

An Interview with Nikky Finney

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By Cara Dees

Nikky Finney's most recent poetry collection, Head Off & Split, was published to wide acclaim, winning the 2011 National Book Award. She has written several previous books of poetry: On Wings Made of Gauze (1985), Rice (1995), and The World Is Round (2003). She is also the author of a work of fiction, Heartwood (1997), and is the editor of The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South (2007).

Finney was born in Conway, South Carolina in 1957, studied at Talladega College and Atlanta University, and is currently the Guy Davenport Endowed Professor in the Department of English at the University of Kentucky. On September 13th, 2012, she traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, to read as part of the Gertrude & Harold Vanderbilt's Visiting Writers Series. That day, we sat down together in the lobby of her hotel to discuss her craft.

Interviewer: You say on the back of one of your books that you've "been writing for as long as [you have] had memory." Were you always writing poetry or was there a time when you discovered you had a passion for poems?

Nicky Finney: Yes, the great Polish poet Czesław Miłosz talks a lot about saving things and how poetry saves things. I totally believe that. I didn't know his work way back when, but I believe when I was a little girl I was trying to save everything I could find. I don't know why some children do this and some children don't, but I remember consciously putting things away. *Save that. Put it in a box. Put it in a bag. Put it under the bed. Put it in an envelope.* I still to this day love little keeping places. I have them all around my house. I travel with a lot of them – a little stone, something my grandmother gave me. As a child, I was just trying to save things and I coupled that with my love of language and my ability to hear music and music in language.

As I became more aware of my love for poetry, those two things came together. I feel like right now, I still do that. I want to save a moment. I want to save what a sunset looks like from seat 8A on a plane. I'm not at that moment trying to think about the audience. I'm trying to think about getting it right, because the act of saving something is not saving it like you want it to be. It's saving it like it is, so that's what I've started doing.

Interviewer: So in a way you've always been interested in history?

Finney: Always. I didn't call it "history," but I've always been interested in what is happening, what has happened, what might happen, which is history in the round.

Interviewer: Was there ever a time you wanted to be something other than a writer?

Finney: No, I've never wanted to be anything else, and I had no idea how to be that.

Interviewer: Who are the poets who have most influenced your writing?

Finney: Every poet who has ever written a poem that spoke to me I feel is my influence. I didn't read one poet in particular. I was from a tiny town in South Carolina with no bookstores. Library – huge fan, early age. My mother dropped me off, sort of like baby-sitting services. I fell in love with books. The library didn't have a lot of poetry, but it had some. You know, the standard, brilliant poetry. Dickinson, Frost.

I didn't meet African-American poets until much later in my life – Hughes and Brooks and the poets that came out of the Harlem Renaissance. Claude McKay. Those poets I didn't read until I was in college. I've been on a search my entire life for poets that got away from me at an early age or whom I was never introduced to. I feel like I'm always finding poets, catching up. Maybe we all do that, because we all come out of communities that cherish poetry or do not cherish poetry. Somebody decides "This is a poet" and somebody decides "This isn't a poet." I'm always looking for poets in the world.

I love Walt Whitman. I found him in high school. There was a poem I had to learn by heart that's well-known – "In Flanders Field." "In Flanders Fields the poppies blow..." I learned that by heart and that was the first time I realized how aural poetry is, and how much I connected to it in an aural way. I wanted to learn it by heart. I wanted to say the music of it. They don't teach poetry that way anymore. Some of us do, but we think of it as "oral" o-r-a-l and not as "aural" a-u-r-a-l, and I always think of it as an aural experience.

Interviewer: You've been involved with both the Cave Canem Foundation and are a founder of the Affrilachian Poets. Have your experiences working with these organizations affected your own writing style?

Finney: I don't know about style. I think they have affected my joy at realizing there are so many poets in so many pockets of America writing, so I don't know about the style. I think that other things affect my style, like things I'm interested in, growth and wisdom as a writer.

I think those organizations fill my heart with the fact that I'm not alone, and that matters to me as a writer in a real way. I don't want to be a hermit writer, even though I love being by myself, but I think that that would change my work. Knowing that I live in a community and that I am responsible as a citizen of that community. Not just the Cave Canem, not just the Affrilachian Poets, but to young writers. If I come and talk to you I feel, "Okay, we've connected now. I have a certain responsibility to say the things that I know to be true in the clearest way I know how."

Interviewer: You mentioned in a prior interview that reading Nikki Giovanni's collections "gave [you] permission to love photography, to talk about the stories of [your] family, and to also put those forms into poetry." When I was reading your collection *Rice*, it seems that photography was especially important to the structure and development of that book. Could you speak a bit about that interaction?

Finney: So I'm in Strand Bookstore in New York City. I think I'm twenty-two or twenty-three. I'm there for a conference and I love bookstores so I always find the best bookstores in town. I'm in the poetry section and I discover a book by Lucille Clifton called *Generations*. Find this book if you don't know it. It's a history of her family and a history of America with photographs of her family shuffled throughout. And I thought to myself, standing there, having read it twice through, "You can do this? You can put photographs in a book of prose poetry?" Then along with the quotes by Walt Whitman, it just opened up my head about the possibility of thinking outside the box. Not just poetry on the page, which I love, but also perhaps sometimes visual images to accompany the poetry. Epigraphs or quotes to accompany those things.

So that's what really gave me permission to look at the photographs of my own family which were stuffed under dusty beds and pulled out for holidays. I thought, 'These people need to come into the air more.' I asked my family, would it be okay if I used some of those pictures in *Rice*, which is a memoir slash poetry story on my family and on growing up in South Carolina, also coupled with my love of photography. Just such a profound way to see the world. A way to get very close, a way to include more than one person or a couple of different things, a way to curve the edges of the earth, a way to include imagination along with intellect in writing and talking about a subject.

My love of the visual is old and goes back to my first moments on earth. I remember being incredibly all in my eyes before I had a lot of language. My grandmother tells a story that she would always push my stroller up the road somewhere and I was completely content just to look around. I didn't need to have anything else going on. She would tell these stories and everyone else would marvel, "Yeah, that's just how she was," because I could look up, look at the plants, look at the bees, and I was completely content.

And she was like, "Now your brother screamed, shouted. 'Gotta get out, gotta do something, gimme some milk...'" I was completely content. So, different spirit. I feel like I'm still following that same spirit of the visual that I had in that stroller on that long dusty road.

Interviewer: I watched a video on your website in which you were writing poetry on a chalkboard in your backyard. Were any of the poems in *Head Off & Split* written using the chalkboard?

Finney: Conceived, yes, on the chalkboard. I love the chalkboard. I find it an extremely magical place to bring ideas together. If I'm working on a poem that has several dimensions, I like breaking down the dimensions on the board because it allows me a larger visual space.

Okay, let's say I'm writing about the intersection of something about a person and something about a place. Well then, the place gets characterized on the board, the person gets characterized on the board, and then I begin to draw lines between the two to see, "Oh, this is where the poem could stretch out here." I find that the chalkboard spatially gives me the permission that sometimes the piece of paper doesn't. I can step back. I can walk around. I can ponder. I can come back to it. There's just something about it visually that works for me.

Also, every important thing I learned in the first ten years of my life I saw on a chalkboard. So, symbolically, back to what I said in the beginning – I'm saving something that matters to me.

Interviewer: When did you discover that the chalkboard would help you as a writer?

Finney: It wasn't the first book and it wasn't the second book. I think it was probably *The World Is Round*, towards the end. Not in the making of *The World Is Round*, but maybe right after that. So early 2000, something like that.

Interviewer: Was it difficult to move from writing poetry to writing the prose of *Heartwood*? Or have you always written prose?

Always written prose. I'm a note-taker. I keep so many notes on things around the world in my journal books. I'm a prolific note-taker and through those notes come the poems. Though I believe poetry is my first voice, even though I have to work really hard on drafting and revision and those kind of things, I feel like I think through the poetic sensibilities. I hear, I respond in that kind of way, but I write prose constantly.

I'm always looking for where the poem is in the prose, so even though it's a very different genre, I don't find it difficult. I can't tell you how many times I've written something – an essay, an introduction... I was

giving a tenure case a couple of weeks ago and somebody said, “That is a poem,” and I said, “No, it wasn’t.” People say they hear poetry in the things that I find quotidian and commonplace.

Interviewer: I heard your National Book Award speech be described as a poem, as well.

Finney: Yeah, same thing! See, not a poem.

Interviewer: Were you surprised at the reaction the speech received?

Finney: Oh my gosh, stunned. It was so personal. It was like, how could strangers be reacting to this in this way? I was completely stunned. I’m still completely stunned. There are some people who have no idea that I ever wrote a poem. They say, “Oh, you wrote the acceptance speech!” I say, “Yes, but the acceptance speech was *for* something.” I have to remind them there’s poetry there. I’m stunned by that kind of reaction.

Interviewer: One thing that struck me about your two most recent poetry collections, *The World Is Round and Head Off & Split*, is that your use of form – where and how you break a line, how your stanzas are organized – has become a lot more diverse. How did that development take place?

Finney: Naturally. I feel like everything I have come to know about poetry and the making of poetry has come through a hundred different tunnels. Not one MFA program, not one teacher, not one book of poetry, not one poet. Because I had to look so long and hard around to figure out how do I do this, I have so many paths that I find that I take to get to the poems. That’s why I say it’s “naturally” how I have become a poet. When I was an undergraduate, my college didn’t have a writing program. I’ve never taken a creative writing workshop.

And yet, I have to go and find the tactile way to do this in many different kinds of places. So the poems are changing. They’ve evolved from safe stanzas and safe line breaks to the title poem in *Head Off & Split*, which has two spaces in between each phrasing, not one. A kind of elongated caesura that I feel like I created out of the pause that I needed in between these very visual, very sensory-induced things. I said, “No, I don’t need an em dash. I don’t need a soft pause. I need something a little bigger.” Something in my life gave me permission to say, “Well, you create that. Figure that out and make it work for the poem.”

Everything has to be what the poem needs, not what you were taught necessarily. My tenth grade English teacher, one of the most amazing influences in my life – I was taking the caps off my words and changing my grammar and punctuation was nil and she looked at me and she said, “Miss Finney, learn the rules, then break them.” “Okay, then I know what I’m breaking. Okay, I got it.” Very important, very important. Still to this day, I find myself thinking about this woman.

Interviewer: We’ve been studying your poems in our MFA workshop, and were talking about the three-part structure of *Head Off & Split*. Did you know the order of the sections when you began working on the book or organizing the book? Did you know that “The Hard Headed” would begin and “The Head Waters” would end?

Finney: No. I don’t know how other people do this, but I knew the last poem that was written was the title poem. I knew when I finished it I had a book. Then I pulled some poems out and I began to look at how each poem was speaking to each poem. Once I saw that, clusters began to happen. I was pinning poems on the wall and pulling them down and moving from the dining room to the living room to the stairwell. I began to see that the spirit and the themes of the three had really kind of risen to the surface. “The Hard-Headed” talks about characters or people who have a little hard-headedness about them, and so the subtitles came naturally from the alignments that the poems made and that I honored.

Interviewer: There is a certain type of writer and reader of poetry who wishes politics and art to remain separate. What would be your response to those who think that poets should not write about political subjects?

Finney: I think they're not living honestly in the world that I live in. I think that they live in a bubble or something else, because I find the two inextricably bound and the job is not to say whether they are or not. The job of the writer and the poet is to write them as critically and clearly as one can.

I'm way beyond "Does this exist" and "art for art's sake" argument and all those kinds of things. I never really did well with boxes and definitions of things. I'm always looking for a more honest approach to what I do and to what I love. So, that's fine, if they think that. I don't want to speak for anybody but myself, but I really think that that's narrow.

Interviewer: You often write very personal, even perhaps one could say "confessional," poems –

Finney [laughing]: I do not confess!

Interviewer: Okay, personal – very personal poems – as well as historical poems that zero in on a specific figure's point of view. When you were writing these poems that focus on a particular figure, such as George W. Bush in "Plunder," Rosa Parks, or Condaleeza Rice, did you draw on your own personal experience, as well as on history to inform those poems?

Finney: I think absolutely, absolutely. I don't know how I could not. If I'm writing a persona poem, if I'm writing out of the spirit of somebody, I study as much about what they have said and who they are as I can, but they absolutely come out of me. There's no doubt about that. I would be less than honest if I said that they didn't. Yes.

Interviewer: You often identify yourself as a writer from the South – are there certain aspects of your writing that you would characterize as "southern"?

Finney: Honesty. I'm always thinking about the word. What is honesty? Who does tell the truth? Is your truth like my truth, or can we have two different truths? I remember so well my grandmother. Born in 1900, died in 1999 – I was holding her hand. The biggest single influence in my life in terms of a human being. Didn't go to college, played the piano in church, a farming woman. The big thing she taught me – a lie was equal to murder. If you couldn't tell the truth in life then you were taking up space and you should go do something else.

We don't think about that in that way anymore. There are so many people who take words and turn them around and change definitions. The older I get, the closer I get to the sound of her saying, "A lie is akin to murder." You have to learn in your life to be a human being and to be here with everybody else, to say the truth, say "I made a mistake," say "I did this wrong," apologize, say "I did this," full knowing the trouble I was going to be in. Say it honestly.

I think the world sometimes teaches us something else, so I'm going in reverse. I'm trying to get my hands back around that quality that I think we used to be closer to as human beings. There's so many ways to jump out of the way of truth and honesty and say, "Skew it," in some kind of way. I'm trying to do the opposite. I'm trying to see how closely I can align myself with what I feel is a true thing.

Interviewer: Could you talk a little about what you're writing now?

Finney [laughing]: No. From one writer to another. I can say this: as a little girl, I was terribly attached to the outside world. Frogs and birds and woodpeckers and chinaberry trees. I knew the names of plants and animals and insects.

Oh, I'm thinking of this now! I wanted to be a paleontologist when I was about nine. I knew every name of every dinosaur. So you can take this answer and put it back up there. Stegosaurus, tyrannosaurus... I knew what they ate for breakfast. I knew how long they lived. I knew the period they lived in. I knew all of that. My life and my career has been built really as a portrait poet. I love people. I love watching people and listening to them, and I feel like some of the things I'm working on now really center less on people and more on land, more on geography and more on flora and fauna.

It's amazing, because I really haven't written a lot about that. They're very quiet pieces and I don't know if they'll be a book or if they'll all be that way. I think it has everything to do with the danger that the land is in and that we are in as human beings because we're not listening to what the ocean is telling us and what we're doing to the skies. All those things that matter so much to us as human beings, we've just taken for granted. My body and my soul was telling me that the trees and the flowers and the things that we need to be here, need a poem more.