



# Maud Martha

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September 2003 marked the 50th anniversary of *Maud Martha*, the only novel published by esteemed poet Gwendolyn Brooks. Initially entitled "American Family Brown" the work would eventually come to symbolize some of Brooks' most provocative writing. In a novel that captures the essence of Black life, Brooks recognizes the beauty and strength that lies within each of us.

## Maud Martha Details

Date : Published October 1st 1992 by Third World Press (first published 1953)

ISBN : 9780883780619

Author : Gwendolyn Brooks

Format : Paperback 180 pages

Genre : Fiction, Poetry, Classics, Cultural, African American, Literature, Race

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# From Reader Review Maud Martha for online ebook

## Jim says

I had some difficulty settling into it, to follow her cadence, and I'm glad I did: it's a quiet marvel, so carefully observed in rich tones, like a vivid dream of an ordinary life. I thought some of the most magnetic work occurred in describing her doomed affair/marriage with Paul -- the chapter "a birth" was very intense, a chapter full of so many whirling emotions, and dread and betrayal, and to end thus:

but now the baby was quiet and returned its mother's stare with one that seemed equally curious and mystified but perfectly cool and undisturbed

Here are some passages I particularly enjoyed:

The Ball made toys of her emotions, stirred her variously. but she was anxious to have it end, she was anxious to be at home again, with the door closed behind herself and her husband. Then, he might be warm. There might be more than the absent courtesy he had been giving her of late. Then, he might be the tree she had a great need to lean against, in this "emergency" --If you're light and have long hair

What I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him. He has to jump away up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping. --If you're light and have long hair

(There were passages about color and prejudice that reminded me of "Their Eyes Were Watching God")

She watched the little dreams of smoke as they spiraled about his hand, and she thought about happenings. She was afraid to suggest to him that, to most people, nothing at all "happens." That most people merely live from day to day until they die. That, after he had been dead a year, doubtless fewer than five people would think of him oftener than once a year. That there might even come a year when no one on earth would think of him at all. --Paul in the 011 Club

And yet the chicken was a sort of person, a respectable individual, with its own kind of dignity. The difference was in the knowing. What was unreal to you, you could deal with violently. If chickens were ever to be safe, people would have to live with them, and know them, see them loving their children, finish the evening meal, arranging jealousy. --Brotherly love

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## Rod-Kelly Hines says

10 Stars!

Gwendolyn Brooks manages, in about 150 pages, to create a beautiful portrait of a black woman's life, in Chicago, in the 1950s. This novel is so graceful and light, yet deals with the ugliness of colorism among black people, racism, domestic woes, motherhood, and daughterhood. Brooks, ever the poet, describes the minute details of everyday life with brilliant ease and lyricism. Each chapter is a little window into a moment in Maud Martha's life; she is a character with a quiet strength, able to endlessly dream and enjoy all of the things that make life beautiful despite circumstances that spell tragedy for many of the people around her.

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### **Judy says**

I learned about Maud Martha from Elaine Showalter's excellent overview of American women writers, *A Jury of Her Peers*. Gwendolyn Brooks was primarily a poet and this was her only novel.

The novel is short, composed of vignettes in Maud Martha's life from childhood through courting, marriage and motherhood. The tone is lighthearted but Brooks spares no aspect of what life was really like for a young black woman in 1950s Chicago.

The writing is indeed poetic; in fact consummately so. She tells it to us, without censure or preaching, but man, do we get it: black, female, mother and wife. So well done.

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### **Ciana says**

This quiet story from Gwendolyn Brooks gives an excellent portrayal of a young black woman growing up on the south side of Chicago. Its discussion of the different treatment of light and dark skin blacks in the black community is really interesting and accurate. Maud Martha's story told in short vignettes allows her thoughts and concerns to come alive on the page. It was an enjoyable and quick read. I wonder why it has not received the attention it deserves from the African American literature cannon.

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### **Kima says**

Maud Martha is a quiet triumph that follows out protagonist from girlhood into marriage. Maud shares her world with a clarity that can only be called "learned" "lived" and "poetic." Maud has thoughts! ideas! opinions! ruminations! Maud's is not a life to be pitied but celebrated even when she shares her most private defeats. This novel is as much about Chicago as it is about Maud. This was a reread for me as I read Maud Martha over a decade ago, and it has stood the test of time with its commentary on race, color, gender, community and love.

I could not love and appreciate Gwendolyn Brooks anymore than I already do.

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## **Julie says**

8.5/10

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## **Winter Sophia Rose says**

Passionate, Graceful, Beautiful & Inspiring! An Amazing Read! I Loved It!

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## **Rachel León says**

Gwendolyn Brooks has long been one of my favorite writers, in part because MAUD MARTHA was at one time my all time favorite book ever written. It's a slim book with no real plot. The novel (more appropriately described as a novella) is a collection of vignettes from the main character's life. It's a quiet book, but so astute, beautifully written, and deeply felt. I have read this book over and over and I still come back to it. This last reading I saw things in it that I hadn't before, which to me, is the mark of a truly great book. I've recommended this book to other people, but no one has enjoyed it as much as me. Some people haven't even finished it because they "couldn't see the point." I cringe each time I hear this criticism because this book touched me deeply. I LOVE this book!

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## **Laurie says**

Poetry is short, pithy sentences or phrases that say much in a short space. This novel is poetry barely converted to prose, which is not surprising since Gwendolyn Brooks was a poet and this is her only novel. Each short chapter is a snapshot in the life of Maud Martha beginning as a young child and progressing through her life as a young mother. Even though the reader knows quite a bit about Maud Martha by the end, there are so many depths to plumb and so many images, both happy and sad, of this young woman. I only wish there had been more.

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## **Asha says**

Eloquent. Thoughtful. Honest.

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## **Karen Skinner says**

Stunning things happen when a poet writes a novel. They happen here in this raw and insightful examination of a woman's life in Chicago. It doesn't matter so much when this story takes place because it is THAT timeless. This is a fast read that I did not want to finish. I kept going back, and then forward again, to delay

the inevitable, the end. Here is an author that was crafting her writing in a fresh and new way back in the 1950's, and it reads fresh and new today. What a pleasure to see things this way, to see how words can be strung together so that a couple of paragraphs is a full and satisfying chapter.

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## Brina says

The year 2017 marks the hundredth year after Gwendolyn Brooks' birth, so I felt it appropriate to begin my reading year with her only full length novel Maud Martha. A coming of age tale of Maud Martha Brown Phillips, Brooks short novel speaks of the African American experience in the 1940s.

The Brown family makes their home on Chicago's south side. Facing discrimination on a nearly daily basis, the family is nearly evicted from their home, yet at the last moment are able to call themselves home owners. The parents have respectable jobs and attempt to instill these values in their three children Helen, Maud Martha, and Harry. Unfortunately, the two girls realize from a young age that skin color could inhibit their progress in society.

Maud Martha comes of age and marries Paul Phillips. The couple dreams of a lavish apartment or house with all the fixings but face reality and prejudices and settle for a kitchenette (forerunner to studio) apartment. Paul works as hard as he can to provide for Maud Martha but finds life frustrating at times; he is much lighter skinned than his wife and, while too dark to pass, enjoys entries into society that he would be unable to do so in the company of Maud Martha.

Brooks poetic prose is lovely as always and makes for easy reading. Last year I read for the first time Jacqueline Woodson's poetic novellas. Woodson's work appears to be a descendant of Maud Martha, a slim novel poetic in its voice. Used to Brooks poetry that flows off the pages, she easily transferred this voice to novel form to describe Maud Martha's life. The light nature of the prose made it easy to digest difficult topics as discrimination and the African American culture prior to integration. As a result of Brooks' works, readers have insight into African American society during the 1940s and early 1950s.

Fifteen years after the publication of Maud Martha, Gwendolyn Brooks was named a poet laureate in Illinois. A fixture in the Bronzeville community that she called home, Brooks lived as respected member of Chicago until her death in 2000. Winning the Pulitzer for her poetry collection Annie Allen in 1950, Brooks novel is equally impressive and should be lauded. A window into African American daily life during the 1940s, Maud Martha rates 4.5 beautiful stars.

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## Jola says

**Name:** Maud Martha Brown

**Year of birth:** 1917

**Address:** Chicago, a tiny apartment. Gwendolyn Brooks describes a place like that in her poem 'Kitchenette Building':

*'But could a dream sent up through onion fumes  
Its white and violet, fight with fried potatoes  
And yesterday's garbage ripening in the hall,  
Flutter, or sing an aria down these rooms'*

**Family:** Working class. Poor. Struggling. Loving. Mum, dad, one brother, one sister. Annoyingly beautiful sister, to be exact: *'It's funny how some people are just charming, just pretty, and others, born of the same parents, are just not.'*

**Ethnic background:** African American.

**Skin colour:** *'The color of cocoa straight.'* According to Maud Martha, much too dark.

**Dream:** New York and to be cherished.

**Secret:** A recipe for the best cocoa in the family.

*State Street, Chicago, 1917. [Image source.]*

Let's face it, probably this fact file doesn't urge you to drop everything and run desperately to the nearest library to get a copy of 'Maud Martha' (1953) by Gwendolyn Brooks. The girl seems a bit plain and lackluster at first sight, doesn't she? Only tentatively. Just wait and see.

Who doesn't love Gwendolyn Brooks? - asks Sandra Jackson-Opoku. According to her, *'only those who've never read her'*. Well, I must confess humbly that I've left the group of Brooks' non-readers only recently.

My interest in Gwendolyn Brooks germinated a few days ago thanks to my wonderful Goodreads friend, Julie. It was watered and nourished with Julie's tears of affection and Brooks' poems. It bloomed while I was reading 'Maud Martha', the one and only novel by this author. I am very grateful to Julie, as she inspired me to 'meet' a truly remarkable writer.

*Gwendolyn Brooks. [Image source.]*

'Maud Martha' is an ethnic female bildungsroman, a short autobiography of a young woman, who seems to be very similar to the author, by the way. She was even born in the same year. The novel consists of thirty-four vignettes, often resembling prose poems. Each of them depicts one year in the life of Maud Martha. Each of them is like a piece of shimmering amber with a scrap of life preserved inside for billions of years to come. It can be an episode, a thought, an observation, a conversation, a memory. It's always a moment caught in the act. Maud Martha seems to follow the advice of Omar Khayyám, who she possibly hasn't heard of: *'Be happy for this moment. This moment is your life.'*

We meet Maud Martha Brown when she is a little girl and we say goodbye to her when she is expecting her second child. The year must be 1945, as her brother has just returned from the war. Gwendolyn Brooks presents a multi-dimensional, richly rendered portrait of Maud Martha: we see her at different stages of life, in various roles, as a granddaughter, a sister, a daughter, a girlfriend, a fiancée, a wife and a mother.

We witness important events in Maud Martha's life, like her granny's death or giving birth to her daughter, and special occasions like Christmas or Easter, but we also accompany her during more prosaic activities, for instance gutting a chicken or bargaining at a hat shop. And sometimes she amazes us with her search for answers to unsettling philosophical questions.

*[Image source.]*

I hope the ostensible plainness of Martha Maud's autobiography in fragments won't discourage more refined readers. According to David Littlejohn, *'It is a powerful, beautiful dagger of a book, as generous as it can*

*possibly be. It teaches more, more quickly, more lastingly, than a thousand pages of protest.'* A very special kind of protest, apparently. Although Maud Martha confronts with nastiness and unfairness because of her skin colour on daily basis, there is no trace of hatred in her. Actually, once she feels it: when her daughter, Paulette, has been ignored by Santa Claus at a department store. Then it was a *'tough cough-up of rage'*.

Racism is one of the problems Brooks deals with in 'Maud Martha' and she gives account of it in a compelling way. There is no physical violence in the book. Sometimes not even one word is said, like in the unforgettable scene at the cinema. Sometimes it is just one word, used accidentally (oh, really?) by a hairdresser. A brief comment by a shop-assistant. Although the term 'racism' is not used even once, it hangs in the air like a menacing cloud.

*The Silent Protest Parade, July 28, 1917.[Image source.]*

If you are interested in history, especially her-story, you will be pleased with Brooks' novel as it is full of tasty little details of everyday life: food, clothes, family traditions, the situation of women, language, marriage, parenting and many more. Despite these concrete particulars, 'Maud Martha' is a timeless narrative about the strength of women, injustice, racism, prejudices, feeling like a puzzle piece which doesn't really fit. A really heartwarming story, delicately brushed with melancholy and a sardonic sense of humour.

Gwendolyn Brooks' protagonist was born one hundred years ago but I am sure if you look around, you will notice some Maud Marthas, who want to convey themselves as a gift to others: *'What she wanted was to donate to the world a good Maud Martha. That was the offering, the bit of art, that could not come from any other. She would polish and hone that.'* You might be one of Maud Marthas, actually.

The first thing that struck me in Brooks' novel was the simplicity and candor of the language. Please, don't let it deceive you, though. In one of her interviews the author explains the unpretentiousness of her words: *'I don't want to say that these poems have to be simple, but I want to clarify my language. I want these poems to be free. I want them to be direct without sacrificing the kinds of music, the picturemaking I've always been interested in.'* The vignettes in 'Maud Martha' are direct and resemble pictures indeed, some of them made me think of film scenes.

*African Americans in 1940's. [Image source.]*

According to the author, *'Maud Martha was born in 1917. She is still alive today.'* If you happen to know her, please give her a bunch of dandelions. They are her favourite flowers: *'She liked their demure prettiness second to their everydayness; for in that latter quality she thought she saw a picture of herself, and it was comforting to find that what was common could also be a flower.'*

If you are lucky, Maud Martha might even give you her secret recipe for the best cocoa in the family.

*[Image source.]*

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**Zanna says**



I think Maud Martha would approve of this edition of her book, which is spaciouly printed in an elegant font on thick, smooth paper. One of the most touching things about her is her love of beauty and fineness and pleasantness in things. After her marriage, she misses the seasonal rituals of her family home:

**And birthdays, with their pink and white cakes and candles, strawberry ice cream, and presents wrapped up carefully and tied with wide ribbons: whereas here was this man, who never considered giving his own mother a birthday bouquet, and dropped into his wife's lap a birthday box of drugstore candy (when he thought of it) wrapped in the drugstore green**

It's the little sugar in the bowl that makes life sweet, not lavish spending, that she wants. Maud Martha reminds us that dandelions are embellishment, can give pleasure. She wants to be cherished, like her sister Helen, whose name, of course, suggests someone who inspires extravagant tribute. Helen has *grace*, but in Maud Martha's eyes, little else to justify the way she is seemingly adored over herself. The author takes a kind of revenge:

**“You'll never get a boy friend,” said Helen, fluffing on her Golden Peacock powder, “if you don't stop reading those books”**

If there's no love for reading girls (because we're dangerous), then the world is wrong, we know absolutely, cuddling our books for comfort.

**What she wanted was to donate to the world a good Maud Martha. That was the offering, the bit of art, that could not come from any other. She would polish and hone that.**

I liked her first beau, 'decorated inside and out', not so much the second who, longing for beauty and elevation like Maud Martha, fails to find any hope of it in black life. Years after Maud Martha has married someone else, he meets her at a university where they're watching a young black writer speak, and she witnesses him fawning over white friends, shrugging her off as she crimps his style. It's his problem, but another part of it is hers, like when she envies a lighter-skinned woman, 'Gold Spangles' who dances with her husband, Paul.

**'It's my color' she thinks, that makes Paul mad, 'what I am inside, what is really me, he likes okay. But he keeps looking at my color, which is like a wall. He has to jump over it in order to meet and touch what I've got for him. He has to jump up high in order to see it. He gets awful tired of all that jumping.'**

Poor housing blights Maud Martha and Paul; they live in a kitchenette and have to share a bathroom. Maud Martha's own story tells so much on *how it is* in so few words, but when she describes her neighbours in 'kitchenette folks', the text's density multiplies as more windows are deftly flung open on lives rubbing along, more or less discontentedly. Hope shines in the romance of 'the Whitestripes' who adore each other, but the hope that isn't for you perhaps hurts more; Paul admonishes her for admiring the couple: 'you can stop mooning. I'll never be a 'Coopie' Whitestripe.' Maud Martha agrees.

The cruelty, meanness, and racism of white folks occasionally pokes into Maud Martha's life, precipitating more horizontal violence (her conversation with the beautician who tells Maud Martha she didn't pull up the white saleswoman on her offensive language because she thinks they, black folks, should be less sensitive) and hard work for Maud Martha (reassuring her daughter that Santa loves her and promising her gifts to prove it after a costumed Santa in a toy store is rude and perfunctory to her). Brooks shows that black people always have to do the heavy lifting of race. Perhaps most incisive is the episode 'At the Burns-

Coopers' where Maud Martha takes on work as a 'housemaid' and after one day of listening to the Mrs go on about her expensive pleasures knows she won't come back, despite the good wages:

**Shall I mention, considered Maud Martha, my own social triumphs, my own education, my travels to Gary and Milwaukee and Columbus, Ohio? Shall I mention my collection of pink satin bras? She decided against it.**

Because Mrs Burns-Coopers, we can see, would not know how to respond, because she cannot imagine that Maud Martha has a life and a mind.

Veg\*n thoughts: a chapter about the struggle and horror of preparing the corpse of a hen to eat is entitled 'brotherly love'

**And yet the chicken was a sort of person, a respectable individual, with its own kind of dignity. The difference was in the knowing. What was unreal to you, you could deal with violently. If chickens were ever to be safe, people would have to live with them, and know them, see them loving their children, finishing the evening meal, arranging jealousy.**

This passage relates back to Maud Martha's empathy with the mouse she caught much earlier in the book, and the elation and surprised pride she felt when she released the creature telling her to 'go home to your family'. It also relates, I think, to the way white folks behave, in their failure to see black folks as fully human.

I could never forget that this is a poet's book. Each line walks to the corner, turns with a flourish like a dancer, a fineness and exactness that catches breath. It is an epic in vignettes, radiating truth like sunlight.

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## **Erin says**

This is my favorite book. Maud Martha's character, the episodic writing style, the exquisite word choice...I read this one again and again.

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## **Sincerae says**

I read this novel about four years ago in a volume which was a collection of Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry. I had the pleasure of meeting and talking to her when I was an undergraduate majoring in English (literature).

Maud Martha is one of the most beautiful novels I've ever read. The language is poetic prose and positive with also a mix of the realistic.

Often African American novels are harshly realistic. But here Brooks' places the main character in occasional grating circumstances which would turn many bitter or warped, yet Maud Martha always keeps her head up and never stops seeing and seeking the sometimes hidden flower of the goodness in the life.

As far as the love of what is beautiful in life and what is good, I would say Maud Martha is me. Despite the harshness of life, if we keep searching and never lose hope we can find the beautiful and the meaningful. I

feel this is the message of this little great poetic novel.

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### **Duane says**

I haven't read any of Gwendolyn Brooks poetry (yet), just this novel, the only one she wrote, but it reads like poetic prose. Beautifully written, flowing lyrical prose that make the pages fly by. It's a coming of age story, most assuredly inspired by Brooks life in Chicago's south side. 180 pages featuring short vignettes that paint a picture of what it was like growing up in the black neighborhoods of early 20th century Chicago. A 5 star read for me.

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### **John Henry says**

I haven't yet read anything else by Gwendolyn Brooks but I'm wild about this book. This novella (?) Maud Martha describes growing up in the 50s. With a poet's choice of words and descriptions. Which I happen to adore. This slim volume of nearly stand alone chapters presents the tip of an enormous implied iceberg. Deeply personal, transparent, revealing. The way GB says so very much with so little is a lesson and an exhibition in literary distillation. Her sentences explode. The chapters, deceptively simple and light, almost breezy, are rich and intricate. Maud Martha and her life come through clear and pure. I am grateful and thrilled to be with Maud Martha for a day or two -- the time it takes to walk through the book with her -- and to keep her in mind for the rest of my life. Highest recommendations.

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### **Camille says**

Maud Martha is the only novel by the poet Gwendolyn Brooks, telling the story of the life of Maud Martha Brown, a Black girl, and the African-American experience in 1940s Chicago. It is very short - my edition has 180 pages - and is very reminiscent of Brooks' poetry skills as it is written in vignettes. While I was taken aback by the writing style at first, it quickly became very compelling. I found it amazing how much Brooks managed to express in so short a book with such a unique writing style

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### **Rowena says**

I really enjoyed Gwendolyn Brooks' poetry so I was interested to read her only novel. I really loved this book; it was a quick easy read, with short chapters that said so much. The book has vignettes of Maud Martha's life from childhood through adulthood. It touches on colourism in the African-American community, as well as love, motherhood and other topics.

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