

Winner Interview: Nikky Finney

By Cat Richardson

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Cat Richardson: How did you react when you found out about your nomination?

Nikky Finney: I was mega-stunned and then mega-humbled and then super super quiet about it all. The bowl of oatmeal I had been waiting for on the stove got turned off and was never eaten. I was suddenly so full, full of the warmth of recognition. I have never not taken myself seriously as a writer and then one morning you get a call and you find out a circle of readers – way over there – has picked out then placed a string of freshwater pearls around the long neck of your work.

CR: I noticed that you thank several people for helping you edit and form this collection. Can you talk a little bit about what you imagined this book would be as compared to what it turned into? How many and what kinds of transformations did it go through? Did you set out to write this collection?

NF: I write alone but I live, work, treasure, the influence of the world and the many small intimate communities that constantly impact my feelings, thoughts, and words. I never imagined the book so much as the title. I knew the phrase *Head Off & Split* was significant when the fishmonger spoke it to me in the fish house. It stopped me in my tracks even though I had heard it many many times before. Sometimes you hear things in a different way depending on who you are in that moment and how the rest of life seems to be aligned. It was my partner, AJ Verdelle, who had the most impact on the finished collection. She is a novelist and a brilliant instructor of Revision as an art form. She had always backed away from my poetry before by trying to pretend she knew narrative but not narrative poetry but one day she just jumped in and made some amazing suggestions and it changed everything about the collection as a whole. Some poems got pulled and other poems were rearranged and rethought. Priceless.

CR: Rosa Parks, George Bush, Condoleezza Rice, and Wilma Rudolph all make appearances in your poetry. How do you feel you inhabit history and/or politics?

NF: I am incredibly drawn to history; personal history, American history, Southern history, family history, the history of a community, the history of secrets, the history that has gone missing, the history that has been told by the lion hunter but not the lion, the history of pencils, of loss, of tenderness, the history of what the future just might be if we would only...

CR: What do you hope that readers will see in your work? Or take away from your collection?

NF: From this particular collection, I am hoping that the reader realizes we are standing at an incredible moment in time. A moment when so much of what we do and don't do matters. I believe more and more our beautiful language is being hi-jacked by those who care nothing about language, those who care only about winning and acquiring and stockpiling and protecting their own interests. I believe language has been stolen and stomped on and sold into sound bites by those who didn't have the grandmother that I had – who thought lying was equal to murder. I believe our many beautiful ways of saying and communicating and the

telling of our stories has been taken for granted and we can't let that happen. All of us who make something with our hands and hearts must step into every arena that we possibly can and bring with us the most eloquent, charged, radical (radical only means grabbing it by the root), tender, truthful words spilling from our arms. Our children deserve this from us.