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## First She Acquired an Esteemed Writer's House, Now His Chair

Photo by: Charles Bertram

Article by: Caitlin Peterkin

When the poet **Nikky Finney** learned this past summer that she would become the first Guy Davenport Endowed English Professor at the University of Kentucky, she was delighted to have one more connection with the professor she had known and admired.

Like Mr. Davenport, she is a native South Carolinian. She lives in what used to be his house, in Lexington. And she has written a poem in his honor, for his memorial in 2005, "The Poet's House."

Ms. Finney, who won the 2011 National Book Award for poetry for her book *Head Off & Split*, was chosen for the chair, a five-year, renewable position supported by a donation from Judith Janssen, a former student of Mr. Davenport's. Along with hosting an annual conversation series with undergraduate students to expose them to writing, Ms. Finney will receive money from the university to support her professional activities.

**Guy M. Davenport**, who was an author, poet, and painter, taught at the university from 1963 until he retired, in 1990.

Ms. Finney, 55, said that as a young new professor she would pass Mr. Davenport in the halls of the university. "He was a legend," she said. "He was somebody who was erudite and witty, and also feared in some ways as a professor because he knew so much about so much."

After he died, **Bonnie Jean Cox**, Mr. Davenport's partner, called Ms. Finney and asked, "Wouldn't it be great if one poet could buy another poet's house?"

When Ms. Finney visited the circa-1910 house, which smelled of cigarettes and old books, she thought it was "like a tiny library in the middle of a community, where you have to walk sideways because there were no walls, just bookshelves."

"I could live here," she said to herself. By owning the house, she said, she could continue its legacy of being a "literary space."

She remembers the writer as "a man who pursued truth relentlessly in his work, in essays, in poetry, in teaching." She encourages her students to find and express the truth through their writing, too.

"If I can keep doing that for as long as I'm in the most sacred space called a classroom," she said, "then I will feel like I've given something great to my students."