

Nikky Finney Has Chops a review By Natalie N. Caro

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In her latest collection of poetry, “Head Off and Split,” the National Book Award Winner, tackles race, sex, and turns an unrelenting eye to the politics that saturate both. It would be too easy to say that Finney writes solely from a place experience. While she is the “child of activists, [that] came of age during the civil rights and Black Arts Movements,” her politics are all her own and so are her stories.

Finney has a knack for narrative and is a natural story teller for whom lyric seems compulsion, if not instinct. At her strongest, Finney weaves through lines like the seamstress with fresh, unusual, and imaginative metaphors. Her language is so rich you are compelled to read her poems aloud if only to feel the texture of her words on your literary pallet.

The first section of the book is a masterfully crafted series of vignettes that explore black history in the South. However, Finney is no mere historian. She imbues stories of black resistance with the same red velvet smoothness she attributes to her subject.

In “Red Velvet, (for Rosa Parks, 1912-2005)” Finney both eulogizes Parks and imbues her with new life. She characterizes Parks as a seamstress “who knows her way around velvet,” for which “by forty-two, biases are flat...patience razor thin.” Finney beautifully carries sewing metaphors throughout the poem, holding history “by pins.”

By contrast, the poems that deal with the events of Hurricane Katrina and the political response cut to the quick. Finney is simultaneously sardonic and heartbreaking when she tells the individual stories of victims of the flood. In “Left,” the reader is literally left to watch the abandoned beg for aid, watch the event unfold slowly, forced to be part of that “national council of observers.”

In the second section, Finney brings light to a fact little known, the true length of the clitoris, which “like Africa is never drawn to size.” This short poem is full of punch and aptly characterizes much of the subtle subjugation of female sexuality that has plagued and continues to plague society.

Nothing and no one is exempt from Finney’s sharp tongue and quick wit, not even the former president or members of his staff.

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