

## James Weldon Johnson: From James Weldon Johnson's Preface to *Southern Road*

Mr. Brown's work is not only fine, it is also unique. He began writing just after the Negro poets had generally discarded conventionalized dialect, with its minstrel traditions of Negro life (traditions that had but slight relation, often no relation at all, to actual Negro life) with its artificial and false sentiment, its exaggerated geniality and optimism. He infused his poetry with genuine characteristic flavor by adopting as his medium the common, racy, living speech of the Negro in certain pleases of real life. For his raw material he dug down into the deep mine of Negro folk poetry. He found the unfailing sources from which sprang the Negro folk epics and ballads such as "Stagolee," "John Henry," "Casey Jones," "Long Gone John" and others.

But, as I said in commenting on his work in *The Book of American Negro Poetry*: he has made more than mere transcriptions of folk poetry, and he has done more than bring to it mere artistry; he has deepened its meanings and multiplied its implications. He has actually absorbed the spirit of his material, made it his own; and without diluting its primitive frankness and raciness, truly re-expressed it with artistry and magnified power. In a word, he has taken this raw material and worked it into original and authentic poetry. In such poems as "Odyssey of Big Boy" and "Long Gone" he makes us feel the urge that drives the Negro wandering worker from place to place, from job to job, from woman to woman. There is that not much known characteristic, Negro stoicism, in "Memphis Blues" and there is Negro stoicism and black tragedy, too, in "Southern Road." Through the "Slim Greer" series he gives free play to a delicious ironical humor that is genuinely Negro. Many of these poems admit of no classification or brand, as, for example, the gorgeous "Sporting Beasley." True, this poem is Negro, but, intrinsically, it is Sterling-Brownian. In such poems as "Slim Greer," "Mr. Samuel and Sam" and "Sporting Beasley" Mr. Brown discloses the possession of a quality that could to advantage be more common among Negro poets--the ability to laugh, to laugh at white folks as well as at black folks.

Mr. Brown has included in this volume some excellent poems written in literary English and form, I feel, however, it is in his poems whose sources are the folk life that he makes, beyond question, a distinctive contribution to American Poetry.

### **Publication Status:**

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### **Author:**

James Weldon Johnson <sup>[2]</sup>

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