

National Book Award 2011 Winners Jesmyn Ward And Nikky Finney Tackle Race And History

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[The National Book Awards 2011 winners](#) exhibited diversity in the literary world. Of the four honorees, two were African American women who spoke about the importance of literature that represents black experiences.

Jesmyn Ward [won the fiction award](#) for "Salvage the Bones," a novel that tells the story of a poor family, days before Hurricane Katrina hits the Gulf Coast.

During an [interview with the Times-Picayune](#), before receiving the award, Ward said the nomination came as a surprise.

"When I got the call about my nomination, I thought it was a prank, or maybe some elaborate scam to harvest personal information," she told the news outlet. "My first book had flown under the radar. And, of course, I'm from the South, I'm black and I'm a woman--and all those things push me into a niche that is outside the realm of experience for a lot of literary people."

Ward's debut novel, "Where the Line Bleeds," and "Salvage the Bones" both draw on the author's childhood experiences growing up in a poor, black community in the South. In her acceptance speech, she shared her thoughts about the importance of telling the stories of an, oftentimes, ignored population.

"I understood that I wanted to write about the experiences of the poor and the black and the rural people of the South," she said. "So that the culture that marginalized us for so long would see that our stories were as universal, our lives as fraught and lovely and important as theirs."

But it was Nikky Finney's powerful acceptance speech for her award for the poetry collection "Head Off & Split" that won praise from actor John Lithgow, who hosted the event, as "the best acceptance speech for anything that [I've] ever heard in [my] life."

Finney read a poem she wrote specifically for the occasion, drawing upon the history of slavery that she said "haunts every poem" she writes.

"Black people were the only people in the United States ever explicitly forbidden to become literate," she told the audience. "I am now officially speechless."

Although Washington Post fiction critic, Ron Charles, praised Ward and Finney's [acknowledgment as literary history on Twitter](#), others disagreed. In [a post for Commentary Magazine](#), D.G. Myers said black female writers have increasingly granted a number of honors in a literary affirmative action, of sorts. Literary awards to black women writers are not historic. For nearly three decades, critical attention and honors have been demanded for some writers (and granted) on the basis of their race and sex. The day is long past when the identification of American writers by race and sex became a mental habit, a social custom; it is now a deep structural element in the grammar of literary criticism. Indeed, the self-congratulation implicit in the trumpeting of the "historic" achievements of black women writers is, by now, thirty years on, a stock reaction like tears when lovers are reunited or laughter when yet another stand-up comic says the word f--k.

Both Finney and Ward were honored alongside Thanhha Lai, a Vietnamese woman who won in the young adult category for "Inside Out & Back Again," and Stephen Greenblatt, who won the nonfiction award for "The Swerve."

