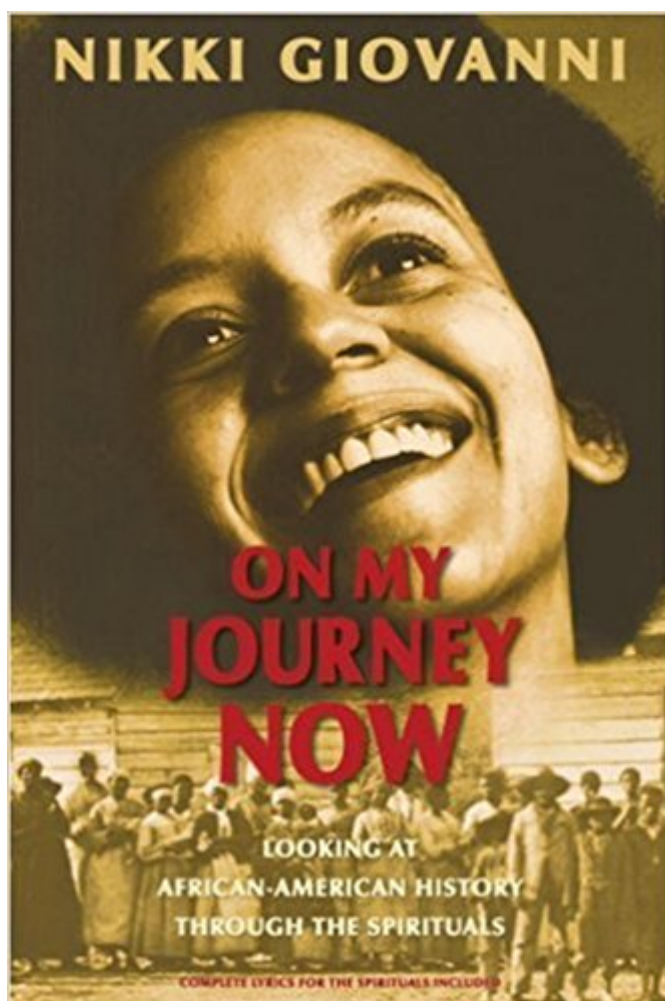


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# On My Journey Now: Looking At African-American History Through The Spirituals



## Synopsis

"The intimate, unpretentious talk about familiar songs will grab readers, who will want to find out more about the inspiring history." [• BOOKLIST](#) (starred review) Ever since she was a little girl attending three different churches, poet Nikki Giovanni has loved the spirituals. Now, with the passion of a poet and the knowledge of a historian, she paints compelling portraits of the lives of her ancestors through the words of songs such as "Go Down, Moses" and "Ain't Got Time to Die," celebrating a people who overcame enslavement and found a way to survive, to worship, and to build.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 12 and up

Grade Level: 7 and up

## Customer Reviews

**Grade 8 Up** [•](#) The songs written and first sung by African-American slaves were inspired by a host of human needs: to express emotion, to call God, to remain heartened under oppression, and, perhaps most importantly, to communicate covertly, often about the Underground Railroad.

Giovanni brings these motives home in this short, impressionistic look at the lives of the slaves, beginning with their holding in places such as Cape Coast Castle and Goree Island, through the end of the Civil War, when members of divided families desperately attempted to track one another down. Giovanni is a poet, and the book has cadence; in tone, it almost reads like the transcript of a

speech or sermon, as the author is generous with her own opinions and often refers to herself within the text. The spirituals themselves are thoughtfully placed and their complete lyrics are printed as back matter but Giovanni doesn't always effectively connect the songs to the travails they are meant to communicate. Light on dates, time lines, or political explanations, this is neither a thorough nor an academic history; rather, it is an invitation for readers to look into the lives of figures such as Nat Turner and Frederick Douglass, and events such as the Stono uprising and the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act. A glossary of terms will get them started. Denise Ryan, Middlesex Middle School, Darien, CT Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

**\*Starred Review\*** Personal and passionate, Giovanni's short narrative talks about the sacred songs first sung by slaves, tracing how the people in bondage created the great spirituals to tell their stories, and what the songs still mean to us today. She addresses the horror of people torn from home and from family, Africans in America bought and sold, those who escaped, and those who stayed, and the wonder of how they made songs about their work. She analyzes the words for messages of defiance, whether it is Nat Turner's "Steal Away" or the angry demand of "Before I'd be a slave / I'd be buried in my grave

With her opening words, author Nikki Giovanni imparts truth needed by all readers as a context for the spirituals. "We say that the slavers went to Africa to get the slaves, which is far from true. The slavers went to Africa to get Africans to make them slaves." How did free people, with their own cultures, their own families, their own everything survive and remain sane when overpowered and raped of everything? Captured and ruptured, how did they survive and even thrive? Giovanni, award-winning author of "Rosa," and University Distinguished Professor at Virginia Tech, provides a core answer. It was through the co-created, spontaneous spirituals by which African Americans proclaimed, "I'm a child of God!" As her aptly chosen subtitle suggests, "On My Journey Home" looks at African American history through the spirituals. Giovanni takes her readers on a journey from capture, to auction block, to daily hardships, escape, community building, the Invisible Institution, Sunday worship, heavenly hope, Emancipation, the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the present, and even to the future. Giovanni makes the vital point that we sing the slave spirituals as "cute children's songs," forgetting the depth, the pain, the passion, and the meaning that drove their creation and their singing. Build through the blending of Old Testament deliverance themes, New Testament redemption themes, and the pressing need for shared hope, these songs of Christian

faith were anything but cute, though they did evidence the trusting faith of a child in a good Father. Nor were these songs "polite." Often, subtly so, they challenged the hypocrisy of their Christian masters with words such as "Everybody talkin' `bout heaven ain't going there." Giovanni has it right. The African American Christians "didn't just write the songs, they lived them." To understand African American history is to understand the slave spirituals and to understand the slave spirituals is to understand African American history. This is the gift of "On my Journey Now." Reviewer: Bob Kelleman, Ph.D., is the author of "Beyond the Suffering: Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction," "Soul Physicians," and "Spiritual Friends."

While researching the 'Spirituals' I came across this book at the library. This is a recent publication (2007). It contains lyrics to some truly beautiful worship songs sung by African slaves in the US. The accounts of the lives of slaves written here help us today to grasp the magnitude of this part of history. Slavery still exists in many parts of the world. Why humans turn against other humans can only be explained by the Bible's teaching of sinful human nature. We need to stretch to empathize with these people and their recovery process. Unfortunately, some things in this book are not accurate. Ms. Giovanni states that the God of the Bible is not just, but merciful. This is untrue. If you read the Bible you learn that this God is just AND merciful. He is not more merciful than he is just. Also, He is not more just than he is merciful. He is perfectly merciful and perfectly just; equally. This is a common false teaching. God's justice was satisfied with Jesus' sacrifice of himself as a substitute. He paid the cost for people. It's not like God said, "Oh, never mind, forget it." His mercy is evidenced by his own provision for a substitute when people did not deserve it by their own doing. That's what grace is; love that is undeserved. The Gospel story is the perfect combination of God's mercy AND justice. Also, history teaches us that Africans learned about the God of the Holy Bible from their captors. This author suggests Africans held to Christian beliefs before contact with white people, as evidenced by the content of their songs. Was the Gospel spread throughout Africa and already a cultivated belief? Are our textbooks wrong? I know there was a man from Ethiopia mentioned in the book of Acts. Could this be true? Please share. My desire to learn Negro Spirituals and understand more about lives as slaves was unsatisfied with this account. It was too tainted with inaccuracies. I will keep looking for accounts that reflect a more honest rendering.

I am planning a church-based course on Black theology in African American spirituals. Nikki Giovanni's unique treatment will be enriching for participants.

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