

Art Talk with Nikky Finney: From the National Endowment for the Arts

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by Paulette Beete



Nikky Finney. Photo courtesy of Ms. Finney

“The role of the artist in the community is to not see herself as something special—set off to the side—but rather someone integral, like the carpenter, the electrician, the school teacher, the nurse...” —Nikky Finney

In a 2011 interview with *Poets and Writers* magazine, South Carolina native [Nikky Finney](#) said, “I’m trying to have a conversation about truth.” And it’s that need to see and speak things as they are that drives Finney’s powerful poems. Take for instance the opening poem of *Head Off & Split*, her 2011 National Book Award-winning collection, in which the simple question of whether she wants a fish whole or cleaned prompts a meditation on responsibility: “She understands sharpness and duty. She knows what a blade can reveal & destroy.... She would rather be the one deciding what she keeps and what she throws away.” Finney renders her responsibility as a poet in her willingness to make sure her eye doesn’t waver, whether she’s writing about the current state of race in America, her sexuality, or the grief of losing a friend to cancer. The Guy Davenport Endowed Professor in the Department of English at the University of Kentucky, Finney has published three additional volumes of poetry, the first of which was championed by

Nikki Giovanni, who it's been rumored inspired Finney's "Nikky" nickname. (The poet's given name is Lynn Carol.) We spoke with Finney via e-mail—as she headed to Tennessee to present a reading at Vanderbilt University—about the artist's life, her influences, and her mother's belief in vitamin Art.

NEA: What's your version of the artist's life?

NIKKY FINNEY: I sit with a thousand words in my head trying to make something shiny and real out of them. The poet-construction zone eventually closes and I get in my car (preferably), or on an airplane, and take what I have made up into the air or out on the long highway. When I arrive someone is always there to meet me. I stand with my made artifact, full of found and imagined bones, breaths, and whiskers. I tap the microphone once. I open my mouth. I offer what I feel, think, and imagine, to anyone who has gathered there. Afterwards, sometimes there is clapping, always I can feel immediately that my workday is done, but no money is ever thrown at the stage (unfortunately) and then the most terrifying critical part of all; I take questions, listening out for what those gathered together—have or have not heard,

NEA: What do you remember as your earliest experience of an engagement with the arts?

FINNEY: I'm sure there was an earlier experience because my mom believed in Art as vitamin, medicine, and elixir, but the particular experience that propelled me up and through the hot summertime air: I was 15 and a troupe of traveling Broadway actors came to my tiny southern town. The play was Lorraine Hansberry's *To Be Young Gifted and Black*. The entire town had bought tickets and filled the auditorium of our small, historically black Morris College. People were sitting two to a chair. Babies were whining. Fans were turning. Fathers and other manly men hung out by the door. I was sitting up in a high windowsill. I had never seen our entire town at anything but basketball and football games, but on this night everyone knew the significance of these brilliant actors coming to OUR little place on the planet. Two lines from the play that lit the fuse of writing in me: "I am a writer I am going to write" and "A classical people demand a classical art." I'll never forget the moment. The dle was cast.

NEA: In your National Book Award acceptance speech you said that being a poet "was the only life you ever wanted." How did you come to poetry? And how did you come to know that it was indeed the life you were raised for?

FINNEY: Sometimes a child is born into a perfect lightning storm and somebody who loves her offers her a pencil as oar. That's what happened to me. What a magical wand and oar a pencil is. It is one part tool and three parts pontoon. If that child can make her way through the first flashes of lightning without too much fear of being hit, if she can be overtly curious about the lightning, if she can see the lightning as more than worry and trouble, if she can even find out later that lightning is no bigger than a pencil (the Weather Channel), then she might get very close to being who she has come to earth to be.

I was born at a time when lightning and storms seemed to be flashing and raging everywhere in the world; Vietnam, Civil Rights, Women's Rights, Gay Rights, Environmental Rights. Human beings marching around the planet with their mouths open—in one long dedicated scream. I was a child who found herself noticing everything around her and saving everything she could—in little cloth bags, in cigar boxes, under the house steps, and in tiny notebooks with cats and dolphins printed on the front. I found myself wanting to participate in my own way. I found myself taking notes on the world I lived in. I liked my job then as a 15-year-old. I still like my job. I still find myself taking notes on the world and looking for the sapphire notes in between the lightning and the ground.

NEA: You grew up amidst two very powerful (and related) movements—the Civil Rights movement and the Black Arts movement. How has coming of age at that particular point in history informed your work?

FINNEY: Art and the human heart are one. Art and politics cannot and should not be sent to two deserted islands.

NEA: What does it mean to you to be an artist of color? To be a woman artist? To be an American artist?

FINNEY: It means I don't sleep a lot. I feel accountable to the world that is happening all around me. I feel accountable to my own eyes and heart and what I must say. There are so many emotions that I want to pursue and explore before these eyes close down completely. There are so many ideas that I want to give my students a chance to write about and explore. I hope all of who I am helps provide a dynamic space for conversations that are not happening as much as they should, in the air and on the page. I feel deeply connected to the long line of women writers and artists who came before me. We must, individually, find our own voice in this long brilliant line of other voices, but my responsibility is to also remember that none of what I have achieved, individually, is disconnected from that long line of women who have been creating and changing the world with their powerful hands and imaginations for thousands of years.

NEA: I know people often ask if one has been influenced by a particular poet, but I'm going to tweak that and ask if you've been influenced by particular poems? Or other specific works of art?

FINNEY: In seventh grade Mr. Warr made us learn poetry by heart. The poem I had to learn and recite to my classmates was, "In Flanders Field." I believe it was written by a physician who was also a poet and a close witness to the destruction that war always brings. Because of this poem I never forgot the power of being a witness. I also learned the aural power of poetry. It was very important to me that if the poet did his work, as a poet, and got the scene right, then I had to do my job as a seventh grader and learn the poem with all my might, and get it right too. I still know the poem by heart today because I studied it so long and practiced the turns of phrase so diligently. Another poem that mattered greatly to me was Gwendolyn Brooks' "A Song In the Front Yard." Her beautiful line, "A girl gets sick of a rose" took the top of my head off when I first read it in college. I had grown up in household where my brothers could do things that I couldn't do. A beautiful home where there were so many rules for how girls were raised and how boys were raised. Miss Brooks wanted to know what was happening in the backyard and so did I. She gave me so much permission to become the poet I have become. Her attention to detail. Her fierce heart. A poet needs these things.

NEA: One quote that's always stuck with me from an NEA interview came from David Harrington of Kronos Quartet. He said, "I try to know as many of the things that are missing from our world of music as I possibly can...I try to put the thrust of my time into realizing those things that aren't yet part of our work but should be." What isn't yet part of the work of poets—of poetry—that should be? What's missing?

FINNEY: Everything that has yet to be said. Everything that someone has been afraid to say.

NEA: What do you think is the role of the artist in the community?

FINNEY: The role of the artist in the community is to not see herself as something special—set off to the side—but rather someone integral, like the carpenter, the electrician, the school teacher, the nurse, the flower lady, the man who picks up cans, the funeral home director.

NEA: Conversely, what is the responsibility of the community to the artist?

FINNEY: To recognize that the human being in the community making sculpture, or stringing words together is as valuable as the nurse, the school teacher, the carpenter, the electrician, the woman who picks up cans, the funeral home director.

NEA: At the NEA, we say "Art Works." What's your take on what that phrase means?

FINNEY: Each and everyone of us who has ever had an art class or sat and listened to an artist or walked slowly through a gallery or listened as a poet opened her mouth and let her words fly knows the power of the willful human imagination and the stunning human mind to challenge us to be stronger, wiser, more thoughtful citizens. Art works to illuminate every single part of our bodies and minds that is still alive and full of hope. I believe this with every cell in my body.