

Notes on We Real Cool by Gwendolyn Brooks:

Gwendolyn Brooks was walking through her Chicago neighborhood one day when she saw something that caught her eye. She looked through the doorway of a pool hall and saw a bunch of guys who looked too young to be there. She was intrigued by what she saw as their combination of boldness and insecurity. On the one hand, they were thumbing their noses at society by hanging out at a place populated by gamblers and pool sharks – on a school day. On the other hand, spending your day in a dingy, dimly lit room seems more like something you'd do to look cool, as opposed to actually being cool. She decided to write a poem about it. (You can listen to Brooks talk about "We Real Cool" at [Poets.org](https://www.poets.org).)

Brooks might not be happy that we're giving yet more attention to this short poem. "I wrote other stuff, you know," she might say – and, in fact, did say at readings where she would nonetheless recite "We Real Cool" with gusto. Though "We Real Cool" is her most famous poem, Brooks wrote other excellent poems like "The Bean Eaters." The next time you're at the library, pick up one of her full collections, even if only to flip through the pages to see how her other poetry looks.

"We Real Cool" has become an example of what can be accomplished in a very short space with simple, everyday language. Much like William Carlos Williams's "The Red Wheelbarrow," "We Real Cool" is as much about defining the possibilities of poetry as it is about its particular subject matter. Using only a few well-placed words, Brooks recreated the atmosphere of the pool hall and the attitudes of the players. She emphasized sound over description.

Brooks was a Chicago poet, and she lived in the Windy City for most of her life. Chicago is known as a center of the blues and jazz cultures, and even more so when this poem was published in 1960, in the collection *The Bean Eaters*. Now, we don't always think an artist has to be seen through the lens of his or her environment, but in this poem the rhythms of jazz are fairly inescapable, so it's important to mention it.

In 1950, Brooks became the first African-American woman to win the Pulitzer Prize, which she was awarded for her book *Annie Allen*. She served as the U.S. Poet Laureate from 1985-1986.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

"We Real Cool" is a poem for anyone who has ever played hooky. Though it's written from the perspective of seven young guys who are hanging out in a pool hall instead of attending class, we never really feel like the pool players are talking. Rather, the speaker is trying to imagine their thoughts. At first you might think the speaker is being judgmental – imagine an older lady wagging her finger and saying, "You darn kids!" But we like to imagine the speaker is kind of playing hooky herself, and one-upping the kids in the pool hall. After all, what the heck is she doing poking her head into a gambling and drinking establishment in the middle of the day?

If you've ever seen the Oscar-winning boxing movie *Million Dollar Baby*, think of the scene where the salty old man played by Morgan Freeman enters the ring with a cocky, young upstart and cleans his clock. The speaker of the poem does something like that here. She sees these guys who think they are "real cool," who think they know something about jazz and "singing sin," and this poem is her response. She says, "I can write words that are more like jazz than you'll

ever produce, and I can sum up your entire adolescent existence in 24 words. You'd better run along now back to school and leave the 'singing about sin' to the older folks, like me."