

Honoree: Nikky Finney

Grade Level: 6th-8th

Subject: English Language Arts/Visual Arts

Standard(s) Addressed:

6-8-RI-7 Integrate information presented in different media or formats as well as in words to develop a coherent understanding of a topic or issue.

6-8-W-4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.

Steps/Strategies:

1. As a starter activity, students will be given a quote and asked to Freewrite in response to it.
 - a. “The role of the artist in the community is to not see herself as something special—set off to the side—but rather someone integral, like the carpenter, the electrician, the school teacher, the nurse....” —Nikky Finney
2. Ask students to share their responses to the quote.
3. Introduce students to poet and South Carolina Native, Nikky Finney. Have students read the following biography:

Celebrated poet Nikky Finney was born in Conway, South Carolina, the daughter of an attorney and teacher, both civil rights activists. Ms. Finney’s fourth book of poetry, *Head Off & Split*, was awarded the 2011 National Book Award for poetry.

An alumna of Talladega College and Atlanta University, Ms. Finney is the Guy Davenport Endowed Professor in English and Creative Writing at the University of Kentucky. Ms. Finney is also on the faculty at Cave Canem, the prestigious Black Poetry organization founded in 1996 and located in New York City, and a founding member of the Affrilachian Poets, “the coal black African voices of Appalachia,” as she says. During the academic year 2007-2008, Ms. Finney was Grace Hazard Conkling Writer-in-Residence at Smith.

Ms. Finney’s poems have been described as powerful and warm, like her southern roots, and provide glimpses into the human adventures of birth, death, family, violence, sexuality, and relationship, exploring the soul of human community. Novelist Walter Mosely said of Ms. Finney’s work, “She has flung me into an afterbirth of stars and made my stiff bones as loose as jelly.”

Ms. Finney has authored four books of poetry: *Head Off & Split* (2011); *The World Is Round* (2003); *Rice* (1995); and *On Wings Made of Gauze* (1985). She has also authored the collection of stories, *Heartwood* (1997) and edited *The Ringing Ear: Black Poets Lean South* (2007).

Exploring characters as diverse as Jacques Cousteau and Saartjie Baartman (the so-called Hottentot Venus), young women defined by violence and old women killing time in a thrift store, Ms. Finney “takes a leapfrog hop of the extraordinary over the commonplace,” writes Black Issues Book Review, as in the poem “Coda,” which examines the intimate landscape of her close-knit family.

Caribbean poet Lorna Goodison wrote of Ms. Finney, “(She) calls us to consider and value again the blessings found in community, the strong bonds of family and the transcendent and inexplicable ways of the spirit.”

4. Students will list the type of leadership characteristics they below Nikky Finney portrays.
5. As students discuss the leadership qualities of Nikky Finney, begin to read the beginning of Nikky Finney’s National Book Award acceptance speech. Hook students by ending after the introduction of her speech. Have students respond to the introduction.
6. After responding to the introduction of Nikky’s speech, distribute multiple copies of Nikky Finney’s poems. Have students read and analyze poems in groups.
7. Students will read the works of Nikky Finney and construct a Reflective Learning Log after reading their given piece. Students will create a visual from their interpretation of the poem and give a written response to the piece.
8. After being exposed to various poems written by Nikky Finney, students will independently choose one poem that speaks to them.
9. Students will create a poem that mimics the one they chose, in honor of Nikky Finney.
10. As a culmination activity, students will watch Nikky Finney’s acceptance speech for the National Book Award and create a 3-2-1 Exit Slip for what they have learned throughout the unit on Nikky Finney.

Additional Resources:

<http://artworks.arts.gov/?p=14886>