

Book Reviews

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ON THE SHOULDERS OF GIANTS: My Journey Through the Harlem Renaissance

By Kareem Abdul-Jabbar with Raymond Obstfeld

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Reviewed by Amy Alexander, author of "Fifty Black Women Who Changed America." Her reviews appear monthly in The Washington Post Style Section.

In "On the Shoulders of Giants," Kareem Abdul-Jabbar continues his intriguing evolution from iconic professional athlete to astute cultural historian. By mixing personal anecdotes with traditional research and reporting, he acts as a knowledgeable, passionate tour guide through the artistic and social history of one America's most dynamic creative eras.

Along the way, Abdul-Jabbar depicts his own introduction to the work of Claude McKay, Zora Neale Hurston, Duke Ellington and dozens of other artistic lights who glittered for two decades in the two square miles of upper Manhattan.

"I am a Harlem Renaissance Man," he writes, "not because of my achievements, but because of my goals. And right now, my goal as a writer is to offer books that use the past to illuminate the future. To unearth and put on display all the broad, black shoulders for future generations to climb upon and see what they are capable of."

Writing in straightforward language buttressed by evocative imagery and solid research, Abdul-Jabbar makes the case that all Americans would be diminished if we let the rich history of creative accomplishment that flourished in Harlem between the 1920s and mid-'40s slip away. "If the Harlem Renaissance teaches us anything, it is to see each of (those artists) as a human being, not just an icon of color. And to marvel that sometimes human beings can translate into words the chaos of passions, frustrations, and

hopes we hold for the future."

For Abdul-Jabbar, born Lew Alcindor in Harlem in 1947, the early spark of interest in those artists came unexpectedly, through a single, unhappy event in his comfortably middle-class life. In the summer of 1964, the 17-year-old loped into a public library in Harlem. He had passed the six-foot mark in his early teens and already had gained quite a reputation on neighborhood basketball courts. His family had moved from Harlem to a racially integrated Manhattan neighborhood, Inwood, when he was 3, but he returned regularly to Harlem.

At that time, only vaguely aware of the rich cultural history of the area and a bit sheltered from racial strife by his overachieving parents -- his father, the son of Trinidadian immigrants, was a Juilliard-educated jazz musician -- he had begun questioning his racial identity. On that summer day, the talented, sensitive boy -- who later changed his name, developed the "sky hook" shot and became the top scorer in the history of the National Basketball Association -- was feeling a mite disillusioned.

He had spent the previous two summers at an elite basketball camp, but during the summer of '64, he cut short his stay.

Months earlier, Jack Donahue, his coach at Power Memorial High School, and the "friend" who guided his growing court skills and fielded the inevitable avalanche of come-ons from college basketball recruiters, had hurled a notorious insult at him during a timeout.

"We were playing St. Helena's, a team we should have been beating soundly. But we were up by only six points," Abdul-Jabbar writes. "After berating the entire team, (Donahue) pointed an accusing finger at me and said, 'And you! You go out there and you don't hustle. You don't move. You don't do any of the things you're supposed to do. You're acting just like a nigger!'" After the game, which Abdul-Jabbar's team won, the coach told him, "I knew that if I used that word, it'd shock you into a good second half. And it did."

But that ill-advised motivational talk also led Abdul-Jabbar to leave Donahue's summer basketball camp early in favor of a stint at the city-sponsored Harlem Youth Action project. Young Abdul-Jabbar's assignment on the summer program's newspaper brought him to the doorstep of the public library on 135th Street -- not just any old branch of the New York Public Library, but the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

And it was there that he first read the works of Countee Cullen, James Weldon Johnson and Wallace Thurman. Moreover, the administrator charged with overseeing that section of the summer program was John Henrik Clarke, a leading black historian. Not surprisingly, after Donahue had "betrayed" Abdul-Jabbar, Clarke became his most trusted mentor.

The structure of "Giants" is a bit odd: Several early chapters are written as historic backgrounders and outline the demographic and political history of the Great Black Migration, and of African Americans' involvement in the military during World War I. They provide necessary context, but there is a somewhat uncomfortable intermingling of sociological reporting -- supporting the contention that Harlem's creative bent sprang from poverty and class and racial discrimination -- and uplifting stories of Renaissance notables making the best of their tenuous realities.

"Everyone wanted a piece of paradise," Abdul-Jabbar writes. "But the constant influx of black immigrants from the South and West Indies caused such overcrowding that residents were forced to face a whole new set of challenges." Between 1923 and 1927, he notes, the mortality rate from tuberculosis among white New Yorkers was 76 per 100,000, while for black Harlem residents it was 183 per 100,000. Such eye-catching -- but lightly sourced -- details are described before Abdul-Jabbar's more inspirational remembrances of Harlem's creative legacy. But, with his enthusiastic voice, the overall effect is uplifting.

With this vivid journey -- which includes a primer on the famous Harlem Rens, the legendary all-black basketball squad that lent some muscle to the literary and artistic scene at the height of the Renaissance years -- Abdul-Jabbar continues his scholarly winning streak.

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