

Poet Nikky Finney hopes prestigious award illuminates arts' role in Kentucky

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Published in the *Lexington Herald-Leader*



Nikky Finney didn't know whether she would win the National Book Award for poetry on Wednesday night in New York. But she wanted it, and she wasn't going to be ambushed by false modesty.

"I knew I would sit there and I would have everything prepared so if the door opened I would walk through it and say I am here, I am prepared to be here, and I have worked to be here," she said Friday after she returned to Lexington. "It's not a haughty thing. ... I knew I belonged there, I didn't know if my name would be called."

Then her name was called.

Her head dropped in her hands, "half prayer, and half-stunned joy, and I suddenly felt my mother's arms around my head and she was screaming, 'You won, you won!'" Finney said.

She walked up to the stage to accept the prize for *Head Off & Split* (Triquarterly, \$15.95), the fourth book of poetry by Finney, who teaches poetry at the University of Kentucky.

Then came the moments now known as *The Speech*, a spoken-word poem that has flown around the world and back along digital wires, bringing tears and awe in its wake.

First, Finney summoned the souls of the slaves of her native South Carolina, those forbidden by law under threat of death from learning to read and write.

The laws were "words devoted to quelling freedom, insurgency, imagination, all hope," she said in the speech. "What about the possibility of one day making a poem? ... Tonight these forbidden ones move around the room as they please, they sit at whatever table they want, wear camel-colored field hats, tomato-red kerchiefs. ... Some have just climbed out of the cold, wet Atlantic just to be here. We shiver together. If my name is ever called out I promised my girl poet self, so too would I call out theirs."

Finney also thanked her partner, A.J. Verdell; her parents, who were at the ceremony; and her teachers, one of whom found her as she was daydreaming in the library as a college student. "Do you really have time to sit there?" the teacher asked. "Have you finished reading every book in the library?"

As she walked back to her table after her speech, she could hear the ceremony's emcee, actor John Lithgow, clapping. Then he said: "That's the best acceptance for anything I've ever heard in my life."

Finney concedes that the "acceptance speech has become bigger than the poetry award. It's now bigger than me, and that's what I wanted," she said. "When you're talking about language and literature, it's got to encompass more than our solo selves."

"That's the power of good writing ... to bring many to the table — that's what's happening now."

Finney said she prepared for the speech by reading past acceptance speeches for the National Book Award by writers such as W.H. Auden and Rachel Carson, one of the nation's first environmentalists and author of *Silent Spring*.

"I decided this acceptance speech had to be about more than me," she said Friday. "It had to be about something bigger than me. I wanted to talk about South Carolina history because that's my home."

Now she's back in Lexington, still revelling in one of her field's greatest prizes, an award previously won by such notables as Auden, W.S. Merwin, Wallace Stevens, Marianne Moore, Frank O'Hara and fellow Kentuckian Robert Penn Warren.

"It's a good tsunami, and I'm trying to ride it," she said.

Finney, 54, has been writing poetry for 30 years, working and teaching, but as any writer does, always hoping for this kind of recognition. "I am not tired of this. This is really good, I'm trying to honor this moment."

South Carolina and its history informs so much of Finney's poetry, but she also accepts that she is now part of Kentucky, where her friends and fans have welcomed her back.

"I have spent 20 years of my life here," she said. "It's correct that I should be adopted in this place where I've spent so much time coming into my own. I became a writer in Kentucky."

Finney came to Lexington about 1990 as a one-year visiting professor at UK. She wrote her second book, *Rice*, in a cubbyhole desk at the Carnegie Center for Literacy and Learning downtown.