Die in a Combat Zone, Box Me Up and Ship Me Home. He’s gone on to have a prolific career, authoring works, many of which deal with the Vietnam War, including Northern Lights (1975), The Nuclear Age (1985), In the Lake of the Woods (1994), Tomcat in Love (1998), July, July (2002), and the two for which he’s best known: The Things They Carried (1990) and Going After Cacciato (1978), the latter winning the National Book Award and judged by many critics to be the best book by an American about the Vietnam War. Reproduced here is the first and title chapter from The Things They Carried. In You’ve Got to Read This, writer Bobbie Ann Mason describes O’Brien’s matter-of-fact details in her response to The Things They Carried: “Of all the stories I’ve read in the last decade, Tim O’Brien’s ‘The Things They Carried’ hit me hardest. It knocked me down, just as if a hundred-pound rucksack had been thrown right at me. The weight of the things the American soldiers carried on their interminable journey through the jungle in Vietnam sets the tone for this story. But the power of it is not just the poundage they were humping on their backs. The story’s list of ‘things they carried’ extends to the burden of memory and desire and confusion and grief. It’s the weight of America’s involvement in the war.”

In addition to the National Book Award, O’Brien’s prizes include the James Fenimore Cooper Prize for Best Historical Fiction (in 1995 for In the Lake of the Woods), the Dayton Literary Peace Prize Foundation’s Richard C. Holbrooke Distinguished Achievement Award (in August 2012), the $100,000 Pritzker Military Library Literature Award (in June 2013), and the Purple Heart. O’Brien’s signature style combines autobiography and fiction, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. He lives in central Texas, and, in alternating years since 2003, he’s held the endowed chair of the M.F.A. program at Texas State University, San Marcos.
He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2010. Presented to O’Brien by fellow fiction writer and poet Russell Bank, the citation for the award reads: “Tim O’Brien’s superb Vietnam novels take us into that dark struggle of death and betrayal, where young American soldiers were thrown away in a useless war of devastating cruelties. His later books use that same sharp eye, mordant humor, and narrative power, to chronicle our later life, with its own battles, its many defeats, and few victories. Both tender and savage, his portrayals of men are unsurpassed.”

The Tim O’Brien biography was written by Cameron Larimore, a University of Delaware student.

5.31.1 “The Things They Carried” (1994)

Link to “The Things They Carried”
Yusef Komunyakaa, whose birth name was James William Brown, Jr., was born on April 29, 1941 or 1947, in the small mill town of Bogalusa, Louisiana, to an illiterate carpenter. The oldest of five children, he grew up during the Civil Rights Movement. A soldier during the Vietnam War, he served one tour of duty in South Vietnam. He worked as a correspondent and was managing editor of the *Southern Cross* during the Vietnam War. He covered stories, interviewed soldiers, and wrote about Vietnamese history, which earned him a Bronze Star. After his service, he graduated with a BA from the University of Colorado Springs on the GI Bill, editing and contributing to *riverrun*, the campus arts and literature publication. In 1978, he earned an MA from Colorado State University, and, in 1980, an MFA from the University of California-Irvine.

Komunyakaa credits his grandparents for showing him the power of language. They were church goers who read the Bible. Komunyakaa has said that “the sound of the Old Testament informed the cadences of their speech. It was my first introduction to poetry.” Influenced by Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar, James Baldwin, Robert Hayden, and Walt Whitman, he began writing poetry and changed his name to Yusef Komunyakaa in 1973, while an undergraduate student. The last name, Komunyakaa, was reclaimed from his grandfather’s African name. His first two chapbooks were published: *Dedications & Other Darkhorses* in 1977 and *Lost in the Bonewheel Factory* in 1979. In 1984, he published *Copacetic*, his first collection of poetry with a commercial publisher. The book contains autobiographical poems that draw on growing up in the rural, segregated South and on the deep-rooted traditions of jazz and blues in New Orleans.

Komunyakaa’s best known work, “Facing It,” reproduced here, was published in the 1988 collection *Dien Cai Dau*, which is Vietnamese for “crazy in the head,” the phrase that locals used to refer to American soldiers fighting in their country. The poem reflects on Komunyakaa’s first visit to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial. The second poem written by Komunyakaa about Vietnam, “Facing It” has been called “the most poignant elegy that has been written about the Vietnam War,” and the entire collection, one the best books of Vietnam-war poetry. The poems, which capture African American soldiers’ experience in Southeast Asia, are rendered in the present tense, displaying immediacy and reality. His poems “weaves together personal narrative, jazz rhythms, and vernacular language to create complex images of life in peace and in war” (poetryfoundation.org). Fellow poet Toi Derricotte has praised Komunyakaa’s poetry: “whether it embodies the specific experiences of a black man, a soldier in Vietnam, or a child in Bogalusa,
Louisiana, [his voice] is universal. It shows us in ever deeper ways what it is to be human.” In addition to his numerous poetry collections, Komunyakaa has also authored a play and a libretto.

Komunyakaa is no stranger to the complexity of the human experience. Personal tragedy struck in 2003 when his second wife, poet Reetika Vazirani, committed suicide after killing their two-year-old son.

Komunyakaa has taught at many institutions, including in the New Orleans public school system, the University of New Orleans, Indiana University, Princeton University, and New York University. He currently serves as Distinguished Senior Poet in NYU’s graduate creative writing program.

His many accolades include a Pulitzer Prize, Louisiana Writer Award, San Francisco Poetry Center Award, Dark Room Poetry Prize, Kingsley Tufts Poetry Award, finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award, Wallace Stevens Award, Ruth Lilly Poetry Prize, the William Faulkner Prize from the Université de Rennes, the Thomas Forcade Award, the Hanes Poetry Prize, and fellowships from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, the Louisiana Arts Council, and the National Endowment for the Arts. From 1999-2005, he served as Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets.

In a 2021 interview, Komunyakaa agrees that poets are essential workers and went on to say that poetry attempts “to explain or define the mysteries of the world…poetry may be very close to philosophy or even prayer.”

The Yusef Komunyakaa biography was written by Mik Abdullah, a University of Delaware student.

5.32.1 “Facing It” (1984)

Link to “Facing It”
The “King” of horror and suspense novels, Stephen King was born on September 21, 1947, in Portland, Maine. When he was just two years old, his father left the family, leaving his wife and two sons in financial straits. Additional trauma inflicted King when he witnessed one of his friends struck and killed by a train (although he makes no mention of this incident in his memoir *On Writing*). His love for horror developed when he discovered in his attic H. P. Lovecraft’s collection of short stories, *The Lurker in the Shadows*. During a 2009 interview, King stated: “I knew I’d found home when I read that book.” During elementary school, he read EC horror comics and wrote short stories. He even earned money selling his work, although his teachers made him return the profit when they found out about his publishing venture.

From 1966 to 1970, King attended the University of Maine, graduating with a BA in English. To pay for college, he worked odd jobs such as janitor, gas pump attendant, and laundromat worker. His first professional short story, “The Glass Floor,” was sold in 1967. After struggling to find work as a high school teacher, King was hired by Hampden Academy in Maine, where he taught and continued to work on his writing.

King’s fourth novel but his first to be published, *Carrie*, was released in 1973. The novel launched his career as it was met with instant success. It enabled him to leave his job as an educator to pursue a full-time career in writing. Since then, King has published one best-seller after another: *The Shining, Pet Sematary*, and *It*, to name just three. *The Shining* was inspired by Shirley Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House*, which King described as “one of the most important horror novels of the twentieth century.”

To date, King has published 62 novels, including seven under the pen name Richard Bachman, five non-fiction books, and 200 short stories, most of which have been published in book collections. His books have sold more than 350 million copies; over 85 of his works have been adapted into popular films, television series, miniseries, and comic books. His books have been translated into 33 languages and published in over 35 countries. His net worth is over $500 million.

King is the 2003 recipient of *The National Book Foundation Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters* and the 2014 National Medal of Arts. Some of his other many awards and nominations include the Bram Stoker Award (15 times), O. Henry Award, Shirley Jackson Award, and Horror Guild Award (6 times).
Reproduced here is King’s 2017 “Thin Scenery.” Now in his seventies, he continues to write and publish and appears to have no plans to retire.

The Stephen King biography was written by Kelsey Rigney, a University of Delaware student.

5.33.1 “Thin Scenery” (2017)

Link to “Thin Scenery”
5.34 Louise Erdrich (1954–)

One of the most significant writers of the second wave of the Native American Renaissance, (Karen) Louise Erdrich is the author of over 30 books including novels, collections of poetry, children’s books, short stories, and a memoir of early motherhood. She was born in 1954 in Little Falls, Minnesota, the oldest of seven children and daughter of a Chippewa Indian mother and a German-American father. She is a member of the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians. She grew up in Wahpeton, North Dakota, and both of her parents taught at a boarding school in North Dakota, set up by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the same school her grandfather attended. Her father used to pay her a nickel for each story she wrote. Erdrich spent time on the reservation visiting her grandparents and hearing rich stories about her heritage. As a result, most her work is set in the North Dakota lands of her ancestors and explores the Chippewa experience in Anglo-America.

Erdrich studied at Dartmouth College as part of the first class of women admitted to the college. During her freshman year, the Native-American studies department was established. There she met her future husband and collaborator, Michael Dorris, who was chair of the new department. Dorris encouraged her to write about her family history. She attended Johns Hopkins University and earned a Master of Arts in the Writing Seminars in 1979. She then returned to Dartmouth as writer-in-residence and married Dorris in 1981.


Her literary reputation rests on her novels. *Love Medicine* won the National Book Critics Award for Fiction, the only debut novel to receive such honor. Erdrich later turned it into a tetralogy that includes *The Beet Queen* (1986), *Tracks* (1988), *The Bingo Palace* (1994), and *Tales of Burning Love* (1997). Her stories of three interrelated families living on the reservation of a fictional North Dakota town have been compared to William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha novels. Erdrich and Dorris separated in 1995; he died by suicide in 1997.

In 1998, *The Antelope Wife* was published. Other books followed, including *The Last Report on the Miracles at Little No Horse* (2001), which was a National Book Award finalist in 2009, *The Master Butchers Singing Club* (2003), and *The Plague of Doves*, finalist for the 2009 Pulitzer

Other awards include the American Academy of Poets Prize in 1975, a Nelson Algren Short Fiction prize in 1982 for “The World’s Greatest Fisherman,” the National Book Award for Fiction for *The Round House*, the Library of Congress Prize in American Fiction, the PEN/Saul Bellow Award for Achievement in American Fiction, and the Dayton Literary Peace Prize. Kay Boyle was a judge for the Nelson Algren Short Fiction prize that year. The two became friends as a result. In 1992, Erdrich penned the introduction to Boyle’s *Fifty Stories*.

Erdrich currently lives in Minnesota with her daughters. She is co-founder of Wiigwaas Press and owner of Birchbark Books, a small independent bookstore.

The Louise Erdrich biography was written by Reece Davis, a University of Delaware student.

5.34.1 “Turtle Mountain Reservation” (1984)

[Link to “Turtle Mountain Reservation”]
5.35 Li-Young Lee (1957- )

The Asian-American poet Li-Young Lee was born on August 19, 1957, in Jakarta, Indonesia. His parents, both from powerful families, were in exile from China. His great grandfather was the first president of the Republic of China with aspirations to become emperor, and his father was Mao Zedong’s personal physician. When his parents moved to Indonesia, his father helped found Gamaliel University. He frequently read to his son. As anti-Chinese sentiments heightened, his father was imprisoned for 19 months. The family embarked on a five-year trek through Hong Kong, Macau, and Japan, finally settling in the United States in 1964. Lee grew up in Pennsylvania.

While a student at the University of Pittsburgh, Lee developed his love for language and writing. He was influenced by the classical Chinese poets Li Bo and Tu Fu. He is the author of five critically acclaimed books of poetry. His debut collection, *Rose*, was published in 1986. The volume, which has been compared to works by Theodore Roethke, William Carlos Williams, and T. S. Eliot, won the Delmore Schwartz Memorial Poetry Award from New York University. Reproduced here are two poems from the collection: “Early in the Morning” and “The Gift.” Lee’s second collection, *The City In Which I Love You*, was published in 1990. A tribute to Lee’s family, especially his father, the collection won the Laughlin Award. One of the collection’s poems, “A Story,” is reproduced here. In 1990, Lee traveled to China and Indonesia to research for his 1995 memoir, *The Winged Seed: A Remembrance*, which charts the migration of the Lee family from Indonesia to the United States. Lee published three additional poetry collections: *Book of My Nights* (2001), *Behind My Eyes* (2008), and *The Undressing* (2018). *Book of My Nights* earned the William Carlos Williams award.

Lee’s poems are marked by simplicity and silences. He often uses personal experiences and memories in his poems, tying them to universal human experiences. He believes in the oneness of all things and that everything is connected in some way. In an interview, he once said, “If you rigorously dissect it, you realize that everything is a shape of the totality of causes. What’s another name for the totality of causes? The Cosmos. So everything is a shape of Cosmos or God. It feels like something bigger than me— that I can’t possibly fathom but am embedded in.” For Lee, poems are descendants from God, and there is a holiness to language.

Lee has taught at various universities, including Northwestern University and the University of Iowa. His many honors include grants from the Illinois Arts Council, the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts.
He was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship and a Fellowship from the Academy of American Poets. He has also won the Lannan Literary Award, a Whiting Writer’s Award, the PEN Oakland/Josephine Miles Award, the I. B. Lavan Award, and three Pushcart Prizes. In 1998, he received the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters from State University of New York at Brockport. He currently lives in Chicago.

The Li-Young Lee biography was written by Victoria Delgadillo, a University of Delaware student.

5.35.1 “Early in the Morning” (1986)

Link to “Early in the Morning”

5.35.2 “The Gift” (1986)

Link to “The Gift”

5.35.3 “A Story” (1990)

Link to “A Story”
5.36 Sherman Alexie (1966- )

Born outside of Spokane, Washington, in 1966, Alexie is a registered member of the Spokane tribe. As a child, he grew up on an Indian reservation with his family. His father, Sherman Joseph Alexie, was a member of the Coeur d’Alene tribe. His mother was from a family of Colville, Choctaw, Spokane, and European American descent. Alexie’s parents were alcoholics where the father and mother would leave for days at a time. When Alexie was six months old he had to have major brain surgery. His family was told that the surgery could be fatal, and if he survived he would be at a high risk of mental disabilities. The surgery was a success and Alexie suffered no mental damage.

He attended grammar school on the Spokane reservation in Wellpinit, Washington. In “Superman and Me,” in which he describes his earliest response to books during his childhood on the reservation, Alexie writes, “We were poor by most standards, but one of my parents usually managed to find some minimum-wage job or another, which made us middle class by reservation standards. I had a brother and three sisters. We lived on a combination of irregular paychecks, hope, fear, and government-surplus food.” Alexie was a smart boy and avid reader, finishing *Grapes of Wrath* in kindergarten when other children were “struggling through Dick and Jane.”

He left the reservation to attend high school in Reardan, Washington, the only Native American student there. He excelled in school and was elected class president and a member of the debate team. He received a scholarship to Gonzaga University, with plans to become a doctor and later a lawyer. He was not happy with his choices so he resorted to drinking and dropped out of Gonzaga.

It wasn’t until he attended college at Washington State University that he discovered an anthology of Indian poetry, which had a profound change on his career path. He found that he could better save lives through writing than by becoming a pediatrician. After he took a creative writing course with Alex Kuo, he began to publish in magazines such as *The Beloit Poetry Journal, The Journal of Ethnic Studies, New York Quarterly, Ploughshares,* and *Zyzzyva.* In 1991, he was awarded a poetry fellowship from the Washington State Arts Commission, and the following year, he received a poetry fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

His career began in 1992, when he published his first two collections of poetry: *I Would Steal Horses* and *The Business of Fancydancing.* Several more works followed in rapid succession, including a book of short stories for which he is best known, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* (1993), his first novel, *Reservation Blues* (1995), a film of his screenplay,

His works have garnered many awards. *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven* received a PEN/Hemingway Award for best first book of fiction. He won the American Book Award for his novel *Reservation Blues*. *Smoke Signals* took top honors at the Sundance Film Festival. *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* won the 2007 U.S. National Book Award for Young People’s Literature and the Odyssey Award as best 2008 audiobook for young people. *War Dances* received the 2010 PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction. He was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters in 2014. *Smoke Signals* broke barriers in 1998 for being the first all-Indian movie. Alexie became a founding board member in 2005 of Longhouse Media, a non-profit organization that is committed to teaching filmmaking skills to Native American youth, and to use media for cultural expression and social change. Alexie has long supported youth programs and initiatives dedicated to fostering at-risk Native American youth. He lives in Seattle with his wife and their two sons.

The Sherman Alexie biography was written by Reece Davis, a University of Delaware student.

### 5.36.1 “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona” (1994)

[Link to “This Is What It Means to Say Phoenix, Arizona”](#)
5.37 Jhumpa Lahiri (1967- )

Indian-American novelist and short story writer, Nilanjana Sudeshna “Jhumpa” Lahiri was born in London on July 11, 1967, to Bengali parents. Her family relocated to the United States when she was three years old. She was raised in Rhode Island. Her family retained connections to their Bengali roots by regularly going to India to visit extended family. The name “Jhumpa” came from her kindergarten teacher who had a difficult time pronouncing her given name. Her love for literature and writing stems from her parents, a university librarian and a schoolteacher. Many of her works illuminate the experience of cultural transplants and the search for identity.

When Lahiri was in high school, she was often encouraged by her family and teachers to write, which she did to cope with feeling lonely and shy. Lahiri graduated from Barnard College of Columbia University in 1989 with a B.A. in English literature. To further refine her skill in writing, she then attended Boston University and graduated with multiple degrees in English, including an M.A. in English Literature, an M.F.A. in Creative Writing, an M.A. in Comparative Literature, and a Ph.D. in Renaissance Studies. In 1997, she accepted a two-year fellowship at Provincetown’s Fine Arts Work Center. She has taught creative writing at Boston University and the Rhode Island School of Design.

After several rejections, Lahiri published her first collection of short stories in 1999: Interpreter of Maladies is a book of nine short stories centered around the Indian-American experience. “Sexy,” reproduced here, is from that collection, although previously published in The New Yorker. Praised by American critics, it sold over 600,000 copies, was translated into 29 languages, and earned the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 2000, the PEN/Hemingway Award, the American Academy of Arts and Letters Addison Metcalf Award, The New Yorker Debut of the Year Award, and a nomination for the Los Angeles Times Book Prize. However, the book received mixed reviews in India.

The Namesake, Lahiri’s first novel, was published in 2003 to widespread acclaim as her book was celebrated for representing the archetypal immigrant experience. The book was a New York Times Notable Book, a Los Angeles Times Book Prize finalist, and was selected as one of the best books of the year by USA Today and Entertainment Weekly. It was adapted to film in 2007. Lahiri’s second collection of short stories, Unaccustomed Earth, was released in 2008, debuting at number 1 on The New York Times best-seller list. It was named a best book of the year by The New York Times Books Review, The Washington Post, and the Los Angeles Times, and it was the recipient of the Frank O’Connor International Short Story Award. The Lowland, her 2013 novel,
was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize and was a finalist for the National Book Award for Fiction. It was awarded the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature.

In 2015, she declared she is writing in Italian. Her first book in Italian, *In alter parole (In Other Words)*, focuses on her experience of learning the foreign language. It won the Premio Internazional Viareggio-Versilia. *Dove mi trovo (Whereabouts)* was published in 2018 (translated to English herself and to be published in 2021), and in 2019, she edited and translated the *Penguin Book of Italian Short Stories*, which consists of 40 Italian short stories written by 40 different Italian writers.

Lahiri’s many awards include the National Humanities Medal, PEN/Malamud Award for Excellence in the Short Story, O. Henry Prize, John Florio Prize, and Vallombrosa Von Rezzi Prize. Since 2005, she has served as a vice president of the PEN American Center, and in 2010, she was appointed a member of the Committee on the Arts and Humanities. She was awarded a Guggenheime Fellowship, a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship, and was inducted into the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her first collection of poems, *Il quaderno di Nerina (Nerina’s Notebook)*, will be published in Italian in 2021. Lahiri currently serves as the director of Princeton University’s Program in Creative Writing. She was also named Commander of the Italian Republic in 2019 by President Sergio Mattarella. She divides her time between Princeton and Rome.

The Jhumpa Lahiri biography was written by Idalia D. Briceno Comacho, a University of Delaware student.

5.37.1 “Sexy” (1998)

[Link to “Sexy”](#)
5.38 Emanuel Xavier (1970-)

One of the most significant openly gay Latino voice in the spoken word poetry movement, Emanuel Xavier is a poet, author, and LGBTQ activist who was born in Brooklyn, New York, in May of 1970. From Ecuadorian and Puerto Rican heritage, he was abandoned by his father before he was born, sexually abused by an older cousin, and deserted by his mother when he came out to her when he was 16 years old. First self-published in 1997, his chapbook, Pier Queen, is inspired by his time hustling on the West Side Highway piers as a teenager. Xavier’s poems are heavily influenced heavily by his youth. After his mother kicked him out, he was forced to sell himself and drugs to survive. He discovered his passion for writing when he worked at the gay bookstore, A Different Light, a gay bookstore. He attended a spoken word event at the Nuyorican Poets Café and was immediately drawn to the art form. He said, in a 2010 interview with Chip Alfred from America’s AIDS Magazine, “That was the moment I realized this is what I wanted to do with the rest of my life.”

Xavier graduated high school and received an associate’s degree in communications from St. John’s University. After publishing Pier Queen, he gained popularity as a spoken word poet. As he was already well known in New York’s gay nightclub scene, he was able to create an annual poetry slam, the Glam Slam, in 1998. This event brought together the house/ball community and members of the spoken word poetry scene, Xavier’s most influential coteries. His poetry collections, Christ Like (1999) and Americano: Growing Up Gay & Latino in the U.S.A. (2002) established him as a key figure in New York’s underground arts scene. In 2001, he helped lead the Words to Comfort poetry benefit for the 9/11 catastrophe.

He is the author of Nefarious (2013), Radiance (2016), and If Jesus Were Gay & Other Poems (2020). “Urban Affection,” reproduced here, is from If Jesus Were Gay. He has published work in Queer & Catholic, For Colored Boys Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow Is Still Not Enough: Coming of Age, Coming Out, and Coming Home, and Studs. All of his publications employ political, sexual, and religious themes and are inspired by his several identities that have shaped his life experiences. Xavier speaks extensively on being a Latino man within the LGBTQ community and how these identities directly impacted his work. In an interview with Roberto F. Santiago from the Letras Latinas Blog, Xavier says “I put [Pier Queen] together at a time when I thought I was possibly HIV positive....I had lived such a crazy life that I didn’t expect to be around much longer.”
His identities also moved him to become an LGBTQ and homeless youth activist. He’s spoken at marriage equality protests and at the Writer’s Resist Rally protesting the Trump Administration. He’s also shared his poetry at the United Nations as part of The International Symposium on Cultural Diplomacy in the USA.

Emanuel Xavier has received several accolades for both his writing and activism. Just a few include the Marsha A. Gomez Cultural Heritage Award, a World Pride Award, and nominations for the Lambda Literary Award.

The Emanuel Xavier biography was written by Abby Haney, a University of Delaware student.

5.38.1 “Urban Affection” (2013)

Link to “Urban Affection”
5.39 Inaugural Poems, Or, Poetry “Taken into the Affairs of Statesmen”

As of 2021, four presidents have had six poems read at their inaugurations.

Robert Frost was the inaugural inaugural poet. He recited “The Gift Outright” at John F. Kennedy’s inauguration on January 20, 1961. The story goes that Frost responded to Kennedy’s invitation to become the first poet to read at a presidential inauguration by saying: “If you can bear at your age the honor of being made president of the United States, I ought to be able at my age to bear the honor of taking some part in your inauguration. I may not be equal to it but I can accept it for my cause—the arts, poetry, now for the first time taken into the affairs of statesmen.” Kennedy’s invitation to write a new poem for the event was not initially met with such enthusiasm as Frost was not at first willing to compose a new piece. Kennedy then asked Frost to read “The Gift Outright,” but to change the last lines to be more optimistic. Although Frost was not one “to tweak his careful wording, he grudgingly agreed.”

And, despite his original rejection, Frost did write a new poem for the occasion. It was titled “Dedication.” He intended to read it as a preamble to “The Gift Outright.” However, on the day of the inaugural ceremony, the January sun glare off the snow for the 86-year-old Frost led him to abandon reading that poem. Lyndon B. Johnson even tried to block the glare with his hat but to no avail. So Frost recited “The Gift Outright” from memory, changing the last line of the poem for Kennedy. The 1942 poem originally ended with “Such as she was, such as she would become.” The new ending read “Such as she was, such as she would become, has become, and I – and for this occasion let me change that to – what she will become.” It was a success, and most did not even catch that Frost called the president-elect the wrong name (Mr. John Finley). According to The Washington Post, the reading was one of the highlights of the ceremony: “Robert Frost in his natural way stole the hearts of the inaugural crowd.” Despite the 43-year difference in the ages of Frost and Kennedy, 1963 saw the death of both men: Frost on January 29 at the age of 88 and Kennedy on November 22 at the age of 46. For a fuller biography of Robert Frost, see Volume 4.

Image 5.33: Robert Frost at John Kennedy’s Inauguration
Photographer: B. Anthony Stewart/National Geographic
Source: google images
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5.39.1 Robert Frost’s “The Gift Outright”

Link to “The Gift Outright”

5.39.2 Maya Angelou (1928-2014)

It would take 32 years for another poem to be read at another inauguration. On January 20, 1993, Maya Angelou read “On the Pulse of Morning” at Bill Clinton’s first swearing in. The poem shared many themes with President Clinton’s inaugural speech, given immediately before Angelou read her work. Both encouraged hope in the economic changes to come, which they viewed as the responsibility of the president and all citizens. Recalling the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, the poem incites all Americans to dream again. The poem won the 1993 Grammy Award in the “Best Spoken Word” category.

When Angelou recited “On the Pulse of Morning,” which she wrote for the occasion, she was already a well-known writer and poet. She had published five of the seven of her series of autobiographies, including her popular 1969 I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings, which met with international critical acclaim and a National Book Award nomination.

The second inaugural poet and the first African American and woman, Maya Angelou came from humble origins. She was born Marguerite Annie Johnson in St. Louis, Missouri, on April 4, 1928. She had a difficult childhood as her parents divorced when she was young. Angelou and her brother went to live with her grandmother in Stamps, Arkansas. At the age of eight when visiting her mother, she was sexually assaulted by her mother’s boyfriend. She recounts the experience in Caged Bird, noting that she was terrified of testifying against the man who had raped her. The man was found guilty but was released from prison after serving just one day. Her uncles then allegedly killed the man. Because she thought her words murdered a man, Angelou spent the next five years not speaking to anyone. During that time, she read the works of Langston Hughes, W. E. B. DuBois, Paul Lawrence Dunbar, Shakespeare, Dickens, and Poe. These literary pieces along with reciting poetry helped her reclaim her voice.

After moving to San Francisco in 1940 with her mother, she won a scholarship to study acting and dance at the California Labor school. She worked odd jobs there: cocktail waitress, cook, prostitute, and dancer. At the age of seventeen, right after graduating from high school, she gave birth to her son, Guy, and became the first female and first African American street car conductor in San Francisco. She married Tosh Angelos, a Greek man, in 1950, but they
separated not long after, although a version of his last name stuck. Then in the 1950s she moved to New York City, where she found success in her dancing and writing career.

In New York, Angelou joined the Harlem Writers’ Guild. She signed on for the production for the folk opera of *Porgy and Bess*, in which she travelled to 22 different countries in Africa and Europe. In 1957, she was featured in the off-Broadway production of *Calypso Heat Wave* and in that same year, created the first album of her singing career, *Miss Calypso*. She also performed in the play *The Blacks* (1961) before moving to Cairo, where she worked on the *Arab Observer*, and then later to Ghana, to work on *The African Review*.

Angelou returned to California in 1966 and wrote, upon the urging of James Baldwin, *Caged Bird*, which was the first of seven autobiographical works that she completed, publishing the last, *Mom & Me & Mom*, in 2013. She often drew on her personal experiences for her writing. Describing her work, Angelou has said: “Once I got into it I realized I was following a tradition established by Frederick Douglass—the slave narrative—speaking in the first-person singular talking about the first-person plural, always saying I meaning ‘we.’ And what a responsibility. Trying to work with that form, the autobiographical mode, to change it, to make it bigger, richer, finer, and more inclusive in the twentieth century has been a great challenge for me.”

She created many notable collections of poetry including *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water ’fore I Diiie* (1971), a Pulitzer Prize nominee; *And Still I Rise* (1978); *Now Sheba Sings the Song* (1987); and *I Shall Not Be Moved* (1990). She also became one of the first African American women to have a screenplay produced as a feature film when she wrote the script for *Georgia, Georgia* (1972). Throughout the next two decades, she acted in many films.

Angelou worked to create change and awareness around issues involving race, sexual abuse, and violence. In 1959, at Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s request, she became the northern coordinator for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. (King would be assassinated on Angelou’s 40th birthday.) After she had returned to the United States from her work in Africa in 1964, she helped Malcolm X set up the Organization of Afro-American Unity, which was disbanded a year later following his assassination. In 1974, she was appointed to the Bicentennial Commission by Gerald Ford and then to the Commission for International Woman of the Year by Jimmy Carter. Even though she didn’t have a college education, in 1981, Angelou became a professor of American studies at Wake Forest University. In 2010 she was awarded the Medal of Freedom for the work she did throughout her lifetime. Still working at the University, she passed at the age of 86 on May 28, 2014.

During her life, Maya Angelou was an author, poet, historian, songwriter, playwright, dancer, stage and screen producer, Hollywood’s first female black director, singer, performer, educator, director, and civil rights activist. She received many awards for her works, including the National Medal of Arts and over 50 honorary degrees. She published over 30 bestselling titles. In addition to reading at Clinton’s inauguration, she wrote “A Brave Startling Truth” in 1995 to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the United Nations and “Amazing Peace” in 2005 for the White House Christmas tree-lighting ceremony.
At Clinton’s inauguration, Angelou was dressed in a similar way to what she described her eight-year-old-self wearing to court to testify against the man who raped her. But the similarities ended with the coat with brass buttons. Angelou’s riveting performance, in which she bids the nation Good Morning, illustrated that she not just found her voice, but that she was a spokesperson for all citizens as her voice helped unite the States.

The Maya Angelou biography was written by Jonathan Carney, a University of Delaware student.

Link to “On the Pulse of Morning”

5.39.3 Miller Williams (1930-2015)

In 1997, Bill Clinton was reelected president. He invited Miller Williams, celebrated poet and good friend, to recite a poem at his second swearing in. Upon accepting, Williams said, “it may do something to elevate poetry in the public mind.” Williams read “Of History and Hope,” which places the future of the nation in the hands of children. In an interview, he expressed his authorial intentions: he wished the poem to be “a consideration of how a look at a nation’s past might help determine where it could be led in the future.” He went on to say: “I knew that the poem would be listened to by a great many people, reprinted around the country, and discussed in a lot of classrooms, so I wanted it to be true, understandable, and agreeable.”

The poem’s accessible language, which resonated with many Americans, characterizes Williams’s direct but elegant style. Best known as a poet, Williams was also a translator, editor, and educator. He was born Stanley Miller Williams on April 8, 1930, in Hoxie, Arkansas, to a Methodist clergyman and a civil rights activist. He went to Hendrix College in Arkansas with intentions of majoring in English and foreign language, but upon taking the entrance exams, he was told he did not have the verbal aptitude to do so. He ended up graduating with a degree in biology from Arkansas State University and a master’s in zoology from the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville. In 1952, while a student at Arkansas State University, he published his first collection of poem, *Et Cetera*.

He continued to teach science at the high school and college levels until he landed a job teaching English at Louisiana State University, mainly through the help of Flannery O’Connor. Williams has explained it as follows: “We became dear friends and in 1961, LSU advertised for a poet to teach in their writing program. Though I had only had three hours of freshman English formally,
she saw the ad and, without mentioning it to me, wrote them and said the person you want teaches biology at Wesleyan College. They couldn’t believe that, of course, but they couldn’t ignore Flannery O’Connor. So they sent me word that said, ‘Would you send us some of your work?’ And I did.” That began Williams’s career in academia as an English professor.

While at Loyola University, he founded the New Orleans Review. He then returned to his roots and began teaching at the University of Arkansas in 1970, retiring from there in 2003. While he was a professor at UA, he cofounded with history professor Willard Gatewood the University of Arkansas Press, serving as director for 20 years. He also started the MFA translation program.

Williams published 37 books of prose and poetry. Some of his books of poems include Time and the Tilting Earth: Poems (2008), Some Jazz a While: Collected Poems (1999), and The Ways We Touch (1997). His poems are known for their realism and musicality. Most of his poems are about American life, at times incorporating dialogue and dramatic monologue.

Miller Williams was an award winning poet. His awards include the Henry Bellman Award, John William Corrington Award for Literary Excellence, the Porter Prize Foundation’s Lifetime Achievement in Writing, National Arts Award, New York Arts Fund Award, a Fulbright professorship at the National University of Mexico, the Charity Randall Citation for Contribution to Poetry as a Spoken Art, Prix de Rome for Literature, a Breadloaf Writers Conference Fellowship, and Amy Lowell Traveling Fellowship in Poetry. He collaborated with his daughter, singer-songwriter Lucinda Williams, who referenced one of his poems in her music. He also translated many poems from well-known writers such as Nicanor Parra, Giuseppe Belli, and Pablo Neruda. Williams inspired many people including former President Jimmy Carter, who published two books through the University of Arkansas Press. Miller Williams died in Fayetteville, Arkansas, on New Year’s Day 2015. His papers are archived in the Special Collections at the University of Arkansas library.

Williams’s words continue to reach everyday Americans. He loved being called “the Hank Williams of American poetry.” His work has been taught at ivy league universities and also “read and understood by squirrel hunters and taxi drivers.” Mentor to Billy Collins, his legacy lives on.

The Miller Williams biography was written by Sarah Elizabeth Price, a University of Delaware student.

Link to “Of History and Hope”
5.39.4 Elizabeth Alexander (1962–)

Forty-six years after she witnessed Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “I Have a Dream” speech, Elizabeth Alexander returned to National Mall, this time to participate in the swearing in of the first black US president, Barack Obama. In 2009, president-elect asked Alexander to write and deliver a poem to mark the occasion. Many, particularly Maya Angelou, were pleased with his selection. Her awareness of history, especially of African-American history, along with her personal friendship with the Obamas made her a natural choice. Based on traditional African praise songs, “Praise Song for the Day,” conveys optimism by focusing on ordinary Americans who contribute to the success of the nation.

Born in Harlem, New York, on May 30, 1962, Alexander was no stranger to politics as she grew up in Washington D.C. Her father served as United States Secretary of the Army and Equal Employment Opportunity Commission Chairman, and her mother was a writer and professor of African-American women’s history at George Washington University. She has said that “politics was in the drinking water at my house.”

Alexander received a bachelor’s degree from Yale University in 1984. She earned a Master’s degree from Boston University in 1987, studying under poet Derek Walcott who encouraged her to focus on writing poetry. While a graduate student, she worked as a reporter for The Washington Post and published her first poetry collection, The Venus Hottentot. In 1991, she began teaching at the University of Chicago. There she met Barak Obama, who was teaching at the law school (and would until his election to the US Senate in 2004). In 1992, she received a PhD in English from the University of Pennsylvania and won a creative writing fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts.

1996 saw the publication of Body of Life, a collection of poems, and Diva Studies, a verse play. She went on to author or co-author 14 books. Her collections of poetry include Crave Radiance: New and Selected Poems 1990-2010 (2012); American Sublime (2005), which was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Poetry; and Antebellum Dream Book (2001). Her memoir, The Light of the World, was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Biography and the National Book Critics Circle Award. She also edited The Essential Gwendolyn Brooks (2005) and Love’s Instruments: Poems by Melvin Dixon (1995).

Her poems, short stories, and critical writing have been widely published in such journals and periodicals as The Paris Review, American Poetry Review, The Kenyon Review, The Southern

Recognized as a pivotal figure in African-American poetry, Alexander has garnered numerous accolades. She was among the first class of Alphonse Fletcher Foundation fellows and was an academic fellow at the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study at Harvard. In 2007 she received the Jackson Poetry Prize from Poets & Writers. She also received an Illinois Arts Council award, and a Guggenheim Foundation fellowship. She earned a Pushcart Prize, the Quantrell Award for Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching at the University of Chicago, and the George Kent Award, given by Gwendolyn Brooks. Awarded an honorary Doctor of Letters degree by Yale University, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and to the American Philosophical Society. She was the recipient of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Award in Poetry. She serves as Chancellor of the Academy of American Poets and on the Pulitzer Prize Board and co-designed the Art for Justice Fund. She was a member of the founding editorial collective for the feminist journal Meridians, and of Cave Canem Poetry Workshops, which help develop African-American poets.

She taught at Smith College, where she was the Grace Hazard Conkling poet-in-residence and the first director of the college’s Poetry Center; Yale University for 15 years, teaching poetry and chairing the African American Studies department; and at Columbia University, as the Wun Tsun Tam Mellon Professor in the Humanities in the Department of English and Comparative Literature. Since 2018, she has served as president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

Reflecting on reciting a poem at a presidential inauguration, Alexander had this to say: “I have thought back to this exact time eight years ago, when I was given the honor of my life [and] asked to represent American poets—all my people—to compose and read a poem for [Barack Obama’s] inauguration in 2009. And I really thought, taking on that job, about the continuum of poets, living and dead, who I felt with me and around me at all times. And I really understood very profoundly what it was to be one of many vessels of the word, coming forward. And I tried to think about…my mother and father—Walt Whitman and Gwendolyn Brooks—they were with me all the time, saying, ‘Listen, listen: different voices, multivocality, polyphony, gumbo yaya.’ Everything happening at once—right? All of that is what brought the country to that profoundly hopeful moment.

And I think it’s important to remember that in that moment, thinking always of our elders, that was a beautiful moment that so many elders never thought they’d live to see. So there are things that we don’t yet know, that we don’t think we’re going to live to see, that are also going to give us power and beauty if we hold up our own….We hope that’s what poems do. So I want…to say that everyone for whom this poem was meaningful, those people are still here—it’s us. We’re still here. So we just have to really, really, really dust ourselves off and do our work. That’s all there is to it—love each other, do your work. That’s all there is to it.”

The Elizabeth Alexander biography was written by Carter Kouse, a University of Delaware student.
Richard Blanco joined the ranks of Frost, Angelou, Williams, and Alexander on January 21, 2013, when he read “One Today” at President Obama’s second inauguration. Moving from universal to specific, the poem focuses in on the immigrant using conversational verse. Maya Angelou praised his courage. Blanco made history as the first Latino, openly gay, and immigrant poet to read an inaugural poem.

Richard Blanco was born on February 15, 1968, in Madrid, Spain, to Cuban-exile parents. His mother was seven months pregnant with him when the family left Cuba. Just 45 days after his birth, they immigrated to New York City. They then settled in Miami, Florida, which is where Blanco grew up. Blanco earned a BS in civil engineering. Sometime in his twenties, he realized that writing was his passion. In 1997 he once again graduated from Florida International University, this time with a Master of Fine Arts in creative writing. Since 1991, he has been a practicing engineer, writer, and poet.

His first book of poetry, *City of a Hundred Fires*, was published in 1998. Winner of the Agnes Starrett Poetry Prize, the book reflects on his first trip to Cuba and his discovery of his family’s cultural background. From 1999 to 2001, he traveled widely, visiting Spain, Italy, France, Guatemala, and Brazil. His travels inspired his second book of poems, *Directions to The Beach of the Dead*, which won the PEN/American Beyond Margins Award. Other collections include *Looking for the Gulf Motel* (2012), winner of the Thom Gunn Award, the Maine Literary Award, and the Paterson Prize; *Boston Strong* (2013); and *How to Love a Country* (2019). He is also the author of two memoirs: *For All of Us, One Today: An Inaugural Poet’s Journey*, which includes the poem he read at Obama’s inauguration and the other two he wrote for the occasion, and *The Prince of Los Cocuyos: A Miami Childhood*, which won the Lambda Literary Prize and the Maine Literary Award. Blanco has collaborated with cartoonist, children’s illustrator, painter, and photographer on projects. He has written occasional poems to mark many events, including the re-opening ceremony of the U.S. Embassy in Cuba, Freedom to Marry, Orlando Pulse Nightclub Tragedy, the coronavirus pandemic, and the 2021 capital insurrection.

He has taught at Georgetown University, American University, Central Connecticut State University, Wesleyan University, Wentworth Institute of Technology, Colby College, and...
Carlow University. He leads writers workshops at correctional institutions and non-profits. His numerous honors include the Woodrow Wilson Visiting Fellowship, a Florida Artist Fellowship, a Bread Loaf Fellowship, and honorary doctorates from Macalester College, Colby College, and the University of Rhode Island. Blanco currently lives in Bethel, Maine, with his partner, and is on faculty at his alma mater, Florida International University. Since 2017, he has been a host and a contributor to *The Village Voice* radio program. He currently serves as the first Education Ambassador for the Academy of American Poets, championing open resources for students.

Richard Blanco was in three countries before he was two months old. From Madrid, a Cuban exile raised in Florida, he gives hope to Americans, proving that even individuals with scrambled and pieced-together backgrounds can achieve great things and find their place in this world. After reading “One Today,” he said to his mother: “Well, Mom, I think we’re finally American.” His works explore the search for home and what it means to be part of the United States.

The Richard Blanco biography was written by an English 204 University of Delaware student in the spring of 2021.

**Link to “One Today”**

### 5.39.6 Amanda Gorman (1998- )

Born in Los Angeles, California, on March 7, 1998, Amanda Gorman is the youngest person to recite a poem at a presidential inauguration. She was recommended by Dr. Jill Biden, who heard her read at the Library of Congress. At 23 years old, she delivered “The Hill We Climb,” a spoken word poem she finished after witnessing the siege on the Capitol. She has said that the events of January 6, 2021, marked “the day that the poem really came to life.” At President Joseph Biden’s swearing-in on January 20, 2021, she stole the show with her reading of a poem that calls for “unity and collaboration and togetherness” in the United States. Acknowledging the harsh truths of a divided country, Gorman invites America to commit to all cultures, colors, characters, and conditions. She drew inspiration from watching great orators such as Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King, Jr. who addressed the nation during divisive times. In honor of Maya Angelou, Gorman wore a ring with a caged bird. She also spoke with Richard Blanco and Elizabeth Alexander during the drafting of the poem. Blanco told her: “it’s just not one of us up there, it’s a representation of American poetry.”
Gorman describes herself as a “skinny Black girl, descended from slaves and raised by a single mother,” who can dream of being president one day, “only to find herself reciting for one.” Raised by Joan Wicks, a 6th grade English teacher, she grew up writing in journals at the playground. Gorman, who has a twin sister, said that her mother encouraged her three children to read and write. Amanda would read every morning and try to transform the story into her own words. In kindergarten, she was diagnosed with an auditory processing disorder, sound hypersensitivity, and a speech impediment. She attended speech therapy throughout her childhood and viewed her disorder as a gift. By 2014, at the age of 16, she became the first Youth Poet Laureate of Los Angeles. In 2017, she was promoted to the first ever National Youth Poet Laureate, which recognizes people who are young, skilled in poetry or spoken language, committed to civil activism, and Youth Poet Laureate in their state. In 2020, she graduated *cum laude* from Harvard University with a degree in sociology.

Gorman has said that she was inspired by the 2013 speech by Pakistani Nobel Peace Prize winner, Malala Yousafzai. When she heard the talk, she had been editing drafts of a book that she had been writing for over two years. She ended up publishing that poetry collection titled *The One for Whom Food Is Not Enough* in 2015. An award-winning writer, she has published in the *New York Times*. She has acknowledged inspiration from the works of Toni Morrison, Yusef Komunyakaa, Audre Lorde, and Phillis Wheatley. Her poems focus on oppression, race, marginalization, feminism, and the African diaspora.

Gorman founded a nonprofit organization called One Pen One Page in 2016, where youth could write and be a part of a leadership program. In 2017, she was the youngest poet to open the literary season for the Library of Congress. She has also read her poems on MTV, met Oprah Winfrey, wrote a tribute for black athletes for Nike, and recited a poem at the 55th Super Bowl pregame ceremony on February 7, 2021.

Some of Gorman’s many achievements are winning the OZY Genius award and recognition in *Glamour Magazine*’s “College Women of the Year.” Gorman has read poems for Lin-Manuel Miranda, Al Gore, Hillary Clinton, Malala Yousafzai, and has even been invited to the Obama White House. She made the cover of *TIME* Magazine’s February 2021 edition and was listed and given a profile in their “100 Next List” under the category “Phenoms.” She delivered a virtual commencement speech during the COVID pandemic. Gorman has three books forthcoming in the fall of 2021: *The Hill We Climb: Poems, The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country*, and *Change Sings: A Children’s Anthem*. She has stated her 2036 presidential and was already endorsed by Hillary Clinton and Michelle Obama.

Called “the voice of a new American era,” Amanda Gorman has noted that “Poetry is typically the touchstone that we go back to when we have to remind ourselves of the history that we stand on, and the future that we stand for.” Her words are a beautiful reminder of the significance of literature and the multiple voices who have authored America.

The Amanda Gorman biography was written by Ivy Wallace, a University of Delaware student.
Link to “The Hill We Climb”