

Proud: My Fight for an Unlikely American Dream

Ibtihaj Muhammad with Lori Tharps
New York: Hachette Books, 2018. 288 pages.

Ibtihaj Muhammad, the US Olympic medalist, shares her story of becoming an athlete in her book titled *Proud*. This is a memoir about coming of age in America as an African American Muslim Woman. Ibtihaj Muhammad tells her story of the long and rocky journey she has been on to become the first Muslim, person of color, female athlete. Her story is filled with achievements and excitements as well as distresses and disappointments.

Ibtihaj shares some of the rawest and intimate details of her childhood, familial, and social relationships. Growing up, her parents were adamant about their children playing sports while maintaining strong academic standing. Ibtihaj's mom encouraged her to try fencing as the dress code wouldn't interfere with her ability to play. Fencing was not Ibtihaj's first choice, but she grew to love the sport after giving it another chance. She fenced throughout her high school career. In addition to training with her high school coach Mustilli and peers, she received training from the Peter Westbrook Foundation in NYC. On completing high school, she furthered her education at Duke University while playing for their fencing team. Ibtihaj decided to take a break from fencing towards the end of her college career. It was not long after she had graduated from Duke University that both Ibtihaj and fencing found their way back to each other. Ibtihaj had carved a space for herself in the fencing community and it only made sense for her to pursue her passion.

Fencing is a not an easily accessible sport, being reserved for the wealthy and for the pre-dominantly white. Ibtihaj shares her experiences in the most raw and authentic manner. The emotional and physical roller coaster ride Ibtihaj endured while training for placement on the Team USA is eye opening. By sharing her experience, it allowed for her audience to see the challenges faced in making a space for herself as an American Black Muslim Woman—embodying identities that are underrepresented and silenced in current society. Ibtihaj notes every detail of her experience providing a wider context of the events as they take place. This approach is valuable for the readers to better connect to Ibtihaj beyond her celebrity status.

Ibtihaj's story shows her resolve. Throughout her journey she met many roadblocks, ranging from racial discrimination to gender and religious

discrimination. Her willpower to keep pushing despite those aggressions is praiseworthy. It is also important to note that Ibtihaj documents her failures, which is so valuable in the current, overly photo-shopped society. The physical strength and the mental stamina to become a professional saber fencer did not come naturally to her. Rather, it was her determination and constant hard work that led her to reap the fruits of her labor.

Her grace in handling toxic situations is admirable. She acknowledges her lack of responses to negative interactions which in turn deeply impacted her mental well-being (spilling over into her physical health). Ibtihaj opens up about her battle with mental health issues while training. She is forward in talking about her depression and managing her anxiety. Her decision to share her mental health experience is a brave one, in the current climate of stigmatization.

It is important for scholars to read about events as told by people experiencing discrimination at the forefront. Personal storytelling in the form of memoirs allows individuals to share their experiences with a larger audience and empowers them to find their voices. Ibtihaj's memoir allows its reader to see the cognitive load of being a woman who happens to be Black, identifies as a Muslim, and has chosen to play a sport that is lagging in racial diversity. And if having those identities is not challenge enough, the rising racist and xenophobic environment in the US has made it even more problematic for her to work towards important matters. For instance, Ibtihaj's interview experience with a prestigious NYC law firm displayed that indirect biases exist in places that otherwise would be beacons of progressive thought and diversity. Her interviewer directly questioned whether her headcover would impact her given the demands of the firm's work ethic and environment. It was implied that her faith identity would interfere with her work. This is a reminder of the microaggressions that are faced by Muslims in various industries.

The memoir shows the extent of social and institutional bigotry that exists; also the impact that bigotry has on the mental health of the minorities within the US. Those situated within academia can use this book not only as a confirmation of various biases but also as a stepping stone to advocate for women and men who are a racial minority and belong to a marginalized faith group.

Ibtihaj's honest writing is refreshing and makes it easy to relate to her. She represents her multiple identities in self-loving, humble, and respectful manner. She acknowledges the privileges and opportunities she has had. She is mindful of the platform she has been given due to her success in the

fencing realm and uses it to advocate for critical matters. She consistently expresses her gratitude towards her parents, family, trainers, mentors, and many other figures who supported her throughout her process so she can achieve her dream of becoming an Olympian.

Proud is a must-read memoir to understand the lived experiences of minority figures working to make a space for themselves in the mainstream. It shows the hurdles experienced by individuals with multiple marginalized identities, and the need to break down the barriers in communities and institutions that turn away people of color from achieving their ambitions. It is important to share her story about pushing back societal resistance and rising above when many bet on her to fail. Her story is the ray of hope much needed for our current hate-filled climate in the US. She serves as a unique role model, for young and old alike, to show that persistence and hard work can help achieve one's most heartfelt ambitions.

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