



# Nikki Giovanni

“

*and if ever I touched a life I hope  
that life knows that I know that touching was and still is and will always  
be the true  
revolution*

— “When I Die” from My House (1972)

”

## Biography

Nikki Giovanni was born on June 7, 1943 in Knoxville, Tennessee under her birth name, Yolande Cornelia Giovanni, Jr. She was raised in Cincinnati, Ohio where she left high school as a junior in order to attend Fisk University, a historically black institution. As an undergraduate, she became increasingly involved in politics surrounding race as well as art. She involved herself with the Black Arts Movement and in 1964 led the organizing of the influential civil rights organization, the Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee (Reid 46). As she became more active in the struggle surrounding race in the sixties she edited a student literary journal. During this time, Giovanni began to emerge as a revolutionary Black Rights poet.

Giovanni’s poetry spans over thirty years, from her first book in 1968 to her most recent collection *Blues For All the Changes* (1998). In her most comprehensive work of poetry, *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni* (1996), the reader experiences vast changes in a poet’s early contentious poetry and later, more personal poetry.

### Quick Facts

- \* Born in 1943
- \* Black Rights poet, activist, and educator
- \* First published book of poetry was *Black Judgment*

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# Nikki Giovanni

## Biography continued

This book, a collection of more than 100 poems from seven different books, spans the 1960's to the early 1980's and includes some of her most notable poems, such as, "Ego Tripping," "Poem For Aretha," and "Woman Poem." Recently published materials such as, "A Poem for langston hughes" and "But Since You Finally Asked (A Poem Commemorating the 10th Anniversary of the Slave Memorial at Mount Vernon)" are also included. These poems tell a story of a revolutionary poet, Nikki Giovanni. She is a mother, teacher, cancer survivor, lover, and Black woman. Her poetry is personal and political, often revolving around events that occur in her life. "Poetry," she has written, "is but a reflection of the moment. The universal comes from the particular" (1). In this way, Giovanni expresses the world she sees around her by making single moments historic and personal inflexions paramount to all.

Giovanni can write for the American, of social injustice and racial prejudice, and at the same time write a book of children's poetry. Like Lucille Clifton, Giovanni writes in a "down-to-earth" style, which allows her to captivate any audience. Her poems are easy to read and understand and her work is capable of reaching an audience regardless of age, race, gender, or social class. But she holds one prerequisite for readers of her work. In an interview with Arlene Elder, she said, "I don't think that writers ever changed the mind of anybody. I think we preach to the saved"(69). The "saved" are those capable of understanding, forgiveness, and change, all being qualities of her own poetry and writing.

Shortly after she was awarded her B.A. in history, Giovanni borrowed money to publish her first book of poetry: *Black Feeling, Black Talk* (1968). Other books of poetry quickly followed including *Black Judgment* (1968), and *Re: Creation* (1970). In these first works, her motives are clear: the importance of raising awareness about the rights of African-Americans. She writes, "If the Black Revolution passes you bye it's damned/sure/the whi-te reaction to it won't" (33). Coming from her first book of poetry, this notion of a "Black Revolution" spreads throughout her early works.



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## Biography continued

Also in her first book, “Poem (No Name No. 2),” she writes:

“

*Bitter Black Bitterness*  
*Black Bitter Bitterness*  
*Bitterness Black Brothers*  
*Bitter Black Get*  
*Blacker Get Bitter*  
*Get Black Bitterness*  
*NOW*

”

Giovanni's poetry shows an awareness towards the mentality of an oppressed race, the anger, and the desire to break from oppression at all costs. Her concern for the destiny of African-Americans can be seen in some of her other works, for instance, her record of several conversations with the famous African-American author, Margaret Walker. In *A Poetic Equation: Conversations Between Nikki Giovanni and Margaret Walker*, she again raises the issue of revolution. When Walker says to Giovanni, “I don't believe individual defiant acts like these will make for the revolution you want,” Giovanni replies, “No, don't ever misunderstand me and my use of the term ‘revolution.’ I could never believe that having an organization was going to cause a revolution” (23). Throughout *A Poetic Equation*, the two talk about issues from how to raise a child to the Vietnam War to how to save the African-American race that white America is trying to destroy. Walker says, “I will tell you I do believe that our common enemy is the white man in America and his culture which are striving to destroy us and our culture” (5). Giovanni, in response to Walker, says, “I don't want to split the world, it's split already. And if that's the way it is, then I want my side to come out number one” (5).



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## Biography continued

Giovanni's writings during this early period in the late sixties/early seventies were clearly centered around race and racial issues apparent in American society. But just as Giovanni says that an impersonal organization cannot define a revolution, her poetry takes a turn towards the personal. In her first book of poetry after *Re: Creation, My House* shows a turn towards less aggressive and more private emotion. She emphasizes the individual and their capacity to feel when, in the poem "When I Die," she says, ". . . touching was and still is and will always/be the true/revolution" (136). There is an emphasis on what a person can create through love, "touching," and not hate, "Bitterness." Calvin Reid, in his article, "Nikki Giovanni: Three Decades on the Edge," says, "Since the late 1960's Giovanni has written poems of social indignation," but "mitigated and enriched by a down-to-earth sensibility and empathy" (46). This "sensibility and empathy" begin to appear in her later, more mature poems. Her poetry also becomes more musical, working off of the definite alliteration of her early poetry as in "Bitter Black Bitterness," but containing a lyrical style resembling famous singers like Aretha Franklin and Roberta Flack, both of whom she writes about. Giovanni, embracing sound and repetition in "[Untitled] (For Margaret Danner)," sings,

“

*one ounce of truth benefits  
like ripples on a pond  
one ounce of truth benefits like a ripple  
on a pond  
one ounce of truth benefits like ripples on  
a pond  
as things change remember my smile*

”

Although Giovanni is still concerned with racial equality and similar political issues, in her later poetry, she shows a new emphasis on a universal struggle for truth, exchanging her earlier "indignation," for the individual quest for beauty. She discovers a newfound statement towards existence and poetry. In the poem "Poetry," found in *The Women and the Men* (1975), she writes: "that life is precious which is all we poets wrapped in our loneliness are trying to say" (176).



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## Biography continued

Here she expresses, as she often does in her latter poetry, how lonely life is, especially a life of poetry. Giovanni says that writing poetry “is a lonely profession” (Reid 47).

The last poems in *The Selected Poems of Nikki Giovanni*, again become political; but with a different, sensitive approach towards history. Many of these poems are dedicated to people or events which affect her life directly, such as cancer, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Billie Jean King. This sampling of poetry is controversial, like her earlier work, but less direct and demanding.

After Giovanni’s only child, Thomas Watson Giovanni, was born on August 31, 1969, she began to write children’s poetry, publishing many books from her first children’s publication, *Spin a Soft Black Song* (1971), to the recent, *The Geni in the Jar* (1996). She has also edited many anthologies and published a large amount of prose including her autobiographical work, *Gemini* (1971), and most recently, *Racism 101* (1994). It is through her brutal honesty, experience, and wisdom that Nikki Giovanni is able to compile a collection of poetry that is moving and inspiring, as well as showing the vitality of all of her literary works. In the last poem of this vast selection, “But Since You Finally Asked,” Giovanni provides a closure, clearly addressing her audience when saying,

“

*let me say: I am proud to be a Black American  
... We didn't write a constitution ... we live one  
... We turn our faces to/ the rising sun ... knowing  
... a New Day ... is always ... beginning*

”



# Nikki Giovanni

## Biography continued

This collection of poetry is a celebration of triumph over hatred and oppression. Through the perspective of someone who has survived her past and been able to write about it—a perspective only Giovanni can give—she celebrates, through words, the forbearance of the Black American. In “Nikki Giovanni: Three Decades on the Edge,” she is quoted as saying, “‘I answer to the ancestral Gods, and the people whose work means most to me came here in 1619,’ the year that the first African slaves arrived in the future United States” (47). Her poetry has changed as have her methods of writing; be it children’s poetry, conversational prose, or poetry, her main focus is her audience. Her latest work, *Blues For All the Changes* (1998), is described by Giovanni in “Three Decades on the Edge” as her “environmental piece” focused around her ongoing love for nature as well as the blues singer Alberta Hunter (47). Presently she continues to write and currently teaches at Virginia Tech.

## Biography continued

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#### Poetry

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*Cotton Candy on a Rainy Day* (1978).

*The Women and The Men* (1975).

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