

NIKKI GIOVANNI

b. June 7, 1943

d. December 9, 2024

CELEBRATED POET & AUTHOR

She was one of the world's best-known children's authors and African American poets.

"If you don't understand yourself, you don't understand anybody else."

Nikki Giovanni was a professor, an activist, a children's author, and one of the world's best-known African American poets, revered for her deeply personal social commentary on race, gender, and sexuality.

Yolande Cornelia "Nikki" Giovanni Jr. was born in Knoxville, Tennessee, and raised in Cincinnati, Ohio. Seeing her father abuse her mother shaped Giovanni's fiercely feminist worldview. She left home at 15, returning to Knoxville to live with her grandparents.

In 1960, Fisk University in Nashville accepted Giovanni as an early entrant, allowing her to start college without completing high school. After a forced hiatus, she earned her degree in history with honors in 1967. When her grandmother died shortly thereafter, Giovanni started writing poetry to process her grief.

In 1968, Giovanni self-published her first book, "Black Feeling Black Talk." It included her most famous poem, "Nikki-Rosa," about her childhood. In 1969, she became a single mother by choice, giving birth to her only child, Thomas.

Giovanni quickly became a luminary in the Black Arts Movement, often performing her poetry with gospel choir accompaniment. She toured widely and appeared on television, most notably at age 28 in a groundbreaking conversation with the author and activist James Baldwin, during which she discussed Black women's treatment by their Black husbands.

By 30, Giovanni was selling out major venues, including 3,000 seats at Lincoln Center in New York. In 1970, she cofounded a publishing company, NikTom Ltd, to support Black female writers. Her memoir "Gemini," released in 1973, was a National Book Award finalist.

Around this time, Giovanni began teaching. She worked at several colleges before Virginia Fowler, associate head of the English department at Virginia Tech, recruited her in 1987. The two entered a long-term relationship and married in 2016.

In 2007, one of Giovanni's former Virginia Tech students carried out a mass shooting on campus, killing 32 people. Giovanni's address to the student body the next day, delivered with President George W. Bush in attendance, received a standing ovation.

Over her lifetime, Giovanni published numerous poetry anthologies, a dozen children's books—including a Caldecott Honor winner—and several spoken-word albums, including a 2004 Grammy-nominated poetry collection. Her many accolades included 20 honorary doctorates, seven NAACP Image Awards, and Governor's Awards from two states. She was repeatedly celebrated in the media and named one of Oprah Winfrey's 25 Living Legends.

Giovanni retired from Virginia Tech in 2022. She died two years later, after battling lung cancer for more than a decade. Her final poetry collection, "The Last Book," was released in 2025.

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