



# HARTWORKS

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Featuring Guest Author  
Nikki Giovanni

The Charles Hart Middle School Literary Magazine



# HARTWORKS presents our special guest Nikki Giovanni

Nikki Giovanni is the author of twelve books of poetry, five books of prose, and seven children's books. She has been named Woman of the Year by *Essence* magazine, *Ladies' Home Journal*, and *Mademoiselle*. She has been awarded thirteen honorary doctoral degrees, and is currently a professor of English at Virginia Polytechnic Institute. She was interviewed by Charles Hart Middle School students Amani Al-Fatah, Antonio Ashford, and Jessica Young at the Loudon County Regional Library, where she later read her poetry for an audience of nearly two hundred fans.

**Amani:** In one of your poems, Nikki grows up poor. Did you actually grow up poor?

**Nikki Giovanni:** Oh yes, of course. Most people my age did. I grew up in a town called Woodlawn, and it's really in what's called the valley of Cincinnati. Cincinnati is a river town, and rivers, of course, cause valleys. When you come from the north, you come in through the valley till you get down to the river. And we had a very small home, that was actually quite nice, but with no running water. We had an outhouse. I've always been fond of outhouses. But the answer is yes.

**Antonio:** What got you started writing poems?

**Nikki:** Well, I like to write. I always did. I liked to draw and then I liked to write. I liked to write stories and then draw pictures. And so, in terms of talent, I had more talent for writing than I did in drawing so I don't draw or paint anymore. I used to paint when I was in college. But it was something that was fun to do because you get to express yourself.

**Jessica:** I read this poem called "How Do You Write A Poem?" Why did you pick a title like that?

**Nikki:** That's a good question. I think it's a love poem, and it was the first line, and that always helps. Emily Dickinson, who was a great poet, uses a lot of first lines. I could have said, I guess, "How do you write a love poem?" But that would have been not as good as "How do you write a poem?" It's like I say "Ahhh" and you say "choo." It just seemed to be the right fit.

**Antonio:** About your poem, "The Moon Shines Down," it says you're no panacea. What does that word mean?

**Nikki:** Antonio, I'm going to have to make you look it up because that's the whole purpose of using words that people don't know. I could tell you, but my mom and my grandfather would just... My mother would kill me and my grandfather would turn over in his grave if I did that. And if you don't have a dictionary, I'll send you one. But you've got to look up words. That's the truth. Do you have a dictionary? Okay then I'll let you look it up. Otherwise I'll send you one, because I do that. I had some friends out in Oakland, California your age and they used to say things like that. I sent about six dictionaries to them.

**Jessica:** What did you mean when you said, "No white person ever has cause to write about me?"

**Nikki:** Well you have to get the whole line. I hope no white person has cause to write about me because, and there's a big because there, because black love is black wealth. And they'll probably talk about my hard childhood and never understand that all the while I was quite happy. Because there are cultural assumptions that privileged people make about nonprivileged people. And I would never recommend a nonprivileged position. If you have the choice between being comfortable or being uncomfortable, be comfortable. If you have a choice between being cold or hot, be comfortable again. If you had a choice between being hungry and poor, I would recommend poor. But a lot of people make the assumption that because you didn't have a lot of things that other people had, because your parents didn't have cars or because you didn't have running water, somehow or another you did not have a decent and good life. And I reject that, and I've said that because black love is black wealth.

And we live in a materialistic age which is way overblown. Materialism has such limits. How many people find this out the hard way. They find it out because they have empty lives that they then try to fill with things like drugs or things like alcohol, or really stupid things like driving their cars up and down city streets at 50 miles per hour because they're drag racing. What kind of sense does that make? That's an emptiness in life.

One of the things that we learn in the Old Testament that I think is good (cause I'm not that fond of that eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth, that does not get it for me), but one of the things that I do know the Old Testament teaches us is that the love of money is the root of all evil. It's not that money is the root of all evil. And that's all I'm saying: One cannot spend one's life being envious or jealous or wanting something just for the wanting of it. That doesn't make sense. The goods of your life, the goods and services of your life, have to be in service to a better you. It cannot be in service to a better

them. In other words, you work to live, you do not live to work. So you always have something else to give. So if you have a bowl of chili and somebody's hungry, you don't even think about it, you say, "Come have some of mine." Because that's what makes you a human being.

Materialistic people say, "No, I'm going to keep mine," even though they don't want it. They're afraid of somebody getting enough; that's crazy. So that's what I'm saying: My life was a good life, and I have become, I think, a better person for my life. And for understanding that I don't have any reason to be envious of anybody, and I won't be. I'm not jealous, I'm not small-minded, and I'm not mean, and I'm not going to be any of those things to get something. Because it makes you crazy.

**Amani:** Actually, I do like a lot of material things.

**Nikki:** Sure, but there are limits. If you were on your way to school and there was a little kindergarten kid who lost her coat, and you had a jacket and a coat, you would give her your jacket, because your father would kill you if he found out you let that little kid go to school freezing. You'd try to help, I know that. So it's not liking material things, it's being mean and laughing at other people who don't have something.

**Amani:** Was your dad a drinker?

**Nikki:** Oh yes, he was an alcoholic.

**Jessica:** What effect did that have on you? Did it have any effect?

**Nikki:** I didn't drink, I knew that being an alcoholic wasn't a good idea. But he's still my father.

**Amani:** I was just thinking about it, and I know a girl who's father used to be like that. If you're living poor and your life is not as good as others, when you were in school didn't you ever think about how that affects you sometimes?

**Nikki:** My father didn't drink to do something to me. My father wasn't an alcoholic to get back at me. As soon as Nikki's father started drinking, he was drinking for whatever reason he was drinking. It didn't have anything to do with me, except that I don't like to be hollered at. He would holler, and anyone who's been around me more than a few minutes knows, don't holler. And I grew up in a black community, and kids like to tease you about something like that, but they've got to be crazy. Cause it's not funny. If kids say "your daddy's a drunk," well "What kind of a life do you lead that all you have to do is pay attention to mine?"

**Amani:** Are you rich?

**Nikki:** No. Rich is a lot more money than I have. But I'm happy and I'm sane. You're too young to understand that. I do okay. I take care of my responsibilities, and that's all I want to do in life.

**Antonio:** When you were young, did your friends ever pick on you about writing poems?



**Nikki:** No. Because my good friends all wrote. We all enjoyed writing.

**Jessica:** Do you use profanity in your poems to express your emotions?

**Nikki:** Sometimes, yes. Sometimes I do. Sometimes to shock, it depends on what the point is. Let me answer a question you haven't asked. I so seldom think of myself as a children's author. I'm always amazed when young people say "I read your poem," cause I think of myself as an old person. I do have young people's poetry, because my son's 31 now, but when he was in the 5th grade, I wrote a book with him called "Vacation Time." I think of those series of books as children's books. The poems you're asking me about now mostly appear to be a variety of my adult poetry.

So I'm enchanted that you're enjoying reading some of the love poems. Of course, "Nikki Rosa" is probably going to be on my gravestone. It's a signature poem. I really hope I write something else. Of course, "Ego Tripping" is my most popular poem, and that's a poem that's gone all around the world. But I am just enchanted at the breadth of the reading that you've done. I'm always enthralled that young people like "Cotton Candy On A Rainy Day," because I have a hard time thinking of how it is that you access "Cotton Candy On A Rainy Day."

**Jessica:** When you were growing up, did you ever have an inspirer?

**Nikki:** I had a lot of people who encouraged me, inspiration is probably not the word I would use. But I had a fantastic grandmother. My mother is very much a dreamer and my grandmother is very practical. My father is very much a dreamer. So I had all these influences. But I don't think you all are too young for me to say, I think there's too much emphasis in your generation, on the conditions and who is or is not a proper mentor, a proper role model. And I think they make you dependent on finding somebody instead of finding yourself. You have to learn to trust yourself. And if I see a weakness, coming into the 21st century, it is that so few of you trust what you know to be true. You look for validation from other people, and you can't do that.

**Amani:** Sometimes when we're writing a poem, we want to put a curse word down, and we can't.

**Nikki:** Well you're eighth graders. I'm 58 years old, there's a big difference. Be fair now, Amani. One of the reasons that you do something called be grown up is that you get to do it your way. But right now this is not Burger King, this is school. You do not get to have it your way. Their job is to teach you something.

**Amani:** Yeah, but if your curse is because you feel something, if your feeling is, you're mad and you feel as though one of those words is the only way express it, you want to put it. And my teacher is, like, "No!" But it's not as though I want to use it because I hear other people use it, or because I try to be grown, but it's kind of sometimes how I feel.

**Nikki:** But if I were teaching you, as I do teach at Virginia Tech, I'd say, "and what does this mean in this context?" Which is what she's saying to you. And you say it means, "yack, yack, yack." I say, then that's what you have to write for me, because my job is not to let you shock me or use a cheap word. Every curse word is not cheap, but if we don't give you another word for it, you will grow up writing a word that no longer adequately satisfies what you are saying. But you will not have learned the other word. If we let you keep that one word, you will now find yourself with only that word, and we will not have done our job.

**Amani:** Yeah, I see that but...

**Nikki:** That's why we make you eat vegetables. You must eat your asparagus. You have to, because if we don't make you eat your asparagus, then you're going to find yourself a little older, needing the folic acid, needing whatever it is that asparagus gives us, (aside from a really beautiful dish with butter, and things like that). And you'll say, "Well, I never ate that before." Our job is to make you eat it. And words are the same thing as your vegetables. You just cannot go through life eating hamburgers and feeling that you're being properly nourished. And that's why we do it.

**Amani:** Right, but what I'm saying is, okay, when you get in a certain state of mind, and you know that there's another word that you can justify for the word you want to use.

**Nikki:** I understand what you're saying. You have to use the other word. It's what you do now, it's why you practice "middle C" on the piano. There are things that we have to teach you. We teach you how to use words. We make you eat your vegetables; we tell you to go to sleep. Because we want to make sure that when you're grown, and we're no longer there to instruct you, we have done our best. And we can't let you take that away from us because it's inconvenient. When you come to Virginia Tech, I'm going to say the same thing to you. Come sit in my writing class and see. But Amani, remember, when we had this discussion you were twelve years old.

**Amani:** Thirteen

**Nikki:** And you'll say, "but I still think, Dr. Giovanni..." And I'll say you still have to learn. I have to teach you what I know because that's all people can do for young people. We can only teach you what we know, so you can take that as a basis to learn what you have to know. That's called life. It's why we have children, whether they're biological children or they're emotional children, as you are to the teachers, my students are to me. I am not their mother biologically, but I am their mother emotionally. And I have to teach you what I know so, you don't have to learn again what I know. If I teach you what I know, then you can use that and go forward. If I don't, then you'll have to learn it at some other point and that's taking up time that we don't have to spend.



# Poetry

poetry is motion graceful  
as a fawn  
gentle as a teardrop  
strong like the eye  
finding peace in a crowded room

we poets tend to think  
our words are golden  
though emotion speaks too  
loudly to be defined  
by silence

sometimes after midnight or just before  
the dawn  
we sit typewriter in hand  
pulling loneliness around us  
forgetting our lovers or children  
who are sleeping  
ignoring the weary wariness  
of our own logic  
to compose a poem  
no one understands it  
it never says "love me" for poets are  
beyond love  
it never says "accept me" for poems seek not  
acceptance but controversy  
it only says "I am" and therefore  
I concede that you are too  
a poem is pure energy  
horizontally contained  
between the mind  
of the poet and the ear of the reader  
if it does not sing discard the ear  
for poetry is song  
if it does not delight discard  
the heart for poetry is joy  
if it does not inform then close  
off the brain for it is dead  
if it cannot heed the insistent message  
that life is precious

which is all we poets  
wrapped in our loneliness  
are trying to say

*Nikki Giovanni*

# Choices

if I can't do  
what I want to do  
then my job is to not  
do what I don't want  
to do

it's not the same thing  
but it's the best I can  
do

if I can't have  
what I want then  
my job is to want  
what i've got  
and be satisfied  
that at least there  
is something more  
to want

since I can't go  
where I need  
to go then I must go  
where the signs point  
though always understanding  
parallel movement  
isn't lateral

*Nikki Giovanni*