

Children's Book Review

Giovanni, Nikki (2007). *On my journey now: Looking at African-American history through the spirituals*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press. 128pp., ISBN: 9780763628857(hc). \$18.99. (Ages 12+)

Reviewed by Lauren Brothers, Rutgers University

Nikki Giovanni makes her story about slavery and civil rights both captivating and original by weaving together the history of slavery in America with the beautiful and poignant spirituals sung at the time. The story begins with a forward from Arthur C. Jones, of the Spirituals Project. He notes of Giovanni's purpose, "Nobody knows specifically when or where particular spirituals were created and sung. Rather than speculating on this, Nikki simply points out the universal meaning of the songs and how they illustrate the challenges that enslaved Africans faced in dealing with their captors" (p. xi).

The characters in *On My Journey Now* are the men and women who were ripped from their homes in Africa, forced on board ships, and brought to America to be sold into a life of slavery. The setting is historical America at this time. However, instead of focusing on the atrocities committed by slave masters, Giovanni takes a different approach. In telling the stories of the Middle Passage, religion, slavery, the Civil War, and escape, she poetically laces her narrative with the lyrics of the spirituals.

In her text, Giovanni reflects on the capacity of spirituals to help slaves cope with their emotions and accomplish otherwise impossible tasks. She observes that spirituals were sung to maintain a meaningful transcendental identity: "If anybody asks you who I am, / Tell them I'm a child of God" (p. 9). She relates spirituals to the success of the Underground Railroad: "The riverbank makes a very good road; / The dead trees will show you the way. / Left foot, peg foot traveling on, / Following the drinking gourd" (p. 16). Giovanni tells how slaves sang about specific routes such as this one that used the "drinking gourd" (the Big Dipper) as a compass. She contemplates the idea that spirituals and religion were used to pass along ideas. Groups of slaves were forbidden to congregate, but through the practice of Christianity the African slaves were able to meet, sing, and spread coded messages without attracting suspicion. Giovanni marvels at how from an otherwise powerless position, slaves were able to practice their religion, to plan escape, and to spread messages: in other words, to make their mark on the world.

Using the spiritual as a guide, Giovanni ends her book on a note of hope. In the last chapter, "Spirituals Today and Tomorrow," she argues that the spirituals still relate to us today. She writes, "I think slavery is such a key to the twenty-first century. As we are going into this new century, we must recognize it

is time to embrace all of us” (p. 64). She wonders passionately about “why [we]...are doing these old racist things? Why are we living in that place that was no good when it was the new idea and it is all the worse now that it is the old one.” She concludes that “it is time we quit considering people on earth as aliens...I just don’t believe everything is out there to kill us. I think that we are out there to kill what we don’t understand, because that is what we do here. It has got to stop” (p. 66-67).

This book is unique in its style and approach. Giovanni is known for her beautiful and meaningful poetry, but in this story she is able to meld prose with poetry - narrative with songs – to create a lasting and memorable account of slave life in America before (and after) the Civil War. Giovanni’s attitude toward the people she writes about is one of utmost respect, admiration, and awe. She wonders how the slaves found the strength to endure and to lead emotionally rich and hope-filled lives. She speculates much of it is owed to the spirituals.

The book concludes with full lyrics of the spirituals cited within the text. In addition, Giovanni has added a glossary of names and terms mentioned in her story and those that are significant from this time period. She also lists her extensive bibliography and source notes that add to the authenticity of the book in hand.