

Nikky Finney's poetry nomination a triumph

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The selection of Lexington poet Nikky Finney as a finalist for the National Book Award is a well-earned triumph for Finney. The UK English professor and member of the Affrilachian Poets group will travel to New York on Nov. 16 to learn if her latest poetry collection, *Head Off & Split*, earns her \$10,000 and the mantle of best American poet of the year.

Whatever the outcome, the nomination further affirms Kentucky as the Literary Arts Capital of Mid-America. New York can legitimately claim the east coast. California may have a lock on the West. Kentucky is America's literary heart.

Proclaiming Kentucky a Literary Arts Capital may be a boast, but it is not a stretch. Since the middle of the 19th century, Kentucky has produced far more outstanding writers than our 1 percent of the population would forecast. For example:

Kentucky is the birthplace of the first African-American novelist, William Wells Brown. After escaping slavery, Brown published *Clotel, The President's Daughter*, in 1853. The book told the then-speculative story of how President Thomas Jefferson fathered children with a slave.

Kentucky is home to the first million-selling novelist, John Fox, Jr. The Bourbon County native produced a string of best-sellers between 1900 and 1910. His 1903 novel, *The Little Shepherd of Kingdom Come*, was the first ever to top seven figures in sales.

The first poet laureate of the United States, Robert Penn Warren, was a Kentuckian. A native of Guthrie, Warren also is the only writer ever to win the Pulitzer Prize in more than one category. He won it in 1947 for his novel, *All the King's Men*, and then twice for his poetry books.

Kentucky also has generated writers who created new literary genres: Thomas Merton redefined spiritual autobiography in *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Harry Caudill created a unique biography of a place — Appalachia — in his non-fiction classic, *Night Comes to the Cumberlands* (1963). And Hunter Thompson of Louisville broke ground with his "gonzo journalism" — first-person, subjective, irreverent prose, including *Fear & Loathing on the Campaign Trail, 1972*.

Nikky Finney, meanwhile, is the latest in a long line of brilliant Kentucky women writers. Harriette Arnow, a Wayne County native, won the National Book Award in 1954 for *The Dollmaker*. Marsha Norman of Jefferson County took the 1983 Pulitzer for her play, *'night Mother*. Bobbie Ann Mason, originally from Mayfield, was a Pulitzer finalist with her memoir, *Clear Springs*, in 2000. And just last year, C.E. Morgan of Berea (*All the Living*) was named by the National Book Foundation as one of the five best writers in America under 35.

Why does Kentucky produce so many outstanding writers?

Some say the inspiration is the land, and there's evidence of that in the luminous environmental writings of Harry Caudill, Wendell Berry and Erik Reece. Others say the inspiration comes from the legacy of conflict here: north vs. south, Hatfields vs. McCoys, rural vs. urban. Without a deep understanding of conflict, who could write a compelling book?

I think it's both of these factors, plus another: Kentucky takes care of its writers. I know that was true for me 15 years ago when I first came to the Carnegie Center seeking my writing voice and a publisher.

As the center's new director, I intend to continue to support our state's writers, both the well-established and the up-and-coming.

A few months ago, in fact, the center hosted a party to help launch a local poet's new book. Now, that poet is getting ready to go to New York for an awards ceremony. Good luck, Nikky, from your friends and admirers throughout Kentucky, the Literary Arts Capital of Mid-America.