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Coup of the Century

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Having already staged African-American poetry's "coup of the century" five years ago with JMU's historic conference, Furious Flower: A Revolution in African-American Poetry, Joanne Gabbin has done it again.

In addition to publishing a new book and opening the [Furious Flower Poetry Center](#), the English professor and Honors Program director has released a four-tape video anthology of that historic 1994 gathering, which drew together for the first time three generations of the African-American poetry movement. Thirty-five prominent and emerging African-American poets converged on the JMU campus to assess the Black Arts Movement of the 60s, to critique their genre and to present readings of their work.

The video is a best-seller among educational institutions. Over 130 schools purchased the four-set collection for \$295 during its first six months of availability. "One expert has called the video a poetry encyclopedia ... of African-American poetry," says Gabbin. "It has a wealth of instructional material."

Captured on video are Gabbin's lifelong mentor and friend, Gwendolyn Brooks, the first African-American to win the Pulitzer Prize (1950), along with other literary giants like Nikki Giovanni, Rita Dove, Amiri Baraka and Sonia Sanchez.

"We had some very generous sponsors for this conference and for the production of these videos," says Gabbin. California Newsreel, the Virginia Foundation for Public Policy, Bell Atlantic, Phillip Morris and the JMU English Department contributed to the video collection."

Carrier Library houses original video footage of the 1994 conference, as well as poetry books donated by clubs, publishers and alumni. Future plans for the Furious Flower Poetry Center include lifetime achievement awards for outstanding poets and monetary awards for emerging poets.

Gabbin's work in the study of African-American poetry has continued its furious flowering with her new book, *The Furious Flowering of African-American Poetry*, which fills a void in the study of the genre with "a collection of critical essays on African-American poetry that can be used as a general information book and also as a textbook for American literature courses," Gabbin says. "There were articles about poets in encyclopedias and journals, but there wasn't a true collection," she says.

The mission of JMU's poetry center is to further fill that void. Gabbin hopes to attract graduate students who will increase research into African-American poetry. "The scholarship opportunities are definitely out there through this center," says Gabbin. "Somehow African American literature has been relegated to a

different level, outside American literature, yet it is an integral part. Some will say even one of the most dynamic parts of American literature. When we hosted the Furious Flower conference in 1994, the world was celebrating a Nobel Prize winner in literature that was an African American (Toni Morrison). The United States Poet Laureate was Rita Dove, and Maya Angelou was chosen to read the inaugural poem for President Clinton. The highest honored humanist at the time was Gwendolyn Brooks, the National Endowment for the Humanities Jefferson Lecturer, a woman who has inspired poets for over 50 years."

Full Circle: a second coup

Gabbin has come full circle in her connection to the legendary poet Gwendolyn Brooks. In yet, another coup, last fall, Gabbin hosted poetry legend Gwendolyn Brooks on campus for the second time. This visit was to officially open the Furious Flower Poetry Center and to launch Gabbin's book. Both the book and the poetry center are dedicated to Brooks.

For Gabbin, the reasons are both personal and professional. "In 1970, I had just begun my journey as an educator. I had my master's degree fresh in hand and my first teaching job. I was so green," says Gabbin. "I felt that I had been given this opportunity on the shoulders of the fabulous women writers that I had studied - great African-American poets like Gwendolyn Brooks. I soon learned that Brooks had been turned down for a teaching position in the same university where I had just begun teaching black literature. This woman, who had won a Pulitzer Prize 20 years prior, was turned down because she had no academic degree. I was so humbled. From that moment on, I decided that wherever I taught I would invite Ms. Brooks to speak."

For Brooks, the visit was also "personal." She traveled 24 hours by train [she doesn't like to fly] from Chicago to Virginia to not just be honored at the poetry center dedication, but "more importantly, to help launch her good friend's book."

"I want other people to know about Gwendolyn Brooks' generous spirit," says Gabbin. "Every year, she sponsors a Writers' Conference on Black Literature and Creative Writing at Chicago State University, [where she is professor of literature] and she awards prizes for outstanding scholarship and creativity. I was lucky enough to receive one of these prizes in 1994. It was an amazing honor, but I think Gwendolyn Brooks' spirit is best described in her actions while visiting JMU in October. During her visit, she was held in traffic by an auto accident, but she arrived safely and gave a wonderful reading to open the Furious Flower Poetry Center. She stayed late, signing autographs, and later she took several of us to lunch. We traveled to the U.Va. campus for another book signing the same day, and she gave another reading at 8 p.m. This 82-year-old woman stayed and signed autographs until 1 a.m., not because she had to, but because there were still students there who wanted to connect with her. The fact that she'd come so far to attend our dedication ceremony and my book launching was very humbling. If our center can invoke that spirit, we are indeed a success."

The name Furious Flower comes from a line in *Brook's The Second Sermon on the Warpland*:

"The time cracks
into furious flower,
Lifts its face all unashamed
And sways in wicked grace."

Gabbin says, "Even though Brooks meant 'furious flower' as a metaphor for time, I thought it was a wonderful metaphor for poetry, especially African American poetry, which in this country has always had a protest element that sought after liberation, but then is always beautiful as poetry seeks to be. ... If people only learn one thing from the Furious Flower Poetry Center," says Gabbin, "I want them to know what can come from the generosity of spirit."