

Wilma Rudolph. *Wilma*. (New York: New American Library, 1977) 172 pp., \$2.25 paper.

In 1960 at the 18th modern Olympiad in Rome, Wilma Rudolph, twenty-years-old and black from Clarksville, Tennessee, became the first American woman to win three Olympic gold medals. Having experienced physical handicaps, racial prejudice, and bitter poverty, she had stretched her natural abilities to become the fastest woman runner of her day. Subsequently she received plenty of promotion but little cash, and her message calls attention to the precarious emotional and financial status of black American women, especially black American women athletes. This autobiography (Martin Ralbovsky, author of the excellent *Destiny's Darlings*, a boys-of-summer story of Little League baseball, is listed as "Editorial Associate"—whatever that means) is loaded with common-sense statements, hard looks at cliché responses, and survival techniques in a hostile environment.

For example, in the fifth grade a sadistic teacher was going to use his strap to beat her across the hands; she challenges him by saying, to his threatening query, yes, she'd like to see the principal. The teacher backed off: "I just contented myself with knowing that I had stood up for my rights, and that it worked for me, and it would be a lesson to carry through the rest of my life." Shades of Frederick Douglass.

And further: she probes some assumptions of women's liberation, for she feels that pragmatically the movement has little to offer black women who are forced to work at menial jobs for family survival. Having seen black women in Tennessee work from the time they were twelve to the day they die, she asserts that "it's nothing but a bunch of white women who had certain life-styles and who want to change those life-styles."

Born in 1940, the twentieth of twenty-two children of a railroad porter and a mother who was forced to clean white people's houses to make extra money, Wilma was raised in a family in which her parents' combined income never exceeded \$2,500 during her childhood. In addition, because of early polio she was required to wear a brace on her right leg from her fifth to twelfth years, an experience that she describes as physically painful and psychologically devastating. Because of the infirmity she spent much time alone, daydreaming of being well and being accepted by her peers.

During this childhood she was taught by her parents to "know her place." She says at that time parents told their black children to accept the prejudice and insult "because the parents thought they were protecting the children, protecting them from trouble or from pain." This was reinforced at her schools: "they didn't tell you a lot of things that were the hard truths, because they felt they were protecting us. They were, in effect, protecting us by keeping us stupid, but their

intentions, as they saw them, were good.”

At age five, she watched white gentry riding on fine stallions with fancy saddles at the annual fair, and she thought “white people treat their horses better than they treated us black people.” The racism, she says, caused “deep scars deep inside of you that sometimes never heal . . . I thought at the time that all white people were mean and evil.” It was, she says, the Baptist Church that kept her from being totally embittered.

Sports eventually led to a limited escape, limited because the financial gains from her achievement were minimal within a short time after her Olympic triumphs. The final two chapters, “Retirement” and “Today,” may be Wilma’s most significant, for they depict starkly the economic status of black American women. After the Olympics she ran in several amateur track and field meets; “I was the only woman in history to pack Madison Square Garden in New York, the Forum in Los Angeles, and a lot of other places for track meets. People came to see me run. But the promoters made all of the money, not me. I was strictly an amateur, in more ways than one.”

Soon after, Wilma retired and entered the larger world, working at half a dozen jobs, their rewards never beginning to approach the endorsement money and booming salaries of today’s professional athletes. As she says, “The fact of the matter is that black women athletes are on the bottom rung of the ladder in American sports. Most of them are involved in track and field because that’s the only sport still really open to them. How many black women golfers are there, or how many black women tennis players? When their track careers are over, no matter what they’ve accomplished in the Olympics, there is no place for them to go. They wind up drifting back to where they began, and nobody ever hears from them again.” Wilma, as of the autobiography’s publication, drifted back to Clarksville, Tennessee.

— Stewart Rodnon
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James D. Sexton, ed. *Son of Tecun Uman: A Maya Indian Tells His Life Story.* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1981) 250 pp., \$19.95 cloth, \$8.95 paper.

Although many Indians north of the Rio Grande have published autobiographies, few Latin American natives have done so. Thus, Northern Arizona University anthropologist James D. Sexton’s