



The 100 Best African American Poems

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"Hear voices contemporary and classic as selected by ""New York Times ""bestselling author Nikki Giovanni"

Award-winning poet and writer Nikki Giovanni takes on the impossible task of selecting the 100 best African American works from classic and contemporary poets. Out of necessity, Giovanni admits she cheats a little, selecting a larger, less round number.

The result is this startlingly vibrant collection that spans from historic to modern, from structured to freeform, and reflects the rich roots and visionary future of African American verse. These magnetic poems are an exciting mix of most-loved classics and daring new writing. From Gwendolyn Brooks and Langston Hughes to Tupac Shakur, Natasha Trethewey, and many others, the voice of a culture comes through in this collection, one that is as talented, diverse, and varied as its people.

African American poems are like all other poems: beautiful, loving, provocative, thoughtful, and all those other adjectives I can think of. "Poems know no boundaries." They, like all Earth citizens, were born in some country, grew up on some culture, then in their blooming became citizens of the Universe. "Poems fly from heart to heart," head to head, to whisper a dream, to share a condolence, to congratulate, and to vow forever. The poems are true. They are translated and they are celebrated. They are sung, they are recited, they are "delightful." They are neglected. They are forgotten. They are put away. Even in their fallow periods they sprout images. And fight to be revived. And spring back to life with a bit of sunshine and caring.

-Nikki Giovanni

"Read" Gwendolyn Brooks Kwame Alexander Tupac Shakur Langston Hughes Mari Evans Kevin Young
Asha Bandele Amiri Baraka

"Hear" Ruby Dee Novella Nelson Nikki Giovanni Elizabeth Alexander Marilyn Nelson Sonia Sanchez

"And many, many, more"

Nikki Giovanni is an award-winning poet, writer, and activist. She is the author of more than two dozen books for adults and children, including "Bicycles," "Quilting the Black-Eyed Pea," "Racism 101," "Blues: For All the Changes," and "Love Poems." Her children's book-plus-audio compilation "Hip Hop Speaks to Children" was awarded the NAACP Image Award. Her children's book "Rosa," a picture-book retelling of the Rosa Parks story, was a Caldecott Honor Book and winner of the Coretta Scott King Award. Both books were "New York Times" bestsellers. Nikki is a Grammy nominee for her spoken-word album "The Nikki Giovanni Poetry Collection" and has been nominated for the National Book Award. She has been voted Woman of the Year by "Essence," "Mademoiselle," and "Ladies' Home Journal." She is a University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech, where she teaches writing and literature.

The 100 Best African American Poems Details

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From Reader Review The 100 Best African American Poems for online ebook

Tom LA says

Picked up this book at bookstore and opened it randomly. The first poem I found was the following:

No images

She does not know
Her beauty,
She thinks her brown body
Has no glory.
If she could dance
Naked
Under palm trees
And see her image in the river,
She would know.

But there are no palm trees
On the street,
And dish water gives back no images.

10 seconds later, I came out of the bookstore with the book in my hand. Oh yes, I did pay for it! Anyway, many poems unfortunately are not as beautifully strong and elegant as this one, but I can say I liked a fair number of them. Some more used a lot of words to say very little. A few more others, well, with all due respect they seem to be written by people in need of a good mental hospital to take care of them. But overall, this is a good collection that provided some emotional color while I'm pushing my way through the tongue-stuck-to-your-teeth dry "Bearing the Cross", an almost day by day, pedantic biography of MLK.

Wonder says

Poetry is subjective. You should read these.

Jonathan Tennis says

Enjoyed a number of these poems. Giovanni's work editing this collection exposed me to a number of poets that I had not yet discovered. Some of the poems I really enjoyed include the following: I am a Black Woman by Mari Evans; My Father's Love Letters by Yusef Komunyakaa; Ballad of Birmingham by Dudley Randall; The Mother by Gwendolyn Brooks; Incident by Countee Cullen; Trifle by Georgia Douglas Johnson; Marchers Headed for Washington, Baltimore, 1963 by Remica L. Bingham; The Girlfriend's Train by Nikky Finney; Dancing Naked on the Floor by Kwame Alexander.

Robin Friedman says

A Poet's Anthology Of African American Poetry

African Americans have made large contributions to the literature of the United States especially in poetry. The award-winning poet Nikki Giovanni has selected for this volume 100 (or so) of the best poems written by African Americans. The book is accompanied by a CD of readings of 36 of the poems.

As Giovanni recognizes, it isn't possible for anyone to pick out the 100 "best" of a large, complex genre. Few informed readers would agree on the choice of 100 "best" poems. Furthermore, any anthology of poetry will involve considerations of subjectivity -- personal preference -- and inclusiveness -- offering works from a variety of authors, styles, and time periods -- in making the selections. So it is with this anthology.

Giovanni's book includes both personal favorites and attempts to capture part of the large range of African American poetry. Her selection is broad and fascinating. It includes many outstanding poems together with some that did not work for me and that may not appeal to every reader.

The poems are not organized in the collection on the basis of chronology or poet. They are presented in a collage-like fashion; although the opening two poems, "The Aunt" by Mari Evans and "For my People" by Margaret Walker set the tone for the volume. Evans' poem is about family and individuality while Walker's poem is more communal and political. The earliest poet included is Paul Laurence Dunbar. He is represented by two works, including a poem in dialect, "A Negro Love Song" and his most famous poem, "We Wear the Mask." Langston Hughes has the largest number of individual poems in the collection with at least eight works, including "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" and Gwendolyn Brooks is also well represented with seven poems including "We Real Cool". Other famous poets whose works are represented include Sterling Brown, Countee Cullen, Robert Hayden, James Weldon Johnson (including "Lift every Voice and Sing"), Sterling Brown, Amiri Bakara (LeRoi Jones), and more. There are six poems included by Giovanni herself, including the concluding poem of the volume "Ego Tripping". Richard Wright, better known as a novelist, is represented by an early sharply-written poem, "Between the World and Me". The Harlem Renaissance writer Waring Cuney is represented by his wonderful poem, long one of my favorites, "No Images."

There are many poems of varying themes by African American women. I enjoyed Georgia Douglas Johnson's short poems, "Trifle" and "The Heart of a Woman", Naomi Madgett's personal, "Woman with Flower", Gloria Oden's "The Carousel", Lucille Clifton's "Homage to my Hips" and June Jordan's "If you saw a Negro Lady." None of these poems were earlier familiar to me. I was especially pleased to get to know Gwendolyn Brooks' extended poem, "A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi, Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon", a ballad about the murder of Emmett Till.

Poetry should be heard and read aloud to be appreciated, and the CD accompanying this book adds a great deal. The poems are well-selected and are read with drama, passion, and spontaneity. Some of the readings are drawn from historical recordings and feature Gwendolyn Brooks and Robert Hayden reading their own poems. Giovanni and Sonia Sanchez, and Marilyn Nelson also read their own works. Most of the readings were done at Virginia Tech under Giovanni's supervision by an enthusiastic group readers including Ruby Dee and Virginia Tech's president, Dr. Charles Steger. The readings are done with spirit and offer an excellent gateway to the poems and to the art of reading aloud.

This book is a fine anthology of African American poetry including both familiar and unfamiliar selections

in a variety of styles and voices. Readers who love poetry or African American literature will enjoy this book and CD.

Robin Friedman

Kim says

Love this volume - it comes with a CD and a good number for the poets are reading their own work.

It is lovely to hear them.

Vilo says

This collection is amazing and includes a CD with various readers reading different poems. There are a few poems that are pretty raw. Most are stunning emotionally and in visual imagery. Two of my favorites are a poem about living in Boston, not knowing anyone else black, and a poem of Nikki Giovanni's that includes the line "black love is black wealth." All due respect to Ms. Giovanni, I think I could say the same of my dirt-farming white grandparents and their children (my mom and her siblings), but I agree with the idea. There are more measures of a life than we generally discuss.

Didi says

I decided to get this book because I'm lacking collections and books of poetry in my library and was won over immediately when I saw it on Kim Lechelle's You Tube channel. I felt what better way to start a collection with this one. The book was edited by Nikki Giovanni which is definitely a selling point. She has chosen some of the most poignant, lyrical, culturally rich poems by some of the most prominent writers from the African-American community - some gone for many years and others still alive today. The poems are direct and full of feeling and emotions that follow the history of African-Americans through the years. At times I found some of the poems a little too sad but I accepted their realness and the history they depict and quickly left that critic on the back burner. The thing that really won me over the most about this book was the CD that accompanied it. All the poems came alive for me even more. Some I've listened to quite a few times because they were recited in such a vivacious, tangible fashion. Two of my favourite poems are Who Can Be Born Black? by Mari Evans and A Bronzeville Mother Loiters in Mississippi. Meanwhile, A Mississippi Mother Burns Bacon by Gwendolyn Brooks (extremely well recited on the CD). I give this book 3,5 stars. Check it out!

Chris says

Powerful. Masterful. Each of these packed a punch and made me wish I had known more than the few of these poems I already did. My personal favorite is Bicycles by Nikki Giovanni, not sure why but it really was amazing. I love the color and vibrance and doubts and fear these poems show. It's something to see vulnerable hearts create art.

Amy says

I'm not a huge fan of poetry, but this was pretty good.

My favorites were:

Lift Every Voice and Sing by James Weldon Johnson

Ballad of Birmingham by Dudley Randall

View of the Library of Congress from Paul Laurence Dunbar High School by Thomas Sayers Ellis

Dusky Literati says

Poet Nikki Giovanni is the editor of this anthology of The 100 Best African American Poems. However, there is an asterisk and small type indicating “but I cheated” and that’s because the book actually contains 221 poems. The compilation covers the gamut from classic to contemporary poems and include works by Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Kevin Young, Mari Evans, Haki R. Madhubuti , Kwame Alexander, Tupac Shakar, among others. Also included with the book, is a companion audio CD that contains 36 of the poems being read by their authors (Giovanni, Gwendolyn Brooks, Elizabeth Alexander, and Sonia Sanchez) and other notables such as actresses Ruby Dee and Novella Nelson. The collection is nominated for a NAACP Image Award.

There are two poems by Tupac Shakur in the book and a couple of interviewers have concentrated on this fact. Last week, I listened to an NPR interview with Giovanni and learned she has a “Thug Life” tattoo on her left arm because she was distressed at the death of Tupac and wanted to find a way to express it. She feels that Tupac is important culturally to black America and she wanted to find some solidarity with his generation. While I don’t disagree that there are rappers/musicians who are poets (Mos Def, Jill Scott, Ursula Rucker, The Last Poets, Saul Williams, etc.) including Tupac, I personally don’t get the celebration of the “Thug Life” with a tattoo. Just saying.

One quarter of the poems are by contemporary poets including the current National Book Award winner Terrance Hayes. While some of my personal favorites are missing (i.e., Gil Scott-Heron, Askia Toure, Ishmael Reed, Sekou Sundiata, Ai, and Melvin Tolson), I have discovered several new poets, including Camille T. Dungy and Major Jackson. The best thing about this collection of poetry is being able to hear several of the poems being read. I’ve always felt poetry was best experienced when read aloud to truly understand the rhythm and cadence inherent in the lines. I particularly enjoyed the majestic reading of James Weldon Johnson’s “The Creation” by Terry L. Papillon, the poignancy in discussing abortion in Ruby Dee’s reading of “The Mother” by Gwendolyn Brooks, the sassiness of “Homage to My Hips” by Lucille Clifton read by Ennis McCrery, and the jazzy delivery of “Nikki, If You Were A Song...” by Kwame Alexander read by Novella Nelson. I think this is an excellent introduction to a wide range of poetry from African Americans.

Wendy says

I wasn't able to give this collection the time and contemplation it deserves before it was due back at the library, but--speaking as someone who's intimidated by poetry--the poems in this book are beautiful, heart-breaking (and at times funny), and wonderfully varied. There are a few well known poems, but more that I wasn't familiar with. There were poems I could relate to on a deep level, poems that educated me, and poems that mystified and eluded me. This is #ownvoices writing in all its glory. An African American would get an entirely different experience from reading this volume, but I needed the window.

Lori says

In my opinion, Nikki Giovanni represents one of the best modern poets of the 20th and 21st centuries. So when she edits or publishes a book of poems, I pick up a copy and peruse the content. She includes poetry with an eclectic blend of beloved poets such as Gwendolyn Brooks, Lucille Clifton, Langston Hughes, and Richard Wright. And of course, Nikki Giovanni includes a sampling of her own poems to delight avid fans like me.

Another bonus with this book is that there is a companion CD featuring readings by Nikki Giovanni and other poets.

Zanna says

Just sharing a few of my own favourites from this. It comes with a CD =)
<3 Nikki Giovanni <3

The Girlfriend's Train

Nikky Finney

“You write like a Black woman who’s never been hit before.”

I read poetry in Philly
for the first time ever.
She started walking up,
all the way, from in back
of the room.

From against the wall
she came,
big coat, boots,
eyes soft as candles
in two storms blowing.

Something she could not see
from way back there but
could clearly hear in my voice,

something she needed to know
before pouring herself back out
into the icy city night.

She came close to get a good look,
to ask me something she found
in a strange way missing
from my Black woman poetry.

Sidestepping the crowd
ignoring the book signing line,
she stood there waiting
for everyone to go, waiting
like some kind of Representative.

And when it was just the two of us
She stepped into the shoes of her words:
Hey,

You write real soft.
Spell it out kind.
No bullet holes,
No open wounds,
In your words.
How you do that?
Write like you never been hit before?
But I could hardly speak,
all my breath held ransom
by her question.

I looked at her and knew:
There was a train on pause somewhere,
maybe just outside the back door
where she had stood, listening.

A train with boxcars
that she was escorting somewhere,
when she heard about the reading.

A train with boxcars
carrying broken women's bodies,
their carved up legs with bullet riddled
stomachs momentarily on pause
from moving cross country.

Women's bodies;
brown, black and blue,
laying right where coal, cars,
and cattle usually do.

She needed my answer
for herself and for them too.
Hey,

We were just wondering
how you made it through
and we didn't?

I shook my head.
I had never thought about
having never been hit
and what it might have
made me sound like.

You know how many times I been stabbed?

She raised her blouse
all the way above her breasts,
the cuts on her resembling
some kind of grotesque wallpaper.

How many women are there like you?
Then I knew for sure.

She had been sent in from the Philly cold,
by the others on the train,
to listen, stand up close,
to make me out as best she could.

She put my hand overtop hers
asked could we stand up
straight back to straight back,
measure out our differences
right then and there.

She gathered it all up,
wrote down the things she could,
remembering the rest to the trainload
of us waiting out back for answers.
Full to the brim with every age
of woman, every neighborhood
of woman, whose name
had already been forgotten.

The train blew his whistle,
she started to hurry.

I moved towards her
and we stood back to back,

her hand grazing the top
of our heads,
my hand measuring out
our same widths,
each of us recognizing
the brown woman latitudes,
the Black woman longitudes
in the other.

I turned around
held up my shirt
and brought my smooth belly
into her scarred one;
our navels pressing,
marking out some kind of new
Equatorial line.

Cleaning

Camille J Dungy

I learned regret at Mother's sink,
Jarred tomatoes, river-mid brown,
A generation old, lumping
Down the drain. Hating wasted space,
I had discarded what I could
Not understand. I hadn't known
A woman to fight drought or frost
For the promise of winter meals,
Hadn't known my great-grandmother,
Or what it was to have then lose
The company of that woman
Who, upon seeing her namesake,
Child of her child, grown and gliding
Into marriage, gifted the fruit
Of her garden, a hard-won strike
Against want. Opening the jar,
I knew nothing of the rotting
Effect, the twisting grip of years
Spent packing, or years spent moving,
Further each time, from known comforts:
A grandmother's garden, her rows
Always neat, the harvest: bright wealth
Mother hoarded. I understood
Only the danger of a date
So old. Understanding clearly
What is fatal to the body,
I only understood too late
What can be fatal to the heart

Thomas Sayers Ellis: All Their Stanzas Look Alike

Nikki-Rosa

Nikki Giovanni

Childhood remembrances are always a drag
If you're Black
You always remember things like living in Woodlawn
With no inside toilet
And if you become famous or something
They never talk about how happy you were to have
Your mother
All to yourself and
How good the water felt when you got your bath
From one of those big tubs that folk in Chicago barbecue in
And somehow when you talk about home
It never gets across how much you
Understood their feelings
As the whole family attended meetings about Hollydale
And even though you remember
Your biographers never understand
Your father's pain as he sells his stock
And another dream goes
And though you're poor it isn't poverty that
Concerns you
And though they fought a lot
It isn't your father's drinking that makes any difference
But only that everybody is together and you
And your sister have happy birthdays and very good
Christmases
And I really hope no white person ever has cause
To write about me
Because they never understand
Black love is black wealth and they'll
Probably talk about my hard childhood
And never understand that
All the while I was happy

We Real Cool

Gwendolyn Brooks

The Pool Players.
Seven at the Golden Shovel

We real cool. We
Left school. We

Lurk late. We
Strike straight. We

Sing sin. We
Thin gin. We

Jazz June. We
Die soon.

Nikki Giovanni: Train Rides - In Praise of Black Men

The Supremes

Cornelius Eady

We were born to be gray. We went to school,
Sat in rows, ate white bread,
Looked at the floor a lot. In the back
Of our small heads

A long scream. We did what we could,
And all we could do was
Turn on each other. How the fat kids suffered!
Not even being jolly could save them.

And then there were the anal retentive,
The terrified brown-noses, the desperately
Athletic or popular. This, of course,
Was training. At home

Our parents shook their heads and waited.
We learned of the industrial revolution,
The sectioning of the clock into pie slices.
We drank cokes and twiddled our thumbs. In the
Back of our minds

A long scream. We snapped butts in the showers,
Froze out shy girls on the dance floor,
Pinpointed flaws like radar.
Slowly we understood: this was to be the world.

We were born insurance salesmen and secretaries,
Housewives and short order cooks,
Stockroom boys and repairmen,
And it wouldn't be a bad life, they promised,
In a tone of voice that would force some of us
To reach in self-defense for wigs,
Lipstick,

Sequins.

William says

Rather than a selection of the 100 "Best" (whatever that means), it's better to think of these as something of a sampler. The collection presents a solid mix of classic African-American work with newer, slam and hip hop infused material. Uniting the work is a certain aural orientation: these are all poems meant to be heard, to be read aloud. Among the newer voices, Kwame Alexander is a very nice find. His "Dancing Naked on the Floor" has a strong Spoken Word aspect, the sort that had me warning to keep sharing the poem with friends. Another bold voice is that of Asha Bandele, whose "Subtle Art of Breathing" also brings a combination of performance and politics as she considers the death of a young woman.

Terry says

For devoted poetry readers or scholars of African American culture, this isn't anything shocking. The expected choir assembles: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Paul Laurence Dunbar, Gwendolyn Brooks, Rita Dove, Amiri Baraka, Tupac Shakur. The editor is bold/brazen enough to include six of her own works. And so who might appreciate this collection?

People who aren't yet over-educated. As an informal introduction, it is excellent. As an entry into poetry in general and African American voices in particular, it is wonderful. Most of the poems are top-notch; I delighted in Akua Lezli Hope's "Song Through the Wall" and Toi Derricotte's "Before Making Love". Printz Award-winner Kwame Alexander is represented, some years before his wider success. I'm so glad I picked this up.
