

structive powers of the rivers still clashed with modern cultural ideals of prosperity and land ownership. Thus, in a history that leads up to, and beyond, the great flood of 1927, Saikku shows how people sought to mediate the realities of the landscape with their own dreams through levees and flood-storage reservoirs.

Although the book is highly interesting, well-written, and educational, it is unfortunate that the cultural analysis has been limited to scattered Faulkner quotes, some letters and diaries, and a few references to blues songs. From an American Studies point-of-view, and considering the bulk of available and relevant cultural material dealing with the environmental themes of the Delta landscapes, too little cultural information has been used and that which has found its way into the text seems oddly un-integrated.

All in all, however, Saikku has written a very interesting and relevant book. While the wide historical scope makes *This Delta, This Land* a good introduction to environmental history, the attention to detail ensures that it does not become boring or repetitive even for the trained environmentalist. Instead Saikku manages to educate the reader on the, mostly, troubled past relationship between the peoples of the Yazoo-Mississippi floodplain and the natural environment of that region in a study that seems more relevant today than ever.

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Nikky Finney, *The World Is Round*. Atlanta. InnerLight Publishing, 2002. 109 pages; \$29.95; \$14.95 (paper). ISBN 0-9714890-3-3

When did you last read a whole book of poetry? If you are like most people, it has been a while, and you probably only read it because you had to. Maybe you went through the ordeal of reading some poems to upgrade your intellectual status in the local reading circle, or in order not to fail an English course you had registered (and paid) for in a state of reckless disregard of reality. Or maybe you did not want to disappoint your romantic partner by revealing that – except for the lyrics of country music or rap – you never listen to poetry and prefer to read sadistic crime fiction. And since the depressive experience in youth of being forced to read long convoluted passages of Milton's *Paradise Lost*, you have had a total and, you are convinced, everlasting aversion to poetry and anything vaguely similar.

Nikky Finney offers you a collection that will allow you to discover that you could do worse than read poems. Shut the door on the mentally challenged in the TV room, read "Fishing among the Learned," who are not the academics but fly-fishers "who know real life bestows no terminal degrees," from Finney's *The World Is Round*. In spite of your old poetry phobia, you will be hooked and to your surprise want to read more. A reader needs to fly-fish in the deepest pond to catch glimpses of privileged information.

The poet grew up in Conway, S.C., was inspired by Nikki Giovanni and Toni Cade Bambara's poetry, and published her first poems *On Wings Made of Gauze* in 1985. Nikky Finney is now 49 and teaches creative writing at University of Kentucky, but

her roots in the lowcountry are obvious in her well-received book *Rice* (1995), where the poems and stories are set in coastal Carolina during the poet's childhood, when rice, "Carolina Gold," was a large export crop. *Rice* was awarded the PEN American Open Book Award of 1999.

In 1997 Finney published a short story cycle, *Heartwood*, which she wrote to assist literacy students everywhere. The stories are about overcoming racial anger, fears, and prejudice by relying on the soundness of the 'heartwood' in a small community. Her work has from the beginning dealt with race issues, lost values, abuse, and the trials and triumphs of womanhood. In her new poems she emphasizes her matriarchal ancestry and African lineage, celebrates the spirit of all who rebel, and convincingly incarnates her delight in the Gullah culture of her home state.

Poems such as "Sex" and "My Old Kentucky Home" are frank and honest about police brutality and same gender sexual relations among the "Southern North American Africans." The racial and engendered provocations have been written and read before, but in her treatment of these topics Finney is never trite, clichéd, or boring, and the poems excel in new imagery that invokes all of Southern history. In "A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich" we come to accept racial hatred as a still lingering fact; Finney describes her hatred as "a firestorm/ the kind that burns whole countries down." And "Hate" is the title of a poem that angrily confronts us with a senator's infamous statement about the NAACP. Young blacks are in "The New Cotton" in a poem that shows them chain-ganged and picking white plastic along the roads. Others are "Easy Bake" cremated in ovens after high school killings.

In spite of all the fully justified sound and fury of the uncompromising topical and political poems, Finney's greatest promise as a poet resides in her ability to breathe true life into domestic and universal situations. So if you feel you have had your fill of political preaching in an earlier century, you might read the wonderful poem almost caressing a heavy woman whose behind is wedged into the surf, sunk into the sand. The final lines of "Assam" are:

She sits
dripping
half in half out
the sea,
a tea bag full
of black uncut leaves,
without you I whisper
the world is plain
tap water.

Do you know this woman? Have you seen her at the beach? Is she related to you? Other poems emphasize the importance of having the "charmbracelet of a family," people you go home to "just to touch them" for it is a medicine for them and for you. And there is the sensuousness of childhood you return to in your mind, e.g. in "Elephantine" where Finney recalls riding ... "the head of an elephant/ around and around/ the dime store parking lot,/ my long colored legs/ dug in behind/ his huge floating ears."

The longest section of the collection is a prose poem called "Hurricane Beulah" that celebrates the matriarchal family line by showing the poet and her grandmother

after five hours of the third day at the Salvation Army Thrift Store, where she leaves her mark. The old lady hits the store as if she were a hurricane, and we recognize her, and share the poet's love for her. The clothes she tries on are outlines to be filled by our imagination. When the old woman wastes away with cancer, the poet becomes her grandmother's mother, and we feel and recognize the hardship and the love of the situation. It is art that will not leave us, or leave us alone.

Nikky Finney is "more Atlantic than anything," as she writes in the poem "the Undersea World of Jacques Cousteau," possibly the best in this collection. The old Frenchman "in a tiny red bathing suit no bigger than a smile" has "something watery about him" that makes us not turn away. And the poet has "never seen a white man like him before." Cousteau pulls her "into the old water" takes her "to see his violent peaceful planet."

If you are the callous rejector of all poetry, you should right away let Nikky Finney pull you into her fresh pool of poems where you can explore her violently peaceful, old-new undersea vision of the world. It is a catch to keep.

Jan Nordby Gretlund

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William Walsh, *The Conscience of My Other Being*. Atlanta: Cherokee Publishing Company. 2005. 99 pages; \$14.95 (paper). ISBN 0-87797-313-X

Having published poetry for years in the wonderful local periodicals, fortunately still underfoot and called 'review,' but full of poems not seen before, William Walsh has earned the right to publish a collection of his poems: *The Conscience of My Other Being*. It can be read *Conscience My Other Being*, as the italics of the article and the preposition in the title indicate. The other being Walsh refers to is his imaginary life, which he employs in an attempt to find his supposedly real self. If you get the notion that the title is more trouble than it is worth and half suspect that the poet meant being 'conscious' of his other self, as the poems do *not* focus on conscience, let me assure you that the title is the least successful part of the collection.

There are four sections, the first is called "Unsophisticated Time" and has poems on being in jail, suffering from Tourettes, lying, drinking, spying, burying (a dog), wanting, dying, and "Mowing the Yard of a Woman Whose Name I Have Forgotten." The section opens by quoting Czeslaw Milosz's "Return to Krakow in 1880" to bring out an existential hopelessness, but Walsh also quotes James Dickey's "Cherrylog Road" and this is where the true ancestry of the narrative poems is revealed. His masters are Southern poets such as Robert Penn Warren, A. R. Ammons, Fred Chappell, and Ron Rash, the great storytellers. In the poem "In Anticipation of Spending Several Nights in Jail" Walsh recaptures and holds the adolescent dream of the golden girl with cheerleader moves, for whose body "time and space were invented"

But you never
spoke to her because you were some brand of farm animal.
Maybe she was so golden that one single word spoken to her