

Dr. Nikki Giovanni

Writer, Poet, Professor



Dr. Nikki Giovanni
Writer, Poet, Professor

Narrative Biography

I think I was lucky because I was always sniffing. Colds; allergies; something or another. Which meant I got to stay home from school a lot. Which meant I could read the books that I wanted to read. Mommy had a wonderful library. Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Paul Laurence Dunbar John Hershey but she also read trashy books that she kept in the back of her closet. I remember a nun once saying to me that Black Boy by Richard Wright was a bad book. I knew better but I thank her for letting me know just because you are grown and a nun you don't necessarily know what is a good from a bad book. I guess this is a long way of saying I'm a dreamer.

We had music growing up, 78RPM's that evolved into 45RPM's and, always, the radio. The radio in my day, Black and white, played everything. Gospel Spirituals, even some opera when Leontyne Price came along. You could listen to R & B late at night or you could go to the other station and listen to popular music. There was also jazz if the wind was right. I feel so sorry for the kids who only hear one kind of music. Where do your dreams come from? My dream was not to publish or to even be a writer: my dream was to discover something no one else had thought of. I guess that's why I'm a poet. We put things together in ways no one else does.

Fisk University in Nashville, among others, was participating in a program entitled "Early Entrant." You could start college without having to finish high school. That came in handy when I needed a summer job a couple of year after my enrollment. I could honestly check the box that asked was I a high school drop out that I dropped out of high school which helped me get chosen for that job. People are strange, aren't they? Fisk was my grandfather's alma mater though that was not a factor. Off I went.

Quite naturally there would be adjustments and quite naturally I didn't adjust well right away so I got expelled. A good thing, too, because now I had time to really think about what kind of life I wanted. I knew I needed an education because I was talented like my big sister who was playing Rhapsody In Blue when she was eight years old; I really didn't sing all that well though they let me when we had school plays. I wasn't drop dead gorgeous. I was just me. Not even all that friendly though I knew I was a good thinker and a better dreamer.

Dr. Nikki Giovanni

Writer, Poet, Professor



Dr. Nikki Giovanni
Writer, Poet, Professor

Narrative Biography

I drove back to Nashville to see if I couldn't do something to make this all right. I had a great Dean of Women. When she pulled my file, she laughed for a good ten minutes. Then we talked. Since I was wrong that was the first thing I said. She helped me be readmitted and I graduated.

Now here is the problem: I had no money; no patience with stupid jobs; no talent that could be sold. I knew I needed graduate school but how? Another great Dean. I was admitted to the University of Pennsylvania School of Social Work. Of course, I was not going to do well in that, but my great Dean enabled me to attend Columbia University for their newly developed Master of Fine Arts (MFA) program. No degree there either but Columbia does owe me. The requirement was "in two years you must write a book." I wrote a book in a bit less than a year. I wanted my degree and to go on. It's still a discussion Columbia and I have though I admit I keep losing.

No one was much interested in a Black girl writing what was called "militant" poetry. I thought of it as good poetry, but we all have our own ideas. Since no one wanted to publish me, I formed a company and published myself. That was a lot easier to do in the old days. For \$100 you could get 100 books which meant you could sell them at a dollar a book to break even but you could also ask one of the many small bookstores, black or white, to take your book and offer them a discount of, for example, 40%. Yes, you were losing forty cents on each book but to go back to press was only about \$70 which meant you only needed about \$10.00 for your second edition. Now I had a goal. I wanted to be a writer who dreams or maybe a dreamer who writes but I knew one book does not a writer make. I started on my second book which garnered a lot of attention because I launched it at Birdland-- the jazz club in NYC.

I was asked to do a biography so this is it. I am 71 years old. I highly recommend old age; it's fun. I have been awarded an unprecedented 7 NAACP Image Awards which makes me very, very proud. I have been nominated for a Grammy; been a finalist for the National Book Award. I am very proud to have authored 3 New York Times and Los Angeles Times Best Sellers, highly unusual for a poet. I am a University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech. I don't have a lot of friends, but I have good ones. I have a son and a granddaughter. My father, mother, sister and middle aunt are all deceased literarily making me go from being the baby in the family to being an elder. I like to cook, travel and dream. I'm a writer. I'm happy.