



Isaac Murphy: I Dedicate This Ride

Frank X Walker

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In this richly imagined collection of poems, Frank X Walker brings to life the mind and heart of legendary African-American jockey Isaac Burns Murphy (1861-1896). The son of a slave, Murphy rose to the top of thoroughbred racing in a brilliant career that brought him wealth, honor and international fame. The first to win the Kentucky Derby three times (1884, 1890, 1891), Murphy won an unprecedented 44% of the races he entered. Part of the lore surrounding Murphy's legacy was his penchant for not using the whip. He preferred to ride his mounts into the winner's circle by using his well-honed skills and simply *talking* to his horses.

Through poetic imagination and historical research, Walker creates a unique literary portrait of Murphy. The poems are written in the voices of Murphy and his wife Lucy, his mentor African-American trainer Eli Jordan, and his parents James and America Burns. Their words follow Murphy's childhood years in Lexington, Kentucky, his rise to become America's most famous jockey, his encounters with racial violence in the post-Civil War South, and his early death at age thirty-five.

In Murphy's time, thoroughbred racing was dominated by African-American jockeys. In the first Kentucky Derby, thirteen of the fifteen jockeys were black. Of the first twenty-eight runnings of the Derby (1875-1902), fifteen were won by African-American riders. As the century ended, black jockeys began to disappear from racing, an exodus that continued throughout the twentieth century. *I Dedicate This Ride* helps bring this important history to light.

"I hope the knowledge of thoroughbred racing's original legacy can be returned to the African-American community and to all of us," says Walker. "I hope the book adds to the growing appreciation of Isaac Murphy as one of Kentucky's and the nation's greatest African-American figures. At the height of his career, Isaac was as famous as Jack Johnson, as fast as Jesse Owens, as dignified as Jackie Robinson and as admired as Michael Jordan. In Kentucky, he is to Lexington what Muhammad Ali is to Louisville."

The poems imagined/spoken here by Isaac and Lucy Murphy, Eli Jordan, and James and America Burns tell Murphy's compelling life story. They shine a light on the life of America's most celebrated black jockey, his family and community, and the historical canvas on which his extraordinary life played out.

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