

Professor Nikky Finney wins National Book Award for Poetry

By Joy Priest

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As Nikky Finney began her acceptance speech for “Head Off and Split” — the 2011 winner of the National Book Award for Poetry — on Wednesday evening, one might have mistaken it for a poem.

But it was just Finney, the Provost’s Distinguished Service Chair Professor of English at UK, being who she was and living, “the only life I’ve ever wanted, that of a poet,” she said.

Finney thanked her publisher, her partner A.J. Verdelle who is a novelist, her father and mother, and the other finalists, saying “simply to be in your finalist company is to brightly burn.”

Finney was teary-eyed as she continued her speech, which would explain her emotion as an African American accepting the National Book Award for Poetry.

“A fine of \$100 and six months of prison will be imposed for teaching a slave to read and write,” Finney began her speech, reading from the 1739 slave codes of South Carolina. She talked about how blacks were forbidden to be literate in her home state and across America for a part of history.

“I am now officially speechless,” Finney said, ending her speech with a pun to her literacy.

John Lithgow, actor and host for the evening, took the podium over from Finney in front of an audience responding to her acceptance with a standing ovation.

“That was the best acceptance speech for anything I’ve ever heard in my life,” Lithgow said. “That’s also the loudest I’ve ever heard people cheer for a poetry award.”

On behalf of the English department and the creative writing program, Marion Rust, the department’s interim chair, was “overjoyed” at the results.

“Oh my gosh,” Rust said as she answered the phone at her home on Wednesday night, “we are just so proud of Nikky Finney. It’s a great day for all of us and we couldn’t be more thrilled for our brilliant and generous colleague.”

Rust called Finney “one of the gems of our extraordinary creative writing program,” and said her award speaks to the “treasure” that is the writing community in Kentucky.

“The fact that Kentucky gives these writers to the nation is an inestimable benefit to the nation,” Rust said. “We’re such a resource that means so much to the whole world.”