

Bontemps, Arna Wendell (1902–1973)

DEREK C. BOWE

Derek C. Bowe, Ph.D., is a professor of English and former chair of the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Oakwood University, Huntsville, Alabama.

Arna Bontemps was a key figure in America's Harlem Renaissance literary movement of the 1920s. For more than forty years he operated as a writer, scholar, and librarian, inspiring thousands in his generation and beyond to rediscover the African American past.

On October 13, 1902, Paul Bismark Bontemps (1871–1960), a Roman Catholic, and his wife, Maria Carolina Pembroke (1879–1915), a Methodist, welcomed the birth of their first child, Arnaud, in Alexandria, Louisiana. They little realized the momentous future before him. After all, he was the offspring of Creole parents living in a segregated state in the Deep South, with his father working as a bricklayer and his mother as a schoolteacher.

Taste of new surroundings came when Arna, as he came to be known, was three years old.¹ In 1905 Paul Bontemps moved his young family from Alexandria to Los Angeles, California, to escape racial intimidation.² In California another pivotal change occurred, for the family became Seventh-day Adventists there. Consequently young Bontemps was enrolled in the denomination's schools, first at San Francisco Academy and then at Pacific Union College in Angwin, California.³ In college he switched his major from premed to English.⁴ This change set the stage for his writing career, which he began in New York after his 1923 graduation and a stint as a postal worker in Los Angeles.

The New York years (1924 to 1931) were productive ones for the aspiring writer. He busied himself with teaching at Harlem (now Northeastern) Academy, but managed to find time to write, submitting his work to several African American outlets. In 1926 he won *The Crisis* magazine's Poetry Prize, and in both 1926 and 1927 he won *Opportunity*'s Alexander Pushkin Prize for poetry. Embracing the city's literary and intellectual world, he soon became a part of the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance movement, developing friendships with many of its luminaries, such as Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, James Weldon Johnson, and Langston Hughes. Hughes and Bontemps, physical lookalikes who shared the same birth year, were to remain close until Hughes's death in 1967. They collaborated in producing several anthologies, such as *The Poetry of the Negro* (1949), and popular children's books, including *Popo and Fifina* (1932). Over the years they maintained a correspondence of more than 2,000 letters⁵ However, the most important event of this period involved Bontemps meeting and marrying Alberta Johnson (1906–2004) in 1926. They were to have six children: Joan Marie (1927–1998), Paul Bismark, Poppy Alberta, Camille Ruby, Constance Rebecca, and Arna Alexander.

In 1931, with the Depression in full force, Bontemps left New York for Alabama, seeking stable support for his growing family. Serving as an English teacher at Oakwood College in Huntsville, he started the *Oakwood Years* (1931 to 1934), a productive but contentious period. He published his first novel, *God Sends Sunday*, and began work on *Black Thunder*, a groundbreaking novel on Gabriel Prosser's nineteenth-century slave insurrection, which he published in 1936. He also published a children's novel, *You Can't Pet a Possum* (1934), a tale of an Alabama boy and his dog. However, controversy emerged, polarizing him and the school's administrators. They were nervous about Bontemps' out-of-town visitors protesting the nearby Scottsboro Boys trial and his ordering of race-conscious



Arna Wendell Bontemps

Photo taken from <https://sparticus-educational.com/USABontemps.htm>. Accessed: August 28, 2019.

writings through the mail. They urged him to burn several of these books publicly to show his disconnection with radical politics and to maintain harmony with the white community.⁶ Ultimately, he refused, resigning his position and moving back to California in 1934.

Nevertheless, the two decades that followed were fruitful, yielding material for the remainder of Bontemps' life. For instance, he taught at Shiloh Academy in Chicago, Illinois, from 1935 to 1938; worked as an editorial supervisor on the Federal Writers Project, WPA, Chicago, from 1938 to 1942; and won two Rosenwald Fellowships (1938–1939; 1942–1943), using the first to write *Drums at Dusk* (1939), a novel about Toussaint L'Overture and the Haitian Revolution. He earned two Guggenheim Fellowships (1949–1950; 1954–1955), using them to write *Chariot in the Sky* (1951), an imaginative retelling of the history of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, and to revise the second edition of his children's book *The Story of the Negro* (originally published in 1948), respectively. Additionally, he entered the University of Chicago in 1942, graduating with a master's degree in library science in 1943. This latter achievement paved the way for his employment as Fisk University's head librarian in 1943, a post he held until 1964. In this perhaps crowning role of his life, he was instrumental in shaping Fisk's library into one of the finest in the region. One account affirms, "As librarian, Bontemps acquired invaluable material chronicling African American culture and experience. With Bontemps' encouragement, Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, the former *New York Times* journalist who promoted Harlem Renaissance artists, contributed papers, correspondence, writings (including original sheet music from W. C. Handy and George Gershwin), and other materials to Fisk, making the university's special collections among the nation's finest."⁷

The remaining decades saw continued production from the industrious Bontemps. He continued writing children's books and started writing ones beamed at teenagers. Among the latter were biographies of such African American leaders as Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, and Booker T. Washington. Recognition of African American athletes is recorded in his book *Famous Negro Athletes* (1964). His revision of *They Seek a City*, written with Jack Conroy and originally published in 1945, won the James L. Dow Award, Society of Midland Authors, when it was reissued as *Anyplace but Here*. Continued excavation of the African American past resulted in *100 Years of Negro Freedom* (1961) and such edited works as *Great Slave Narratives* (1969) and *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (1972). Following his 1964 retirement from Fisk University he served as a professor at the University of Illinois from 1966 to 1969; was a visiting professor at Yale University in 1969, serving as curator of its James Weldon Johnson Collection; and returned to Fisk as a writer-in-residence from 1970 to 1973.

On June 4, 1973, Bontemps died of a heart attack in his Nashville, Tennessee, home. Concerning his legacy, his biographer, Kirkland Jones, assessed him as "a champion of freedom and dignity for everyone."⁸ Perhaps ultimately, though, Bontemps' bequest is that he worked tirelessly to rescue the African American past from misconception, devaluation, and myths, thus reflecting the educational work of wise King Solomon, who "taught the people knowledge; yes, he pondered and sought out and set in order many proverbs" and "sought to find acceptable words; and what was written was upright—words of truth" (Ecclesiastes 12:9, 10, NKJV).⁹

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NOTES

1. Charles L. James, "Arna Bontemps," *The New Crisis*, September/October 2002, 25. Bontemps is quoted as saying of the name change: "It was probably what remained of Arnaud after my mother had reduced it."?
2. "Arna Bontemps, 1902–1973," poets.org, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://poets.org/poet/arna-bontemps.?>
3. Garland J. Millett, interview by author, Huntsville, Alabama, August 21, 1995.?
4. Matt Reimann, "Arna Bontemps: African-American Novelist, Children's Author, Librarian, and More," *Books Tell You Why*, October 13, 2017, accessed June 12, 2019, <https://blog.bookstellyouwhy.com/arna-bontemps-african-american-novelist-childrens-author-librarian-and-more.?>

5. Thomas Gale, "Arna Bontemps, 1902–1973," encyclopedia.com, 2005, accessed June 12, 2019, [https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/arna-bontemps.?](https://www.encyclopedia.com/people/literature-and-arts/american-literature-biographies/arna-bontemps.)
6. There has been some dispute about this event's occurrence, but several sources attest to its validity. In an August 21, 1995, interview, Lela Gooding, then chair of Oakwood College's English, Communications, and Foreign Languages Department, acknowledged that her "information was second-hand from his sister," but reported Ruby Bontemps Troy as saying that the administration "asked him to burn his books." See also Kirkland C. Jones, *Renaissance Man From Louisiana* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 1992), 77. "The school's head, only a short time before the birth of Bontemps' third child, had called him in and demanded that he publicly burn his small library, which the administration considered to be too race-conscious and provocative for the good of the school."?
7. Ginger Jones, "Arna Wendell Bontemps," 64 Parishes, accessed June 13, 2019, [https://64parishes.org/entry/arna-wendell-bontemps.?](https://64parishes.org/entry/arna-wendell-bontemps.)
8. Gale.?
9. Texts credited to NKJV are from the New King James Version. Copyright ? 1979, 1980, 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.?

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