

POET NIKKY FINNEY SEEKS THE FLOURISHING OF BLACK FAMILIES IN A TIME OF VIOLENT DECAY.



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For Black people in the U.S.—a collective from which lives are still stolen on a daily basis, as though the slave-boat travels of 1619 never ended but merely set course in new directions to the same destination—reclamation is essential. Perhaps our history motivated the poet Nikky Finney’s father to repurpose a phrase that long had a negative connotation into a moniker to

give his daughter positive focus.

“My mother steeped us in the stories of Black history and my father named me ‘Love Child’ in order not to give anyone else the opportunity to distract me from what I had come to earth to be,” writes Finney, winner of the 2011 National Book Award for Poetry, in her newest collection,

Poetry

Love Child’s Hotbed of Occasional Poetry. “So be she.”

And so she is. About a month into quarantine 2020, Finney released perhaps the most history-and-affection-freighted book to be published this harrowing year. *Love Child’s Hotbed* cannot be read on a Kindle. Less a typical, slender publication of modern verse, and more a hefty coffee-table book of startling import, it brings to mind *The Black Book*, that historical anthology co-edited in 1974 by Toni Morrison, the eventual Nobel laureate in literature who

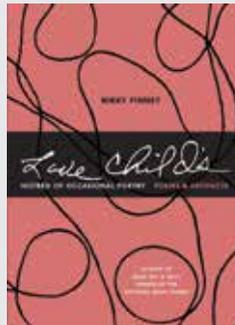


was an editor at the publishing company Random House. A book that strove to contain the vast lives of Black people in the U.S.—their horrific experiences and their magnanimous achievements—*The Black Book* was a gift to the nation’s children and grandchildren of slaves (and even inspired one of the greatest novels of all time, Morrison’s *Beloved*). Likewise, in a time of immense death and thus plundering of families, Finney’s latest book is a blessing for a continuously undone but never destroyed people, reaching into the past to grasp hope and self-worth to sustain their future.

The scope of *Love Child’s Hotbed* is smaller than that of *The Black Book*. In her collection’s introduction, Finney defines “hotbed” as “an area of decaying organic matter, heated earth ... favoring rapid growth”—and it doesn’t take long for the hotbed of her book to make itself known: It is her family. Her father, who was the first Black chief justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court. Her mother, who was an educator. Her uncle Bobby, who helped create the groundbreaking Black doll Tamu and was so bold in being who God made him to be that he brought his boyfriend home with him to South Carolina. Finney highlights these loves and more via photos, prose reflections, newspaper clippings, and, of course, poems.

Yet Finney makes clear that her family doesn’t stop at those who share her blood, but includes the white florist who spotted the Emanuel Nine shooter not long after his crimes and followed his car for 30 miles so he wouldn’t get away; the “two nuns in full Catholic regalia” boarding a plane with Finney, one Black and one white and both wearing identical wedding rings, “their love for each other ... so public and so draped in the Catholic church”; and the 14-year-old Black boy George Stinney Jr., the youngest person to be executed in the U.S. since 1786 and of whom “in 1944, a reporter from *The State* newspaper in South / Carolina wrote that [he] was walked to his / death with a Bible underneath his arm” which he is “made to sit on ... / The electric chair was made for men and George was just / a boy.”

Like a reporter, or the volunteer search team leader Finney once was during the 1979 to 1981 Atlanta child



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murders, Finney scours the land to examine whether this hotbed we call “the United States of America” can actually cultivate love—take the family values it professes to hold so dear and turn that often false and stingy devotion into American abundance.

In doing so, she guides us to the fertile soil in our front yard, reflecting on the removal of the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State House; the brave activism, art, and queerness of *A Raisin in the Sun* playwright Lorraine Hansberry (who inspired Finney to become a writer and embrace her own lesbian identity); the fight by Stinney’s surviving family to hold a corrupt criminal justice system accountable for the legal and lethal abuse inflicted upon him; and more.

COVID-19 does not appear in *Love Child’s Hotbed*; I am almost certain that Finney, like many of us, had no idea the illness 2020 would bring. But in this sickness of coronavirus and unjust fatal force by police, of bigotry and shamelessness in a White House built by Black slaves, of legal impropriety and extreme right-wing hatred so massive that it has destroyed the validity of America’s highest court and perhaps the entire governmental system from the top down, Finney does what her father hoped she would. She brings love, at a time when more than 600 migrant children are without their parents, souls separated by a presidential administration that lacks one.

“It is not taboo to fetch what is at risk of being left behind,” states the Carter G. Woodson Center in Kentucky, defining the Ghanaian word “sankofa.” Finney includes this definition in the “List of Artifacts” of *Love Child’s Hotbed* and thus makes the intention of her fifth book of poetry immensely clear. In a year, a presidency, four centuries of European conquest of Black and brown bodies during which so much has been lost, let us not forget the families we had and have, the “truth and beauty,” to quote Finney, that we, the people, hold.

“They take you from me,” Finney writes, “like it’s nothing to take you from me. Like taking you ... is not the end of my world.”

A world destroyed, and yet still-churning waters, still-sailing ships. ❖

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