

Poetry, Friendship, and an NBA: Editing “Head Off & Split”

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[Head Off & Split](#), by Nikky Finney (Northwestern University Press/Triquarterly, 2011)

Head Off & Split, by Nikky Finney (ISBN: 978-0-8101-5216-8)

I was twenty-one years old with two poems to my name when I first heard the words of the resident Geechee Girl from South Carolina. A long, distilled woman with bronze dreadlocks, unshaken in her air, deliberate with her words, she was crafting stories into rich, poetic voice. I was a burgeoning poet, hanging on to every line, surrounded in a room of writers and non-writers who came to a halt and attention, captivated by the poet Nikky Finney.

Ten years and many poems later I sat in my office as the sales and subsidiary rights manager and poetry editor at Northwestern University Press with a carefully typed manuscript entitled *Head Off & Split* and a handwritten note (that seemed to pay special attention to the roundness in the R’s and E’s) from the very poet I had admired for so long, from afar. Now, to put it like this would give the impression that her manuscript just showed up on my desk one day. No, this is not how it happened. Nikky and I saw each other occasionally throughout the years, and I now know that she was watching me grow in my publishing world as I watched her claim the poetry world. We came into this partnership as friends, each with a great deal of trust and faith in what the other could do.

When I first read *Head Off & Split*, loose pages brimming with metaphors not able to stay on the page, I took a step back (a literal one) and paced in my living room thinking and imagining. I imagined readers’ reactions when they finished the last lines of “Red Velvet” or “The Condoleezza Suite.” This was a writer who could make you imagine something greater than you. Nikky made it clear from the beginning that she was ready to turn the corner in her writing career, and she wanted to do that with Northwestern. Northwestern was ready to turn that corner with her, and with that *Head Off & Split* made its debut in February 2011. With a second printing two months later, a cover story for the April issue of *Poets and Writers Magazine*, and features of the poet and her poems in multimedia and publicity pushes making the rounds in every social networking outlet, the book was a success long before October 12, 2011.

October 12, 2011, was the day it was announced that Nikky Finney, *Head Off & Split*, and Northwestern University Press had been nominated for the National Book Award for Poetry. With no intention to sound cavalier, I must say that I had been to the National Book Awards before. In 2004, a year and a half after I started work at Northwestern, my first trip to New York City was to be present at the awards ceremony for our fiction nominee, Christine Schutt. I already knew how grand this was going to be. This was the Oscars of publishing and as a writer myself, I knew this was a “Cinderella moment” for any writer. My experience was very different this time: this was a book that I acquired, a writer who was a friend, a friend whom I had become very close to over this journey of putting her book out into the world. This time, it really was personal. Staff from the Press, including the director and publicity manager as well as the dean of libraries, descended on New York City with the poet and her family. One of the great highlights was meeting Nikky’s parents, Ernest and Francis Finney, a retired South Carolina Supreme Court Justice and civil rights attorney and a retired elementary school teacher. They spread their proud parent wings and came all the way from Nikky’s ancestral home of South Carolina to watch their daughter be Cinderella for the night.

The night at Cipriani was filled with bellinis and sequins, the flashes of cameras and raised iPads, and ribbon-wrapped book centerpieces. Everything in motion stood still for the seconds that could have passed for hours before the poet Elizabeth Alexander called out *Nikky Finney* to the whole wide world. The cheers from our table could be heard all the way outside, down the Occupied Wall Streets, and the distilled poet, for the first time since I have known her, was shaken in her own air. She reached the podium and made it clear to all those who knew her (and those who didn't yet know her) why she was the National Book Award Winner for Poetry. Her acceptance speech, written as a poem, was one she had been crafting her whole life.

I am beyond grateful to Northwestern for trusting me to step outside and use my love and liberty as a poet to bring the writers of my world to this great house of literature. And I am immensely blessed by my friend Nikky Finney, writer of longitude, latitude, and reverie, who introduced me to her words ten years prior and made sure they lingered long enough for me to help her share them with rest of the world.

Watch Nikky Finney's acceptance speech (called by presenter John Lithgow "the best acceptance speech for anything I've ever heard in my life"): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y2q15iiL79g>