

Interview with: Nikky Finney

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In her latest book of poems, *Head Off & Split*, Nikky Finney navigates political grievances, family traditions, and memories of romance. Such varied themes are drawn together by her singular, glaringly honest voice and knack for examination—the public is made private, and, where necessary, vice versa. In "Left" she immortalizes the image of an abandoned Katrina victim holding a misspelled sign. "Cattails" is a love poem, except the speaker only recalls the wooer—not herself, the wooed. Poems like the title work wrestle with the human (and especially Southern) paradoxical impulse to both flee from and linger in one's hometown. *The OA* recently spoke to Finney about her preference for nontraditional mentoring, drawing the line in her activism, and rightfully becoming a long-winded poet. Fresh from a reading tour, she spoke with us from her home in Kentucky.

THE OA: Your latest book is dedicated to Lucille Clifton. Could you describe your relationship with her?

NF: When I was twenty-three years old, I found myself in Strand bookstore in New York City, and I found her amazing collection of poems and photographs. I had loved photography for a long time. I was writing about my family in my first book. I sat down, read her book three times, and it became a moment that I will never forget because it gave me permission to love photography, to talk about the stories of my family, and to also put those into forms of poetry.

We met around 2005. She was in the audience and I relayed that experience to her. As a result, we spoke afterwards. I went to interview her that next year for an anthology called *The Ringing Ear*. She's at the center of everything I do. I always think about her. I always bring her name up and her work up. She's spinal to whatever I'm doing going forward in this life. I found great support for all the things I wanted to do with my own work in her work.

THE OA: You got your nickname from Nikki Giovanni and you've had correspondence with her and also with Toni Cade Bambara. Could you speak to how important it is for young writers or poets to seek out mentors?

NF: When I left home, I was in search of writers to align with. Toni Cade Bambara's name was passed onto me by a teacher in college—her name and address was written on a postcard, and I went to find her. She had a writing workshop in Atlanta, which I immediately joined. She was the first person to say to me, "So you can write these pretty poems, so what's the plan? What do you want to do with your life?" And I had to go back and not just sit and submerge myself in beautiful language, but I had to really write down some sort of path where I had to get to the place I wanted to get to. Nikki Giovanni was the same way, when I was a junior or senior and my English teacher made me give her a folder of poems. Nikki Giovanni and her mother, who was a high-school English teacher in Cincinnati, sat down with those poems and red-marked them and she wrote back, "Now there's a lot of red on these pages, but I want you to know there's something beautiful trying to happen, abundant among all this red." So I have all those really instructional moments that I sort of built upon. Those moments, those relationships were critical then. I've maintained a twenty-five-year relationship with Nikki.

As a result of those relationships in my life, I, too, answer letters, mentor young writers, and feel like I have to pass that behind me.

THE OA: You had some hesitation about the academy system when you were first asked to be a writer-in-residence at Kentucky. Have you since changed your mind? Do you now encourage students to go into graduate workshops?

NF: It depends upon the student. I believe first and foremost that you have to have a good sense of yourself; you have to have a good sense of your work. I find it's really important to encourage young writers to be in the world, to live, to not be afraid of placing a gap between their undergraduate years and their graduate years. I don't really like the model of going right from undergraduate to graduate without some time spent out in the world. I think you have to work some. Figure out that you don't want to go that way—you want to go this other way. So often humans follow where everyone else is going. I think you have to make that decision based upon what you need, what you want, sort of what Toni Cade Bambara was asking me—what's the plan? It has to be *your* plan.

THE OA: What is the hardest thing about writing poetry?

NF: Compression, because poetry is so much about taking stuff out. It's about looking at what you're including. Personally, I'm a long-winded poet. My poems are, you know, *not* like Lucille Clifton poems. I think that working on form and working on what to leave out and what must make it to the final version is one of the hardest things.

THE OA: Do you consider yourself an activist poet?

NF: Absolutely, absolutely—but I think that I consider myself an activist, and that makes it into my work. I also consider myself a lover of beautiful things and lyrical languages and empathy, as well. I definitely believe that the word "activism" and the ideals of activism are at the core of what I do.

THE OA: It seems that you broach a lot of subjects in the political sphere that outrage you. I was wondering if you have any approach to achieve that kind of aesthetic distance so it doesn't sound like a rant.

NF: Somebody else talked about rage in this book, and I thought, *Rage?* I don't really see the rage. I don't see the outrage. I see the passion. I see the really powerful feelings I have about certain subjects. I do feel you can't be up on a soapbox shouting polemical things—this is poetry. Poetry is about communicating. Standing up on a soapbox is not communicating; it's something else. Since I grew up in the '70s, when the black arts movement was at its height, I saw poets speaking very polemically and speaking out of a worthy rage. I remember saying, "I don't really want to speak like that. I don't really want to do that. I want to do something else." So for thirty-five, forty years, I've been listening and paying attention to the world I feel very passionately about, and how it makes its way into an art form. Because art is when you *make* something and you can't just spew and say you've made something. You have to *craft* to say you've made something.

THE OA: You do have an absolute control over the message that you're delivering and that's what makes it really powerful.

NF: You have to do that because it might become a rage. You have to have perspective in your work. As I tell my students, you fall in love. I'm in love, I'm in love, I'm in love—you fall out of love. You start your litany of other kinds of language. But it's the middle ground, the perspective you take to talk about those things, where the artful message is born.

THE OA: Not that Katrina commands your latest book by any means, but how did you decide to approach it in a way that wasn't necessarily double-backing on what others had done?

NF: As a person who creates, I don't know if I want to worry about double-backing on what anybody has done. I saw a woman on a rooftop holding a sign P-L-E-A-S and I thought, *This is very powerful, what can I do with this? How can I bring her into the future?* Americans have such short memories about hard things and so I wanted to bring her forward. So she was the symbol for me. I wrote to her. I wrote around her. I wrote for her. Whenever I'm talking about that poem, "Left," I say, "Do you remember the woman standing with the homemade sign?" So many people remember her and

haven't thought of her for a long time and then I read the poem and they are taken back in their memory to how much empathy they had at that moment.

The great Czech poet, Czeslaw Milosz, says that what he's trying to do is save something. What he talks about is trying to save his fifth-grade teacher's beehive hairdo—and I love that, because I'm trying to save something, too. Poets save things and pass them forward to the next generation, to the next person to know and understand that they can save something as well.

THE OA: In this collection you mention Rosa Parks, the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing, and Bull Connor. How did tragedies of the Civil Rights era come into these poems?

NF: I was a child of Civil Rights workers in the South. My dad was a Civil Rights attorney who was going to the jail to get marchers out. My mom and dad worked in their own way, in the small towns, for what black people were fighting for all over the South. So as a child, I was trying to figure out how I could help. There were so many times when it was too dangerous for me to do what I wanted to do. But they would go forward and we would wait behind and we would make the placards or the signs. I've never been far away from the human-rights struggle black people have been involved with in the South. That has been one of the backdrops of my entire life.

When I was writing about Rosa Parks [in the poem "Red Velvet"], I'd just read this new book that came out a few months ago, it's called *At the Dark End of the Street*. It talks about Rosa Parks being an operative, not this quiet woman who sat on a bus and didn't move, she was actually a reporter for the NAACP who was sent into the South to interview women who had been violated or raped at the hands of different people. She would do these interviews and then she would call the NAACP back and say, "Yes this woman would be a great person to testify against so-and-so," or "No, this person wouldn't be." You think, *I don't know this side of Rosa Parks*. There's this world about this amazing woman who was this seamstress, who was this NAACP operative who put her life on the line, but we don't know that story.

THE OA: So a lot of research goes into your poems?

NF: Research is such a huge part of what I do as a poet. I don't just want to bring the information through my feelings. I want to go out and see the autobiography. That's what I did with Condoleezza Rice. I wanted to know something about her. Okay, she's a great skater. She's a classical pianist. She grew up in Birmingham/Bombingham. One of her best friends was one of the little girls who was killed in the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing. How does all this shape someone who goes on to become Secretary of State—one of the most important people in the country and in the world? These poems started coming as concertos or musical moments in my ear, who she was, who her family shaped her to be. I personally find it incredibly important to go into the public figures, the characters themselves, and try to find more about them to bring forward.

THE OA: Is the poem "Dancing with Strom" autobiographical?

NF: We finally got my youngest brother married. We were all very happy. I drove home from Kentucky to Edgefield, South Carolina, where we had the ceremony. We go to the reception and I'm on this balcony and I look down and, lo and behold! Strom Thurmond has arrived and he's dancing with my mother. I was like, *This is surreal*. I grew up with such viscidly about him being a South Carolinian and all the things that happened. This was just a few years before he died and there he was. Also, I had just read an article by this brilliant scholar, John Michael Vlach. Vlach was talking of the influence African-American people had on the architecture of the South and how the porch was such an important part of Southern architecture because you could see people coming toward your home, whether they were friend or foe. It was such an important symbolic place. I was reading this essay just before the wedding and then there I was up on a landing and those two things came together: the landing, the notion of the landing, and also the fact that Strom Thurmond was down below dancing with my mother.

THE OA: How did your father, with a Civil Rights activist background, permit something like that to happen?

NF: It's very simple to say my father should have been mad and thrown him out or something like that. But I was speaking almost from a point of privilege; I got to leave. I left the South when I was seventeen, eighteen years old. People who had to stay in the South, in places where there were people like Strom Thurmond, had to figure out how to live with them. I even say it in the poem—I find that black people are the most forgiving people in the world. Knowing what I know about black history, we forgive, we move on. We have to give our children things to hold on to that don't fill them with anger. So this was one of those moments. My father was kind of looking up at me in the poem, going, "I know you don't like this. I know you're angry, but this is a very joyous celebration we're having for your brother." It's complicated. Race in the South is a very complicated situation. If we would talk about it, and if we would bring up subjects, I think we could get close to a better way to live together, a more realistic way to live together, and not just sort of shutting down on things that have brought us forward to this moment. That poem is a photograph of a very difficult situation where people who had lived in the South and had grown up with Strom Thurmond had to decide whether to invite him into our grand celebration or turn their backs to him. And what I know of black people and what I know of my community is that we've always been bigger than hate. Hate is a thing that will eat you up and kill you. And in this moment, a body of very loving people decided they were going to move beyond that and were going to celebrate this union, which is the note the poem ends on.

THE OA: You still stood up on the balcony though.

NF: [Laughs.] Yeah, I didn't come down.

THE OA: So have you always been very autobiographical in your poetry?

NF: I think I've always been. I remember going to the Carnegie Library when I was very small and asking my mom, "Where are the books on black people who I know?" You know, the brilliant people in my community. "Where are the books that would mirror their lives?" She would say, in her way of trying not to be too harsh, "Well, sweetheart, I guess you're going to have to write those books. You're going to have to tell those stories and bring those faces to light in your own work." That again was one of those moments of permission for me and I was like, "Oh yeah, that will be my responsibility."

THE OA: But in addition to being a recorder of history, you also write these really personal, tender love poems.

NF: Yes! I have to be willing. I think part of my responsibility is that I look out and see what I see in the world—this Strom Thurmond, Rosa Parks—but my responsibility is also not to leave myself out. I feel I'm responsible for the looking in on myself as well as the looking out into the world. I find balance as an artist in that way. I often find students who are very resistant to that and I'm like, "Who are you, how did you get here? I want to know the blood and bones of you." They're resistant because someone has told them that looking inward doesn't make for good poetry. I don't think that's true. I think that it has to be handled in a certain way. You have to be willing to say this poem is not working, even if it is about you. I think that my putting myself in to my poetry is me saying to my readers and listeners, "I'm willing to stand here and be as vulnerable as perhaps I am making others and situations vulnerable in my work." I have to be willing to do that.

THE OA: Do you ever feel yourself called to discuss your sexuality in your work?

NF: I don't feel like an activist about something so personal. What I am revealing, what I'm sharing with the world is some kind of activism, but I don't feel like I have to do it in a way that supports or aligns with anybody else—I feel responsible to myself first. I have to be willing and ready to say the

things that I'm willing and ready to say in that moment of the book, and that's the progression of the individual artist in bloom. I encourage my students to do the same thing. For me, it didn't happen ten years ago or fifteen years ago, it's happening now, and I'm very comfortable with that.

The same could be said about how I deal with certain subjects. If you look at my first book, my poems are very short, my poems are still exploring some of those tough subjects, but not in the intimate way I am now. As I recently told an audience in New York, when you turn fifty, you get permission to say a lot of things different from when you turn forty or thirty—that's very true. I honor that as a human being because I love the progression that I've been on as an artist, and not being a ballet dancer—as a ballet dancer your ankles and knees give out when you're twenty and when you're a writer your ankles and knees get *stronger*, metaphorically speaking. As a writer, you're capable of holding more and saying more with precision than when you just start out. Your knees are still trying to find their height when you're a poet or writer at twenty-five. At fifty, there are great fabulous stunning leaps you can make if you've done your work—if you've done your work. So that's some of what I'm trying, I think, now.

THE OA: When did you notice the fish theme?

NF: I went home to South Carolina, and my mom took me to the fishmonger. And he said to me what he'd said to me a hundred times but, because I was in a work mode, his question—"Head off and split?"—hit me in a different way than it would have normally hit me. I started to think about what we cut away, what we don't know about certain subjects, what we forget about certain headlines, news stories. So all those things started talking to me in a thematic way.

I started thinking about what I was writing and it occurred to me that I was thinking about the things that we don't want to see. The things that we hope will go away. I thought, *Wow that's exactly what he's saying to me*. He's saying, "You've chosen the fish, now let me, for a couple of dollars more, cut away the staring eyes, take the scales off, and kind of do your dirty work for you." And I thought, *No, at this age, I want to do this myself*. I want to know what the fish looks like whole because I think that there is more to the story when you do that, when someone doesn't give you the succulent fish all neat and ready to go.

THE OA: The last poem in *Head Off & Split* seems to have a commanding finality to it. This isn't your last book, is it?

NF: Oh, I hope not—my grandmother is so much the reason that I'm a poet. She was a farming woman and she was very honest and I've never met a woman who could surmise situations just by walking into a room and looking around. This was a brilliant self-taught, aware-of-the-world kind of woman. After *Rice*, my second book, she came to me and said, "That's it. No more books, promise me." We were very close. I had to understand it wasn't personal. She was afraid *for* me. She thought after *Rice* I was getting too close to saying things in a way that might put myself and my life in danger. She was afraid for me, and she knew she was getting older. She knew she couldn't protect me from what would come, and she wasn't sure what *would* come, and she saw my writing as getting older, longer, less fearful, and if you look at the book, she's right, there's more on the table. I couldn't promise her. It was the first time she asked me to promise her something that I couldn't promise. This book represents that fear that she had and I hope, hope, hope that this is not my last book. It doesn't feel like my last book. It feels like I'm just at the precipice of a world of more books and more poetry and all kinds of things I've got on the table.

THE OA: Your grandmother still seems like a woman of wisdom and pluck. Do you think, even though she asked you to stop writing, she would have enjoyed this latest book?

NF: My grandmother was intensely private. I think it was because she grew up on the land. She was a rural woman. I can never remember her telling me that she loved me. She never used that kind of frilly language, but she showed me she loved me in a million different ways. I think that she got tired of me talking so much. I don't know how she would feel about my poems. My poems have gotten even longer. They've gotten more revelatory of things of the heart, things of the spirit, things of the soul.

And because she was not like that, she'd probably throw something at me—soft—but I think she would be proud. I think she would be glad to know that even though I could not have promised her what she asked me to, I have gone on to have a great respect for the things she taught me, and great respect for other people, even when I disagree with them. I think those are the things she would smile about, but all this *talking*—she wouldn't really be into that at all. All this book stuff, book learning—go grow a garden, make something, put a tree in the ground. I think in the long run, yes. I think she would.

I find that my closeness to South Carolina and to my family never goes away. Even as I get older and even as I have my own home four hundred miles away, there's something about family and home that is my own evisceration. That's what these poems are about—emotional evisceration, and historical evisceration like what we cut away in order to have the sound bites. This last poem is very personal about my putting myself spiritually and physically on the line every time I leave because my family is always saying, "When are you coming back?" There's that moment when my momma's in the yard, and we're packed and they're in their pajamas, and my father and mother are getting older and I'm getting older and this picture doesn't get any easier any time I do it.