

Black Literary Suite: Kansas Authors Edition

Although not as popularly associated with African American literature as some other areas of the United States, there is a rich tradition of black writing in the Midwest, including in the state of Kansas. A number of important African American authors were born or lived in the Sunflower State, and their work often reflects their time in Kansas. This Black Literary Suite exhibit highlights four important black writers—Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Frank Marshall Davis, and Kevin Young—with Kansas connections.



Langston Hughes in Lawrence, Kansas



Above: This house stood next door to Langston's childhood home, no longer standing.

Poet, novelist, playwright, and essayist Langston Hughes was born in Joplin, Missouri, on February 1, 1902, but he spent much of his childhood in various parts of Kansas, including Kansas City, Topeka, and especially Lawrence. When he was about seven years old, Langston went to live with his maternal grandmother, Mary Langston, in Lawrence in her house at 732 Alabama Street.



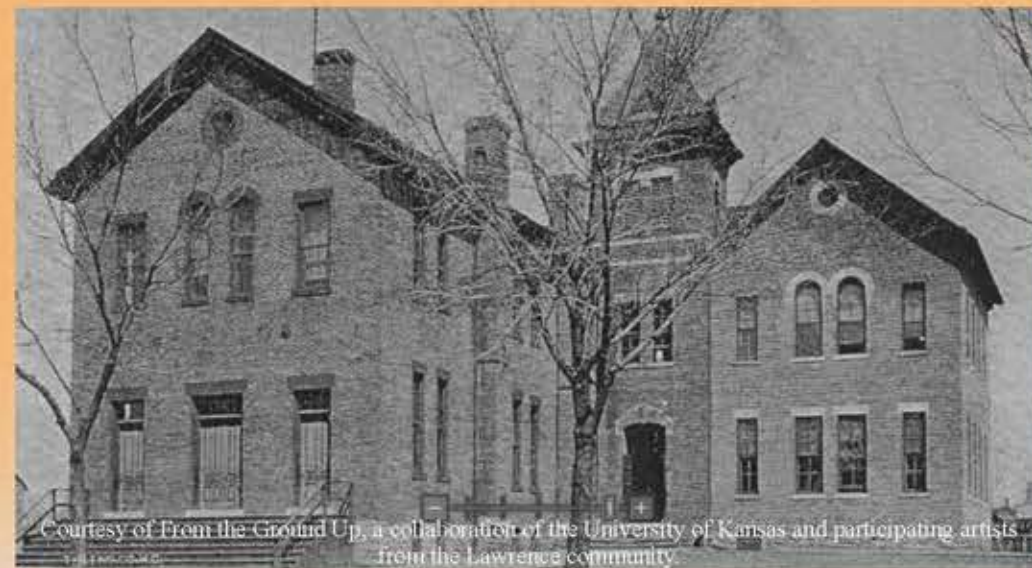
Courtesy of From the Ground Up, a collaboration of the University of Kansas and participating artists from the Lawrence community.

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Langston Hughes

“The first place I remember is Lawrence, right here.” – Langston Hughes at the University of Kansas, 1965

After Mary's death, Langston remained in Lawrence two more years, living with family friends, before he joined his mother in Illinois. He would later write of Auntie and Uncle Reed, the couple with whom he lived in Lawrence, that “there have never been any better people in the world.”



Courtesy of From the Ground Up, a collaboration of the University of Kansas and participating artists from the Lawrence community.

Above: Langston attended New York School from the fourth through sixth grades.

Langston Hughes and *Not Without Laughter* (1930)

In 1930, already an established poet, Langston published his first novel, *Not Without Laughter*. The novel tells the story of a young African American boy, Sandy, growing up in the fictional Kansas town of Stanton, where he lives with his grandmother. Langston acknowledged that *Not Without Laughter* was semi-autobiographical, loosely based on his own childhood living with his grandmother in the town of Lawrence.

“The ideas for my first novel had been in my head for a long time. I wanted to write about a typical Negro family in the Middle West, about people like those I had known in Kansas. But mine was not a typical Negro family.... For the purposes of the novel, however, I created around myself what seemed to be a family more typical of Negro life in Kansas than my own had been.” – Langston Hughes

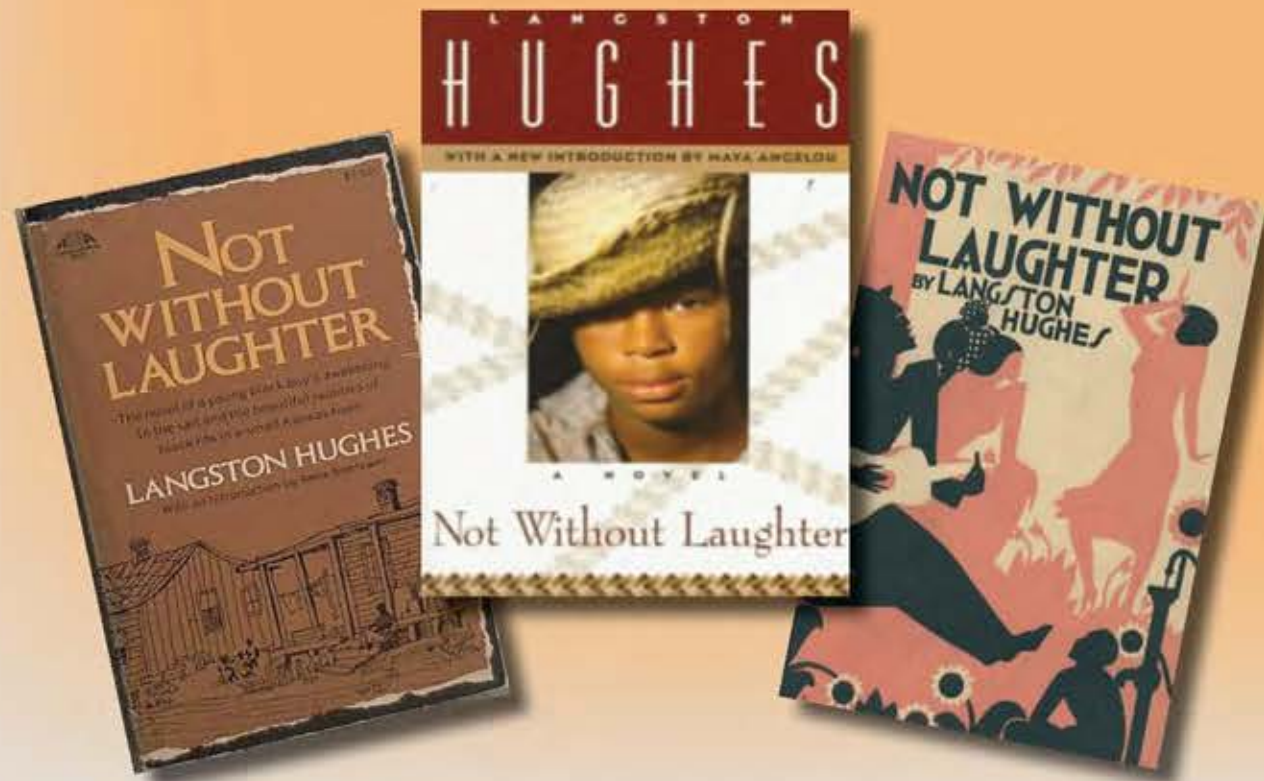
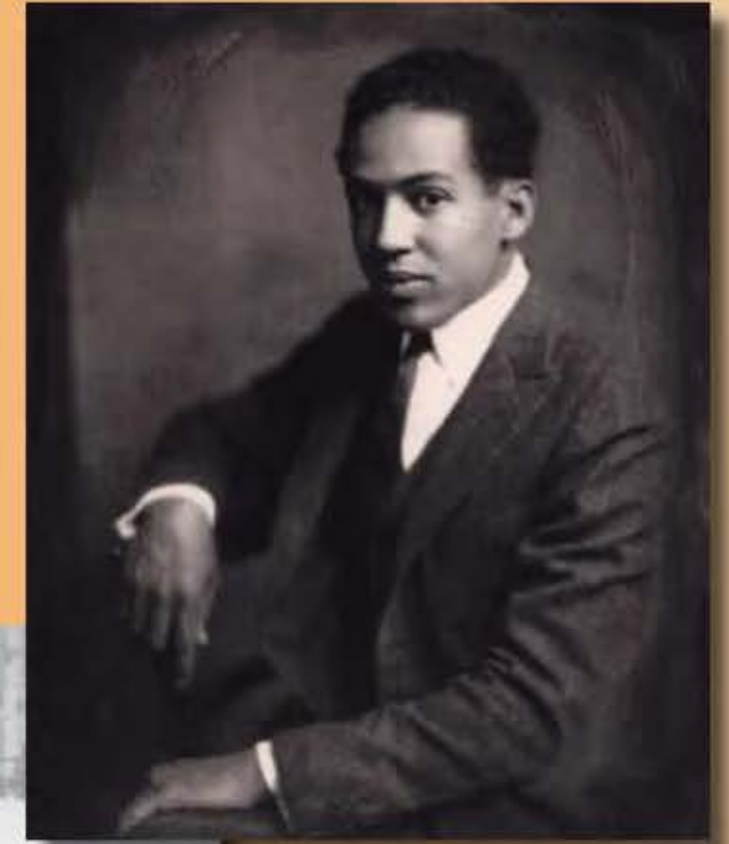


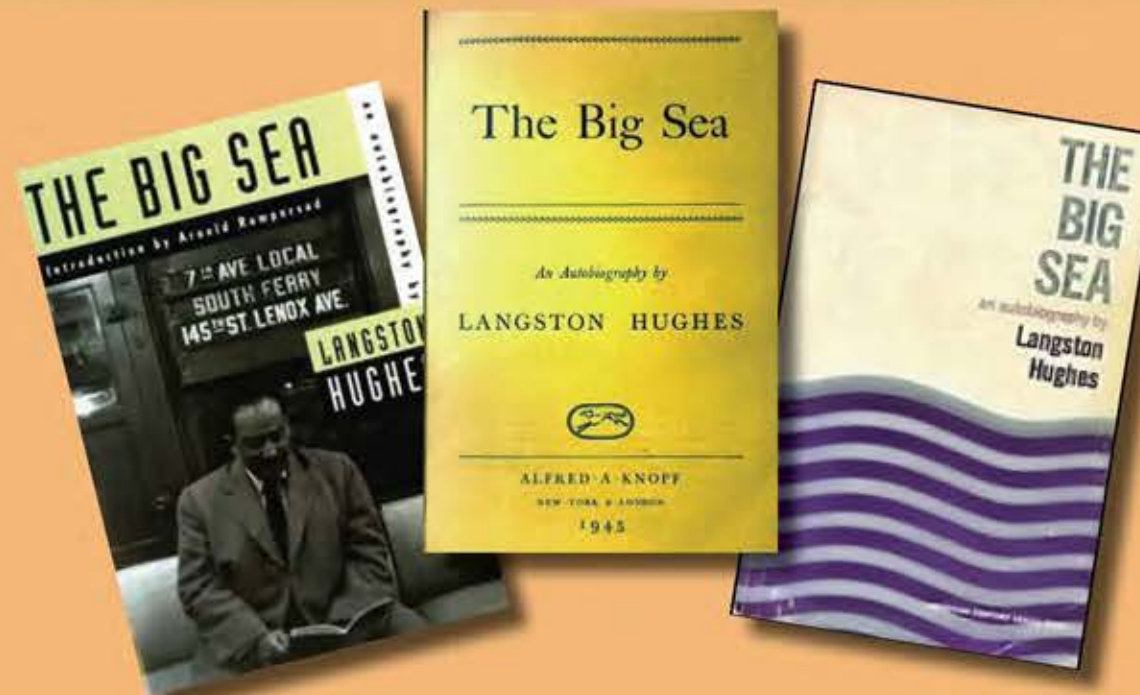
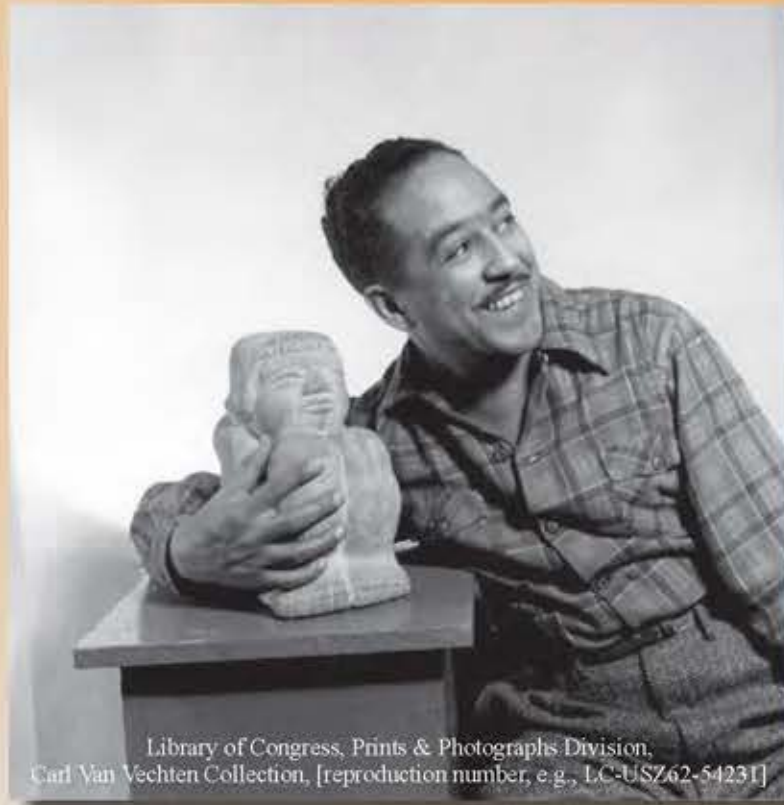
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Langston Hughes and *The Big Sea* (1940)



In 1940, at just 38 years old, Langston published his autobiography, *The Big Sea*. Although the book mostly focuses on his career as a young writer in the Roaring Twenties, Langston devotes quite a few pages to his time in Kansas and the effect it had on him, both personally and artistically. It was while living in Lawrence, Langston wrote in *The Big Sea*, that he developed his love of literature.

“Then it was that books began to happen to me, and I began to believe in nothing but books and the wonderful world in books—where if people suffered, they suffered in beautiful language, not in monosyllables, as we did in Kansas.” – Langston Hughes



“Now that it is here before us, the noteworthy quality of the poet’s latest book passes well beyond its content of remarkable situation and incident. Langston Hughes’s autobiography is the product and portrait of a very unusual spirit...” – Katherine Woods, *New York Times Review*, August 25, 1940

Gwendolyn Brooks in Kansas

Poet and novelist Gwendolyn Brooks was born on June 7, 1917, in Topeka, Kansas, where her maternal grandparents lived. Her mother, Keziah Brooks, was visiting her parents in Topeka when she went into labor. A month later, Gwendolyn, Keziah, and Gwendolyn's father, David Brooks, returned to their home in Chicago.

Although Gwendolyn never lived in Kansas full-time after infancy, her family had deep roots in Kansas. David Brooks grew up in Atchison, while Keziah and her family lived in Topeka. Keziah also attended Emporia Normal School in Emporia, Kansas, on her way to becoming a teacher.



Image via Poetry Foundation.
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“Very early in life I became fascinated with the wonders language can achieve. And I began playing with words.” – Gwendolyn Brooks



Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes



Image via Encyclopedia Britannica.
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Gwendolyn's family recognized her interest in writing very early on and always encouraged her to pursue her gifts. She published her first poem in a children's magazine when she was just 13 years old, and by age 16 had published about 75 poems.

Her parents were so determined to foster their daughter's talents that they even took Gwendolyn to meet Langston Hughes, who, like Brooks, had Kansas connections. She showed him some of her poems, and he encouraged her to keep writing. Langston was so impressed by Gwendolyn that he even dedicated his 1933 short story collection *Something in Common* to her.

“Langston Hughes! The words and deeds of Langston Hughes were rooted in kindness, and in pride.... When those who knew him remember him the memory inevitably will include laughter of an unusually warm and tender kind.” – Gwendolyn Brooks, Report from Part I

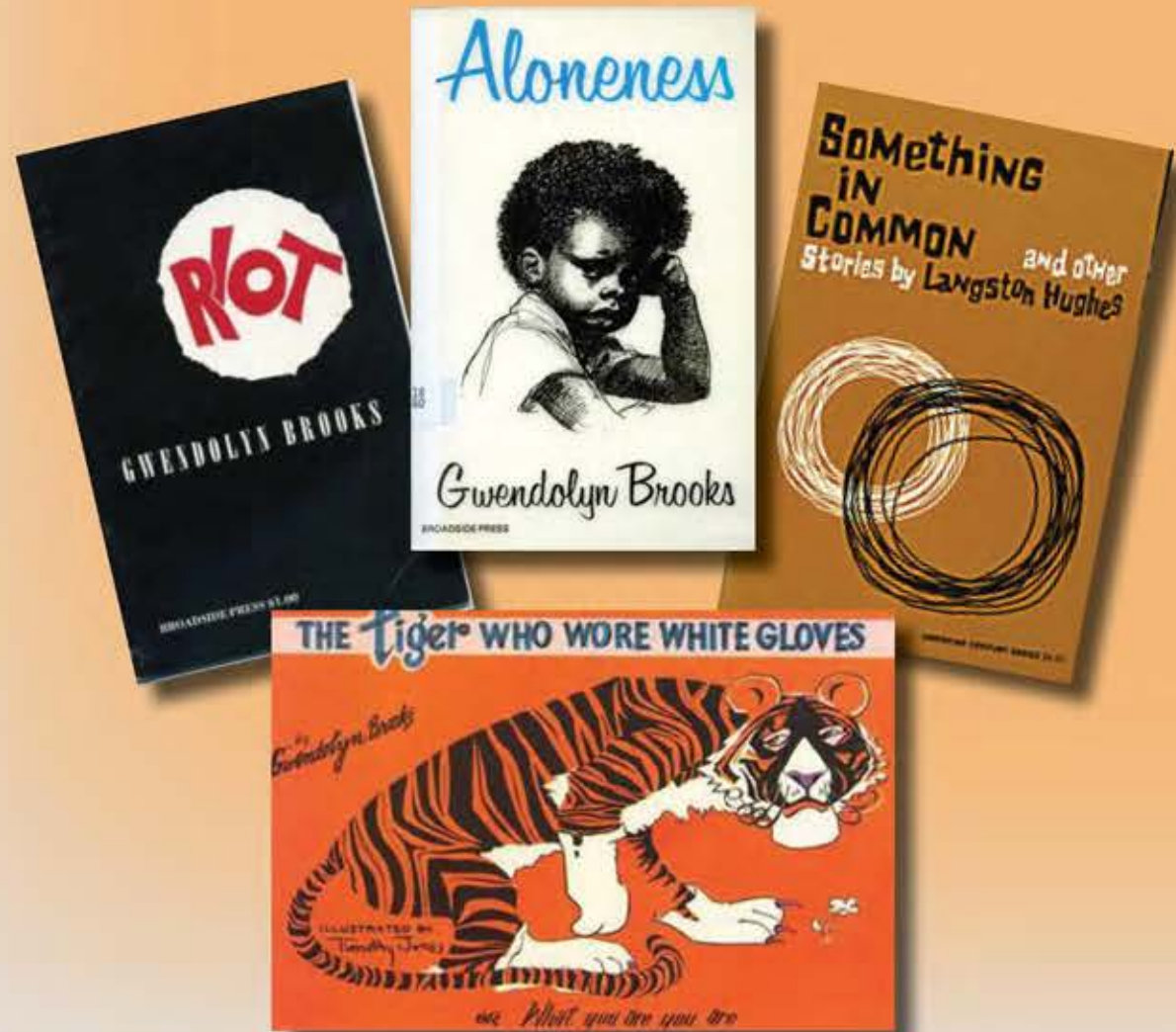


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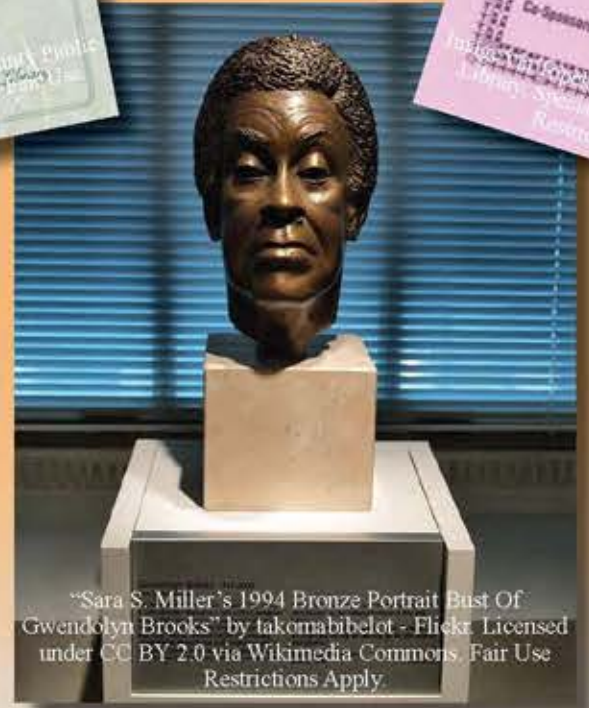
Gwendolyn Brooks's Kansas Legacy

Gwendolyn became the first African American woman poet to win the Pulitzer Prize and the Poet Laureate of Illinois, authoring many widely praised collections of poetry and prose.

She also continued to visit Kansas throughout her adulthood. In 1983, she received an honorary degree from Topeka's Washburn University, and in 1991, the Kansas Legislature declared Thursday, April 5, "Gwendolyn Brooks Day" in Topeka.



Image via Poem Hunter. Fair Use Restrictions Apply.



"Sara S. Miller's 1994 Bronze Portrait Bust Of Gwendolyn Brooks" by takemabibelot - Flickr. Licensed under CC BY 2.0 via Wikimedia Commons. Fair Use Restrictions Apply.

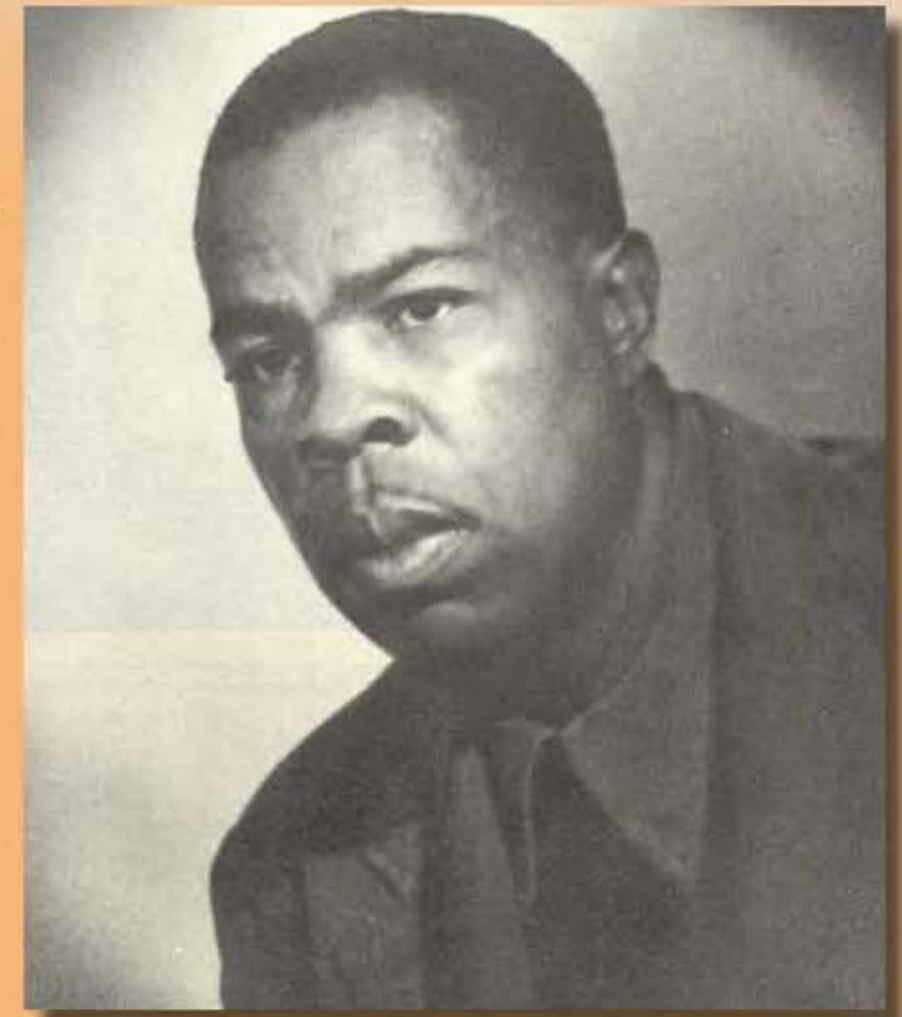
"I feel very good about that [Topeka declaring 'Gwendolyn Brooks Day'], especially in honor of my parents." – Gwendolyn Brooks in the Kansas City Star, 1991

Frank Marshall Davis's Kansas Roots

Journalist and poet Frank Marshall Davis was born in the south Kansas town of Arkansas City on December 31, 1905, where he lived with his mother, stepfather, and grandparents for most of his childhood. When he was 17, Frank enrolled at Wichita's Friends University before transferring to Kansas State Agricultural College (now Kansas State University), where he was one of just 26 African American students.

It was at Kansas State Agricultural College that Frank began to write poetry, inspired by a chance encounter with the modernist literary magazine *Others*. Encouraged by his English instructor, Ada Rice, to explore his gifts further, he soon became known across campus as "the poet who looks like a prizefighter."

"I...felt [Chicago] was my city. I never liked Kansas when I was growing up—too many restrictions." – Frank Marshall Davis to John Edgar Tidwell, 1983



Above: The campus of Kansas State Agricultural College, where Frank discovered his love for poetry.

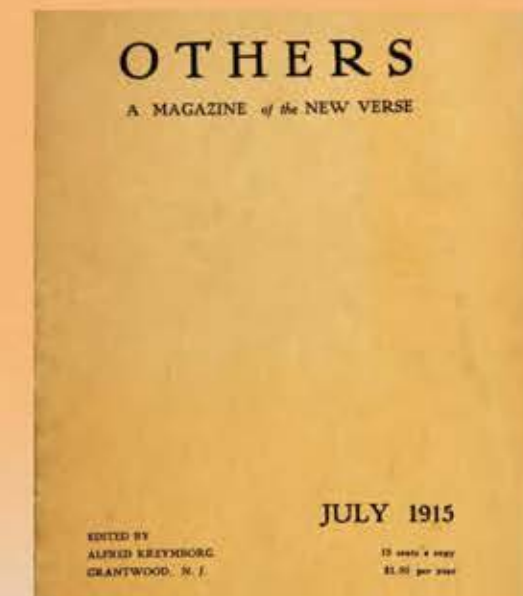


Image via the Modernist Journals Project.
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Frank Marshall Davis, Pioneering Journalist



Frank's career as a professional journalist took him around the United States. In 1927, he moved from Kansas to Chicago, where he wrote for African American newspapers such as the *Chicago Evening Bulletin*, the *Chicago Whip*, and the *Gary American*.

Frank rose quickly through the ranks, and within a few years he was serving as managing editor of the *Atlanta Daily World*, the most successful black newspaper in the country. He returned to Chicago in 1935 to work for the Associated Negro Press and soon became the organization's executive editor, often using his journalistic platform to advocate for progressive social causes.

“My poetry was often triggered by my experiences as a journalist...As a social realist, I had to be influenced by my experiences as a newsman.” – Frank Marshall Davis to John Edgar Tidwell, 1983



Image via Atlanta Daily World. Fair Use Restrictions Apply.

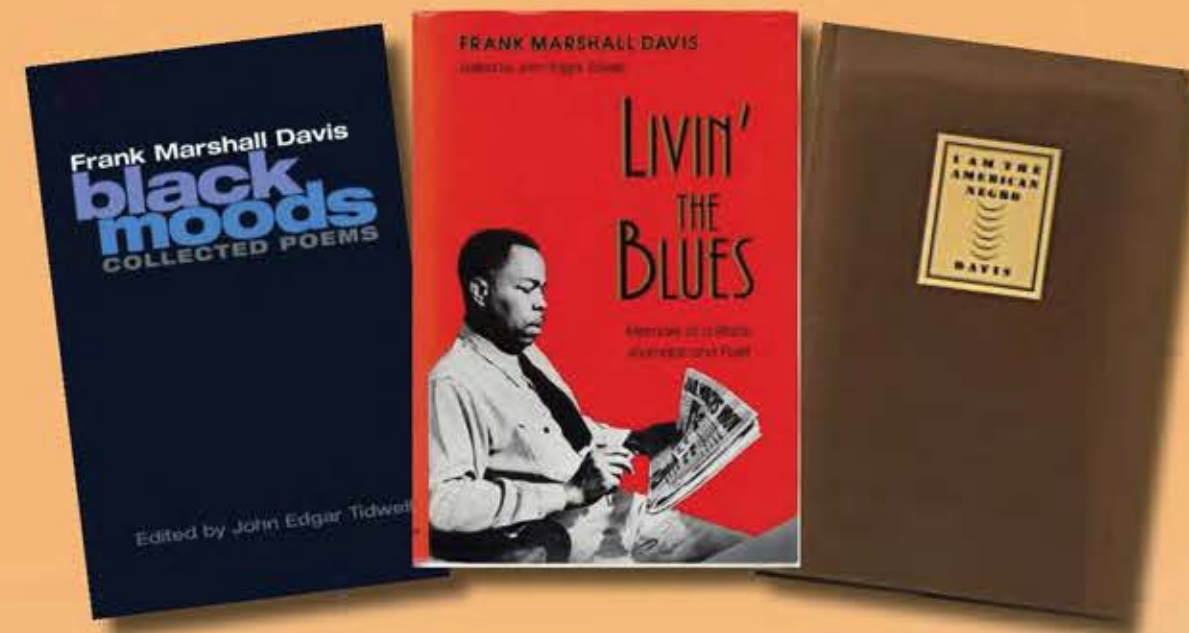
Frank Marshall Davis as a Poet

Although Frank earned his living as a journalist, he wrote poetry throughout his adult life and produced several collections, including *Black Man's Verse* (1935), *47th Street: Poems* (1948), and *Jazz Interludes: Seven Musical Poems* (1977).



Image via Dennis Oda for *Black American Literature Forum*. Fair Use Restrictions Apply.

Frank's own poetry is often concerned with social issues, reflecting his belief that art should serve as propaganda. A huge fan of fellow Chicago journalist and poet Carl Sandburg, Frank wrote primarily in free verse, his favorite form to read, and frequently incorporated references to African American history and culture, including the blues and jazz forms.



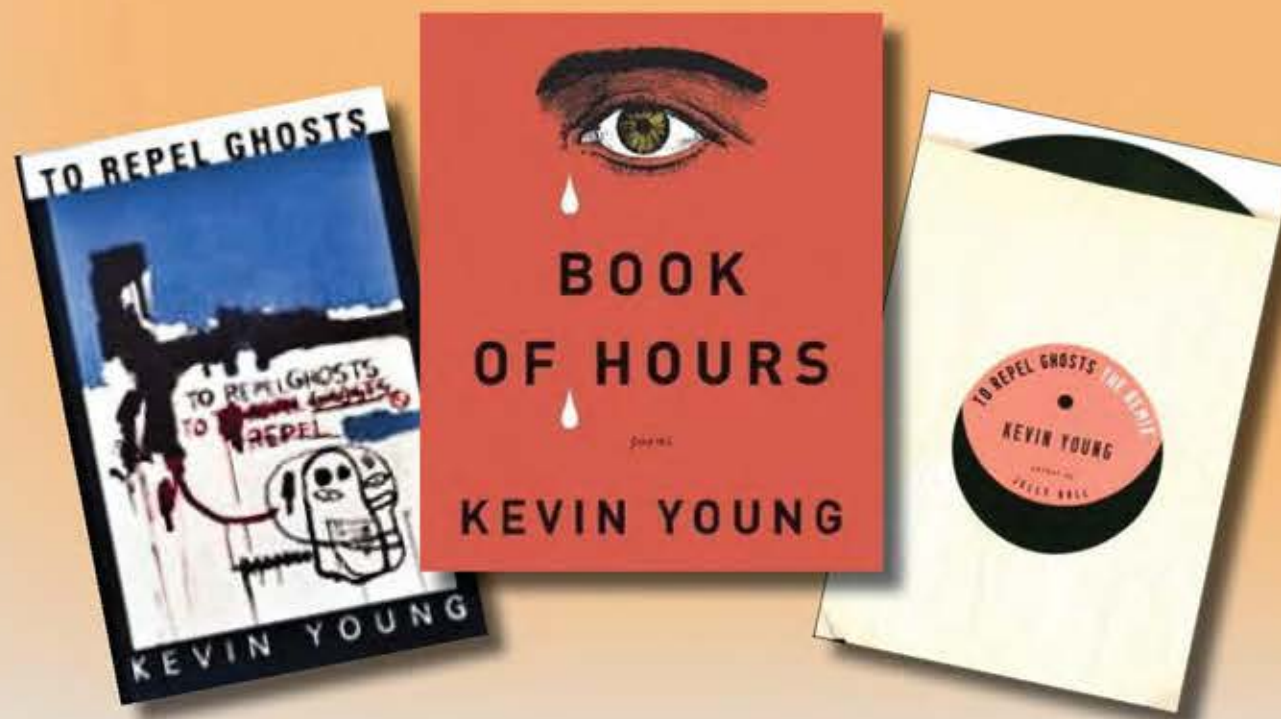
“My advice to young Black writers who want to become excellent writers, then, is that the only way to write poetry is to write poetry.” — Frank Marshall Davis to John Edgar Tidwell, 1983

Kevin Young and Growing Up in Kansas



Poet, critic, and curator Kevin Young was born on November 8, 1970, in Lincoln, Nebraska. Kevin moved five times before, at age 10, he settled with his parents in Topeka, Kansas. He lived in Topeka, where he attended Topeka West High School, until he left to attend Harvard University for college.

Kevin discovered his talent for words when he enrolled in a summer creative writing course for middle school students, held at Topeka's Washburn University and run by future Kansas Poet Laureate Denise Low. Just a few years later, he won first place in the 1989 Academy of American Poets College Poetry Awards, despite telling the *Harvard Gazette* that he didn't start writing seriously until his freshman year of high school.

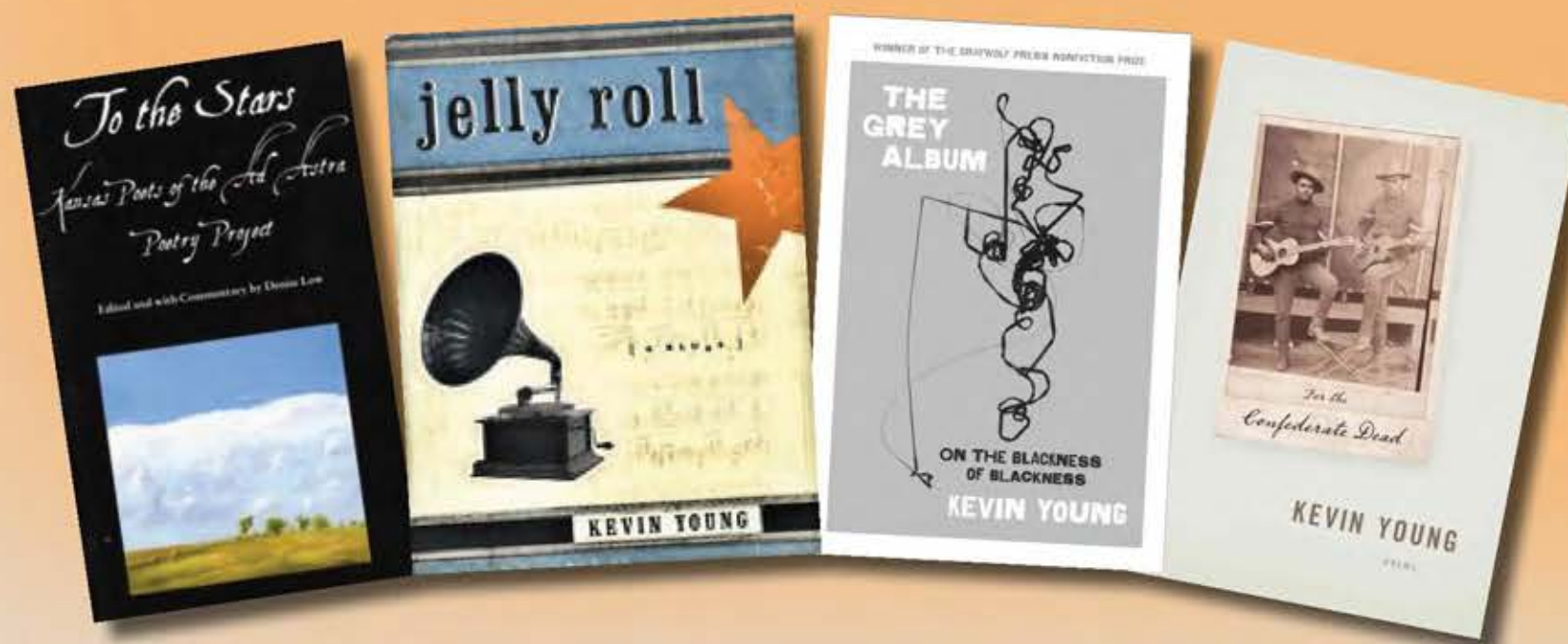


“I thought everyone could be a poet. I didn't think I had to have any special powers [to write].” – Kevin Young to the Christian Science Monitor, 2007

Kevin Young's Midwestern Influences

Kevin's poetry frequently reflects his Midwestern background. His work is grounded in a sense of place, often mentioning the sights and sounds of the land he grew up in. In poems like "Quivira City Limits," dedicated to his mentor Thomas Fox Averill of Washburn University, Kevin describes the Kansas landscape in vivid language: "Somewhere outside Topeka / ... those tractors blooming rust / in the fields..."

Kevin's poetic style is also heavily influenced by the blues and authors like Langston Hughes, who also spent time living in Kansas as a child. Kevin told NPR's *Fresh Air*, "I'm really interested in the way that the blues have that tragic-comic view of life—what Langston Hughes called 'laughing to keep from crying.'"



Additional Black Writers with Kansas Connections

A number of other African American writers have ties to Kansas, as well. A few of these authors are listed below, along with some of their important works.

Maxine Clair, *Rattlebone* (1995)

Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (2004)

Stephanie Stokes Oliver, *Song for My Father: Memoir of an All-American Family* (2005)

Gordon Parks, *The Learning Tree* (1964)

