

S.C. native, Nikky Finney, wins National Book Award for poetry

By Betsy Guzior

Published in *The State*

November 17, 2011



Poet Nikky Finney, a South Carolina native and daughter of a legal pioneer, has won the National Book Award for poetry. The winners were announced Wednesday evening.

Finney, 52, is a professor of English at the University of Kentucky but returns home frequently to South Carolina. Before this year's S.C. Book Festival, she talked about one of her poems, created after witnessing defiance by homeowners facing a hurricane in the Gulf of Mexico.

"I thought this was incredibly powerful," Finney told *The State's* Otis Taylor. "I've been raised in communities when land and the house on it was the legacy that many black people left their children. Many times it was the only legacy."

S.C. native Nikki Finney, winner of the National Book Award for Poetry for her book "Head Off & Split", holds her award as she poses for photographs at the National Book Awards Wednesday Nov. 16, 2011 in New York.

Mayree, the defiant homeowner, is one of several strong women — Wilma Rudolph,

Althea Gibson and Condoleezza Rice — whose names appear in "Head Off & Split."

Finney also retells a moment of her own defiance in the poem, "Dancing with Strom."

Yes, Dancing with Strom Thurmond, the longtime U.S. Senator whose defiance against integration was infamous.

"I think it is symbolic of who he was and certainly what his tenure in South Carolina politics meant to me," she said.

Finney, the daughter of Ernest A. Finney Jr., a former chief justice of the state Supreme Court, was at her brother's wedding in Edgefield when she stood on a porch watching Thurmond dance with her mother and other women.

"Dancing" is an example of how Finney approaches uncomfortable subjects with deference, how she provides history lessons. The poem's foreword includes this Thurmond quote spoken in 1948: "I want to tell you, ladies and gentleman, there's not enough troops in the army to force the Southern people to break down segregation and accept the Negro into our theatres, into our swimming pools, into our homes, and into our churches."

Finney also includes these words by Modjeska Monteith Simkins, an underappreciated state civil rights leader, said also in 1948: “I said, ‘I’m gonna fight Thurmond from the mountain to the sea.’” But the history isn’t in the quotes; it’s in the sitting on the porch.

Long before AC African people did the math: how to cool down the hot air of South Carolina?

“It’s the history that I wanted to know as a girl that I wasn’t taught in the South Carolina public school system,” said Finney, who was raised in Conway and Sumter. “We just keep the things we want to keep about history.”

Many of the poems in “Head Off & Split,” a title that refers to fish purchases, read like short stories.

There’s a musical pacing to the stanzas. The book is also visual in the way the margins are set. The title poem lacks punctuation, but the white spaces between the words are meant for pauses, reflection. “I think this book has more varied schemata in terms of how they’re laid on the page than any I’ve done,” she said.

More so than any of her other published work, “Head Off & Split” has earned attention from critics and other poets. Kwame Dawes, founding director of the South Carolina Poetry Initiative and formerly of the USC Arts Institute, wrote that Finney “establishes herself as one of the most eloquent, urgent, fearless and necessary poets writing in America today.”

On Twitter Wednesday, Dawes could only say “Beautiful. Beautiful.”