

Book Review: *Straight Shooter* by Stephen A. Smith

.....

Stephen A. Smith. *Straight Shooter: A Memoir of Second Chances and First Takes*. Gallery Books/13A, 2023. 288 pages. ISBN: 978-1982189495

Most people who follow sports are familiar with the journalist Stephen A. Smith; however, behind the bravado, there is a willingness for Smith to share his vulnerabilities, insecurities, and experiences in *Straight Shooter: A Memoir of Second Chances and First Takes*. In this riveting autobiography, the Hollis Queens, NY native perseveres from a learning deficiency to emotionally navigating the relationships in his life. One does not need to be a part of the sports culture to be captivated by the events which entail Smith's life. Although an autobiography, *Straight Shooter* captures the essence of a novel, while the author's openness immerses the reader within the text. The persona that social media and national television platforms construct of Smith differs from the individual in *Straight Shooter*. One will not expect the difficulties he endures, whether self-inflicted or a product of the environment, and the salience of being a Black man in society with the ambition to succeed.

From the beginning chapters, Smith introduces the family dynamics and the strife that his present but detached father plays in his upbringing. There is humility in the moments of his life that gives the reader a sense of place and compassion. As a youth, Smith dealt with the banter of neighborhood children for being held back in third and fourth grades. He reflects on these moments that contribute to the develop-

ment of his insecurities. The writer's words bring the realism of a child's emotional vulnerability as his mother and father discuss their child's future. Smith recalls, "My mother must have heard one of my sobs and peeked out the window. She cringed when she realized I'd overheard every word that my dad had said about me" (21). Unbeknownst to the Smith family, society and educational professionals in academia determined Smith's condition to be reading deficiency; however, back then, his "problem wasn't labeled dyslexia yet" (22). He details how his sister and friend's brother spent time tutoring him. Yet *Straight Shooter* delivers a social fabric of the past that frames his experiences growing up in Hollis Queens, New York, before leaving for college.

In time, Smith will develop a talent in basketball as it provides solitude from the world and a scholarship to Winston-Salem State University in North Carolina, an HBCU, which galvanizes his career in journalism. He discusses the first impression of Winston-Salem State being "a revelation. I was surrounded by Blackness—proud Blackness. It was different than growing up in a Black neighborhood in New York City" (60). *Straight Shooter* chronicles the perception of reality for Smith, and emphasizes the significance of Black identity with a moral compass to uplift each other in society. However, known for his bravado, Smith challenges the conventions of protecting one's reputation by writing a controversial piece calling for the replacement of Coach Gaines. The same Coach Gaines that was a mentor and father figure which Smith once played basketball for at Winston-Salem. The reader can extract from Smith's act the belief in one's morals and ethics that shape character. Coach Gaines validates Stephen's courage and states, "The boy told me to my face he wanted me to retire . . . He's an aspiring journalist who prides himself on calling it as he sees it" (73). The reciprocation of

respect is what Smith develops at Winston-Salem as part of his character. In the book, Stephen constantly discusses the personal battles that contribute to the vulnerability and insecurities that journalism expels to allow his confidence to persevere.

Over time, the ambitious journalist writes for rags and journals and establishes a prominent reputation as a sports columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, then as a sports analyst for ESPN. In the social consciousness of inclusive and exclusive language, Smith will learn that his confident voice can be detrimental. *Straight Shooter* captures the contemporary time of social consciousness and ideologies in a shifting society. As a representative of ESPN, the consideration of language sensitivity impacts Smith's hot takes on topics regarding the culture of sports: the Ray Rice incident of domestic abuse, remarks to Ayesha Curry's (actress, author, and wife to NBA player Steph Curry) Twitter response, and criticism of Japanese-born Shohei Ohtani as a potential face of the MLB. Smith's forthright commentary led to his termination from the network and backlash from communities that represent the marginalization of women along with the Asian ethnic culture. Smith reflects on these incidents and conceptualizes their position with his placement as a Black man in society. Readers of *Straight Shooter* are privy to Smith's innermost thoughts and how each event calls for strength and accountability.

Lastly, the autobiography does not circumvent the truth which readers will embrace in knowing who Stephen A. Smith is. What is particularly interesting is the narrative framework of the past, which at times breaks the temporality with present commentary. Furthermore, *Straight Shooter* is a compelling read as Smith's thoughts on contemporary issues,

such as former President Trump's January 6, 2021 attempted insurrection. Another pinnacle event is his reaction to falling ill with Covid-19 and assessing the importance of life and fatherhood. There is no shortage of emotions and Smith's experiences will resonate with readers.

Reviewed by Louie Galvan
University of Nevada, Las Vegas