

Galley Girl: Poet Nikky Finney Dazzles the National Book Awards

By [Andrea Sachs](#)

Writing a book of poetry isn't the easiest way to make a splash. After all, as one frustrated modern poet, Don Marquis, put it, "Publishing a volume of verse is like dropping a rose petal down the Grand Canyon and waiting for the echo." But after the National Book Awards were announced in New York City last week, it was an electrifying speech by poet Nikky Finney, whose book *Head Off & Split* won this year's poetry prize, which made the gathered literary elite pause in their tracks. Even the ceremony's emcee, actor John Lithgow, exclaimed, "That's the best acceptance for anything I've ever heard in my life."

The speech quickly became a viral sensation in the literary community; the Lexington, Ky. *Herald Leader*, described it four days later as "a spoken-word poem that has flown around the world and back along digital wires, bringing tears and awe in its wake."

Finney, 52, an English professor at the University of Kentucky, began her haunting star turn by reciting from the 1739 slave codes in her native South Carolina: "A fine of \$100 and six months in prison will be imposed for anyone found teaching a slave to read or write, and death is the penalty for circulating any incendiary literature." Finney then invoked the memory of those who longed to read or write but were forbidden, and were oppressed by the cruelties of slavery. "Tonight these forbidden ones move around the room as they please, they sit at whatever table they want, wear camel-colored field hats and tomato-red kerchiefs... Some have just climbed out of the cold, wet Atlantic just to be here. We shiver together. If my name is ever called out, I promised my girl poet self, so too would I call out theirs."

It wasn't an accident that Finney, the child of activists, rose to the occasion. "I knew I would sit there and I would have everything prepared so if the door opened, I would walk through it and say I am here, I am prepared to be here and I have worked to be here," she told the *Herald Leader* later. "It's not a haughty thing. I knew I belonged there, I didn't know if my name would be called."

The National Book Foundation says that Finney's collection of poems "sustain a sensitive and intense dialogue with emblematic figures and events in African-American life: from Civil Rights matriarch Rosa Parks, to former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, from a brazen girl strung out on lightning, to a terrified woman abandoned on a rooftop during Hurricane Katrina."

Longtime *Essence* magazine senior books editor Patrik Henry Bass predicted beforehand, as most others did, that better-known nominee Adrienne Rich was going to win the award. He was pleased to be proven wrong. "In all of the talk of technology, and of the Kindle and the Nook, and 'Are books going away?' and 'What's to become of the brick-and-mortar store,' forget about poets! Poets weren't even a part of the conversation," he says. "For [Nikky] to win was a delightful surprise." Another surprise — Jesmyn Ward winning the fiction award for what the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* called a "rawly lyrical second novel, which follows a pregnant teen and her family as Hurricane Katrina strikes their mostly poor, mostly black Gulf Coast community."

Nikky Finney's win marked the second year in a row that a member of Cave Canem, a nonprofit fellowship of African-American poets, has won the prestigious poetry award. (The Latin name means "Beware of the Dog.") Last year, poet Terrance Hayes took home the prize. In the view of many, Cave Canem has been doing an superlative job of honing and supporting African-American poets. "This is not a poetry workshop on Tuesday evenings after a day at work," writes author Walter Mosley. "This is not apple-polishing or IQ tests or the intellect as it has devolved from European apologies. Cave Canem is about the truth. Cave Canem is about the pain we experience getting to the truth. Cave Canem is the denial of the fear that has taught us to cower and retreat from the day we're born all the way to the grave."

To *Essence*'s Bass, Finney masterfully seized the opportunity for a "teachable moment." Her speech, he says, "documented in many ways, in a personal and political sense, the journey that so many writers, and certainly writers of color, have taken. It's been a while, a moment since we've heard that kind of impassioned speech — brilliant, but also providing a sense of context and history." In short, Finney's boldly moving speech marked the emergence of a major literary voice. "In this age of anti-intellectualism,

and this age where so many of our programs are under attack, where education — especially public-school education — is under attack, her poetic words were a reminder about the hard-fought struggle for literacy, for determination of voice,” says Bass. “Often, people will say, ‘Well, who won last year? I can’t remember who won last year.’ I will daresay that no one will say in 2012, ‘Who won last year?’ People will remember Nikky Finney.”