

An Important Time Recalled

J. QUINN BRISBEN

Robert Bone and Richard Courage, *The Muse in Bronzeville: African American Creative Expression in Chicago, 1932-1950* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2011), 336 pages, \$29.95, paperback.

The late Robert Bone had a socialist background which impelled him to study African-American history and literature long before those subjects became fashionable. From the 1950s on his pioneering work in this field included *The Negro Novel in America* (1959) and *Down Home: Origins of the Afro-American Short Story* (1975). He had planned, and partially researched and written, a study of the Chicago African-American Renaissance of the 1930s and later. When his health began to fail, he gave his notes to Richard A. Courage, author of many articles on African-American narrative and visual arts. Courage completed Bone's research, and the result is a compelling book which will be a standard in its field for many years to come.

The Chicago Renaissance of the 1930s and later was every bit as interesting and important as the better known Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s. It included novelists like Richard Wright, poets like Gwendolyn Brooks, and visual artists like the muralist Charles White, as well as the dancer Katherine Dunham, the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson, and the future founder of the DuSable Museum of African American History, Margaret Burroughs. Like their Harlem counterparts, the Chicago group knew each other, helped each other, and formed organizations to connect their community and gain patronage.

The book begins with the new black middle class that was helped by the work of Booker T. Washington and his friendship with Chicago millionaire Julius Rosenwald. They brought Charles S. Johnson to Chicago, who connected many strands of the black renaissance, and Robert Park, the white sociologist at the University of Chicago who had many distinguished black students. Among them were St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, authors of *Black Metropolis* (1945), which was a study of the Chicago community in its days of prosperity.

J. QUINN BRISBEN, who died on April 17, 2012, was an activist in the civil rights, peace, and disability rights movements. He was a public school teacher for thirty-two years, mostly in Chicago's inner city, ran as the Socialist Party's 1992 U.S. presidential candidate, and self-published a novel and three books of poetry.

The days of prosperity were over by the 1930s. The Binga Bank and other institutions that had supported an independent black community had failed. African-American intellectuals got jobs wherever they could, mostly in the post office and the Chicago public schools, where prejudice was less rampant than in the white business community. In the late 1930s an astonishing variety of black writers worked for the WPA Federal Writers' Project, which produced numerous still useful local and regional guides. Black writers and artists also formed clubs to help each other and to connect with the larger community.

Bone and Courage show the many links between the Harlem Renaissance and the later Chicago Renaissance and provide detailed criticism of the achievements of the latter group. The paintings of the group are showcased in dazzling color reproductions. Arna Bontemps's stories, Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, the poetry of Margaret Walker and Gwendolyn Brooks, and the paintings of Archibald Motley and Charles Wright are valuable additions to the nation's patrimony.

One interesting aspect of the Harlem Renaissance is that many of its most important members and supporters were homosexual or bisexual. An interesting aspect of the Chicago Renaissance is that nearly all of its participants were persons of the left, many of them close to, or members of, the Communist Party. This led to their persecution in later years by the House Un-American Activities Committee and similar groups. Richard Wright made a memorable statement as to why he left the party, but he and others refused to betray their friends. Some ran into trouble when Chicago public schools required all teachers to sign a loyalty oath. Margaret Burroughs took a year off to go to Mexico while the heat was on, but most signed the oath with few qualms of conscience and were never investigated.

Full disclosure: I was mentored by the late Robert Bone and my family provided house room to Richard Courage when he was completing research for the book. It is an excellent book, and I am proud to have a small part in its creation.

Begin, though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in—the body. Here at least I know I exist, that living human individual whom the young Marx called “the first premise of all human history.” But it was not as a Marxist that I turned to this place, back from philosophy and literature and science and theology in which I had looked for myself in vain. It was as a radical feminist.

—ADRIENNE RICH, *Blood, Bread, and Poetry* (1986), 212