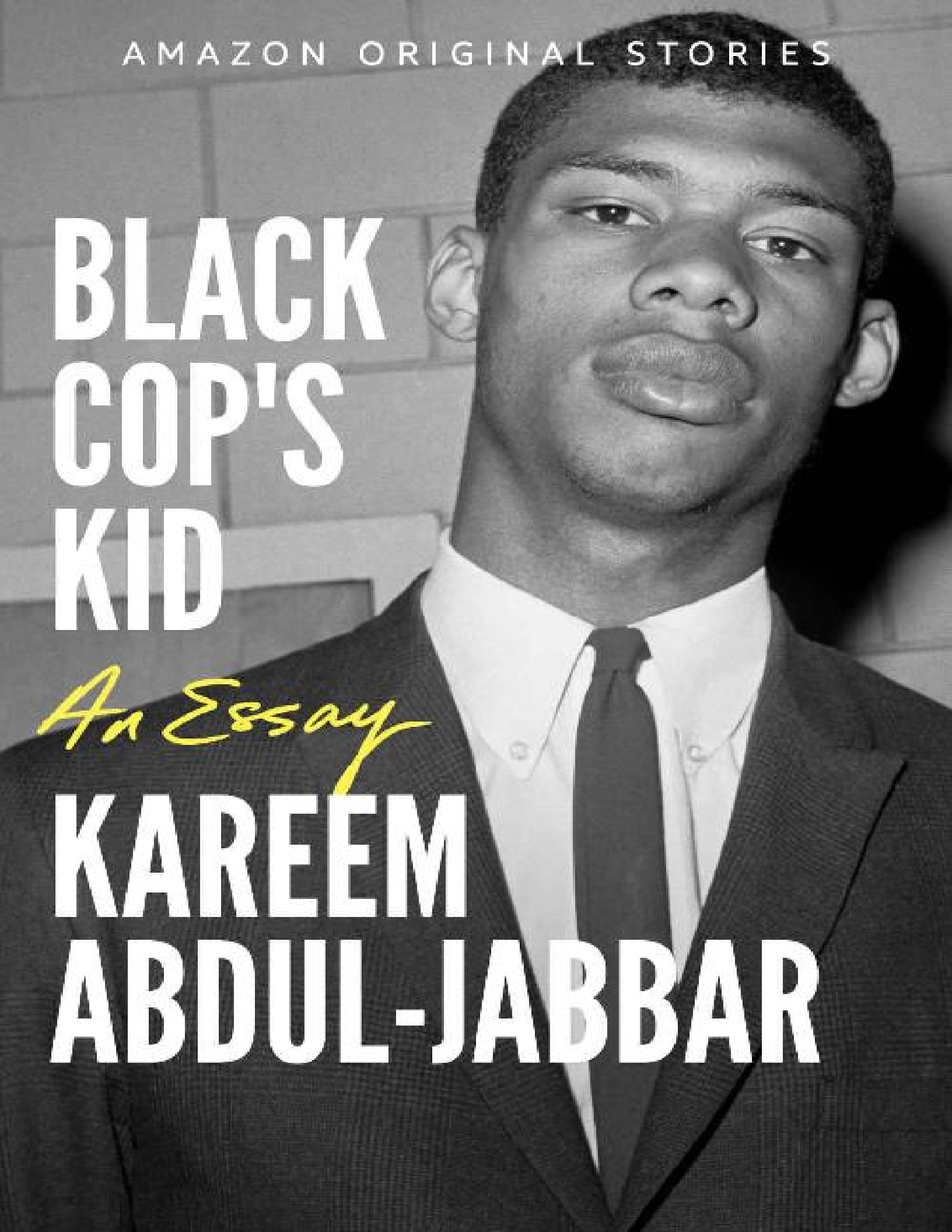
AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES
BLACK COP'S KID
An Essay
KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR

# BLACK COP'S KID

*An Essay*

KAREEM ABDUL-JABBAR

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Find out just what any people will quietly submit to and you have the exact measure of the injustice and wrong which will be imposed on them.

—Frederick Douglass[1]

*Photo © NY Daily News Archive via Getty Images.*

# Introduction

For fifty years I've been both defending and criticizing the police. I've criticized them when their actions reflected the violent systemic racism that resulted in the deaths of unarmed minorities. I've defended them when their good works were overlooked. I especially didn't want all cops lumped together as a monolithic hive-mind, the way so many have done with marginalized people in this country. They, too, have a voice that needs to be heard. This precarious tightrope act has resulted in venomous backlash from both sides. I've been accused of being both a Black anti-cop agitator and an apologist for racist police violence. My ability to see both sides isn't the result of trying to please both sides; my perspective is the result of having been raised by a Black police officer in New York City during the most tumultuous civil rights upheaval the country has ever been through and of the effect both those influences had on me throughout my life.

My father—Lieutenant Ferdinand Alcindor of the NYPD—was a transit cop working out of the 145th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue station who patrolled the subways, trains, and platforms to keep people safe. He was dedicated to serving all the people of New York City. But he was also committed to being a role model in the Black community, to being seen as someone who recognized the inequities of being Black and who silently bore that burden with dignity and purpose. Many of the principles I hold dearest about justice and activism are the result of his noble example, even though he definitely wouldn't agree with all my public political stances or the steps I took to promote them. He didn't support my boycott of the 1968 Olympic basketball team or my participation in the Cleveland Summit, nor would he have endorsed my criticisms of the police after the murders of Michael Brown, George Floyd, and Breonna Taylor or my enthusiastic agreement with the Black Lives Matter protests of 2020. But he certainly would have agreed with my desire to serve my community. This is the story

of how my father's role as a Black cop gave me a unique perspective on the front lines of activism, how it inspired me to action, and how it shaped the form that action would take. Not just as a Black activist, but as a student, an athlete, a writer, a man, and an American.

If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor.

—Desmond Tutu[2]

# Black Cop in Blue

My father was not an activist. He didn't march with Martin, didn't give impassioned speeches, didn't demand racial equality with a raised fist. But he became a cop in 1955, at a time when doing so was in itself a defiant political statement. The job carried dangers from both the street and his fellow officers. On the street, some white people were contemptuous of seeing a Black man in authority and weren't shy about expressing their distaste with vile epithets, and in turn he heard the mutterings of *Uncle Tom* from those who looked like him, angry to see one of their own "colluding with the enemy."

There was also plenty of hostility from the police department. In 1960, five years after he'd joined the force, only 5 percent of the NYPD was Black, even though African Americans made up 14 percent of New York City's population.[3] That made him both an anomaly and a target—on the street and on the force.

In 1960, I was thirteen and didn't fully understand what it meant to be a Black cop in New York City. We lived in a housing project on Dyckman Street, which was the dividing line between the Irish neighborhoods to the north and the Jewish ones to the south. When we first moved there, my mom and I were shopping in a small grocery store when the white owner accused my mom of shoplifting and demanded to look in her purse. I was so startled that I knocked over a shelf of bread. My mother refused and left. Later, she returned with my father, who showed the owner his badge, and that was the end of our being harassed. When I walked through our neighborhood with my dad, all I knew was that I was proud of the way most of the people nodded or smiled at Big Al (for Alcindor), as he was called. I was Little Al. That was still true even though he was 6′3″ and, at thirteen, I was 6′8″. In my eyes, he was still much bigger. On those occasions when we came across a white pedestrian who saw my dad's uniform and looked a

bit startled, I felt an extra surge of pride. He had rattled someone's preconceived notion about Blacks, and it was thrilling. I didn't realize at the time that startling whites out of their biases was the entire mission of the Civil Rights Movement and would become the driving force in my own life.

The reality is that we didn't actually walk together through the neighborhood that often. In fact, I rarely saw him. Because of his rotating work schedule—4 p.m. to midnight for two weeks, midnight to 8 a.m. for two weeks, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m. for two weeks—I only saw him for two out of every six weeks. And even then, he was mostly a silent sentinel of routine —reading, playing jazz records, eating. When I was nine and baseball meant everything to me, he took me to a Dodgers game at Ebbets Field, and I watched Jackie Robinson steal second base. It was a great day, but even then I had no expectation that we'd ever do it again. And we didn't.

Sometimes when I'd travel the subways, I'd see him on duty standing on the platforms or chatting with the people selling tokens, but we never interacted. We just silently passed each other, like at home.

My father was a distant and reserved parent. He didn't show affection, though I knew I was loved and cared for. Like a cultivated orchard under glass. He was that way with my friends, too. If my mom gave me a birthday party, my father would pal around with each of my friends and cheerfully interact with them like a dad in a sitcom. But on Dyckman Street, he acted as if he'd never seen them before. Maybe that wasn't an act. Maybe his life at home as a dad was so separate from his life on the street as a cop that he was never able to merge the two. The irony is not lost on me that my characterization of my dad as aloof and remote is very similar to the one the press used to describe me when I was playing basketball, but for very different reasons.

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Most of the time, he was just the guy that slept in Mom's bed. Being an only child, I was doted on by my mother, Cora, who, in contrast to my father, was attentive and affectionate. She found joy in everything and loved nothing more than sharing that joy with me. She worked as a seamstress in Alexander's department store on Grand Concourse and Fordham Road but was never too tired or too busy to ask about my day and encourage my interests. The dour silence of my father was contrasted sharply by her cheerful chatter and infectious optimism.

At thirteen years old, I didn't know about the city's notorious history of police racism that ran through the force like an underground sewage system. I didn't know about the famous police riot in 1900 in which a Black man defending his wife stabbed an out-of-uniform cop, resulting in white mobs and a hundred white cops tearing through Black neighborhoods bludgeoning Blacks and dragging them from their beds into the streets. Though there was an international protest to the brutality, the NYC Police Board conducted an investigation that, despite the sworn testimony of dozens, cleared all police of wrongful behavior.[4] I didn't know about the Harlem Riot of 1935 sparked when a sixteen-year-old Black Puerto Rican shoplifted a ten-cent pocketknife and was threatened with a beating by an employee of the store. Though the boy escaped, rumors of his beating and even death spread, resulting in three deaths and hundreds of arrests. I didn't know about the Harlem Riot of 1943, when a Black soldier intervened when a white officer was arresting a Black woman for disorderly conduct and was shot by the officer. Two days of rioting resulted in six deaths and six hundred arrests.[5] I didn't know all the horrors of the past, but we all could tell the past was prelude to a growing anger in the Black community at those in power. And their representatives on the streets. The police.

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Despite my father's quiet distance, my teenage home life was not a morbid mausoleum. I had my own room, which was unusual among my friends, with my own record player and radio, and my bicycle leaning against the wall. I also had a window that looked out over the Cloisters, a museum in a medieval building, that allowed me to imagine myself having exciting exploits on its walls. My room was like Superman's Fortress of Solitude. I had time to myself to read adventure novels like *The Three Musketeers*, to play the jazz records of Herbie Hancock, John Coltrane, and Miles Davis—yes, like my father—but also time to play with friends, to imagine great adventures to come. In the living room I watched TV Westerns, which kick-started my interest in history.

One day, when I was watching *The Rifleman* and I saw Black icon Sammy Davis Jr. appear as a gunfighter and do these amazing fast-draw tricks (Sammy actually was a fast-draw expert), I was so delighted to see a Black person in a Western who wasn't a slave or a servant that it got me thinking about why that was. That wonderment eventually grew into a mild

obsession with the history of Blacks in the Old West. When I was playing in the NBA, I started reading books about the history of Blacks in the West and discovered that one in four cowboys was Black, yet I almost never saw one on TV or in the movies.[6] I began collecting artifacts that memorialized how important Blacks were in the Old West, from the fierce Buffalo Soldiers to Bass Reeves, one of the first Black sheriffs and some say the inspiration for the Lone Ranger. Yeah, that Lone Ranger.

In some ways, the activist I was to become started in my room. Without my father at home, I was forced to become more self-sufficient, having to resolve my own conflicts, grapple with teenage angst, deal with embarrassing growth spurts, and struggle with racial identity. Yet even though my father may not have been present, his presence loomed. Older kids stepped back when he walked by, both out of respect and fear. My father carried himself with such dignity, purpose, and confidence that he was perceived as a community role model. A manifestation of the clear lines between right and wrong. Great Expectations. I could breathe him in like the aroma of Mom's cooking wafting from the kitchen. He was an invisible trestle that was shaping my growth.

Regardless of my father's remote nature—or maybe because of it—he represented The System. Not just the legal rules we lived by but, because he was a uniform-wearing representative, a benevolence that emanated from those in authority. The System had to be good, must know what was best for us, or my father would never have been a part of it.

# A Shock to the System

Two events had a profound effect on that naive point of view. The first was the brutal murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. In 1955, he was abducted and beaten to death by several white men for talking to a married white woman (which later reports revealed never happened). Emmett's mother insisted on an open casket so the world could see the horrific things done to her son. Although the two accused men were acquitted by an all-white jury, a few months later they confessed to the crime in a magazine interview, knowing they couldn't be tried again.[7] I was only eight when he was murdered, but a few years later in 1960, I learned about him and the trial, and I realized I no longer felt safe in my own skin. Being Black was being a target. And being a child offered no safety from the grown men willing to beat you to death for the smallest infringement of their rules. Rules that The System protected. After that, I felt exposed. When I walked down the street, I crouched a little bit more, looked around more to see who was looking my way, and I certainly started questioning the wisdom of those in authority. Who were they looking out for? While some kids might have discussed these thoughts and apprehensions with their father, mine was not that kind of father.

The second event happened in 1964, when I was seventeen and a junior in high school. I'd just been accepted into a summer program with the Harlem Youth Action Project (HARYOU-ACT), a city-sponsored antipoverty program designed to keep kids off the streets and teach us about our African-American heritage. I would be a journalist writing about Harlem culture. At that time, very little about Black culture was widely known or broadcast. There was no Black History Month (according to the school I was attending, there was no such thing as Black history). If a Black businessperson or scientist existed, we never heard of them or saw them. I

had very limited role models: sports figures, R & B singers, and civil rights leaders. And my dad, the Black cop.

The more I hung around Harlem, the more I learned about the richness of our history: the writers, artists, inventors, doctors, philosophers, and more who had been ignored by The Authorities who taught us in school and who taught us popular culture.

I realized that when I thought of my own life, I remembered everything I ever said or did that I was ashamed of, and I used those memories to avoid repeating those mistakes. But I also used my memories of my accomplishments, those times when I wanted to give up and didn't, when I thought I wasn't good enough but was, to inspire myself to keep pushing ahead. But what if the society we lived in just complained about Black people's perceived faults—too pushy, too lazy, not smart enough—and never mentioned our accomplishments? If a Black person does something amazing in a forest and no one talks about it, did it happen?

I began to wonder how my father could defend The System that insisted on keeping us in the dark about our own heritage, demeaning our achievements by ignoring them.

During that summer, I received the Willie Wonka Golden Ticket: an assignment from the HARYOU-ACT summer program to join a press conference at a junior high school on 135th Street with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King addressed a couple hundred kids who, like me, were part of the mentoring program. Afterward, about fifteen journalists, including me, crowded around the stage to ask Dr. King questions. Though the other journalists were older and more experienced, I was so much taller that I was able to be noticed, and Dr. King called on me. I asked him whether or not he thought the mentoring program would be successful, to which he replied with a smile, "It already is because we're already thinking about how to make Harlem a better place." Naturally, I was nervous standing among the many professional journalists. Watching Dr. King speak with such clarity, such commitment, such passion about changing America's biases and behavior toward us not only inspired me but forced me to ask myself: Was my dad changing things or helping to maintain the status quo? These doubts were intermittent thoughts that buzzed my brain like a wandering mosquito that attacked for a few seconds then flew off into the night.

Until July 19, 1964. I was riding the train home after a laid-back Sunday reading at the beach. The train car was packed with people wilting under the thick humidity and relentless summer heat. I decided to get off the train at 125th Street in Harlem to stop into a jazz record store I frequented. I figured I could then walk a few blocks to the CORE (Congress of Racial Equality) rally I'd heard about, to see if there was anything newsworthy I could write about for the journal.

The rally was to protest the shooting death of fifteen-year-old African American James Powell by a white off-duty police officer, Lieutenant Thomas Gilligan. The shooting had occurred two days before, and there'd been protests throughout the city ever since. On Thursday, three hundred people, mostly students, had protested at the crime scene. On Friday, CORE members showed up demanding a civilian review board to discipline police but were stopped by a line of fifty police officers. On Saturday, 250 people attended James Powell's funeral. It ended peacefully.

But this was Sunday. Everything had changed.

When I got off the subway, I was feeling pretty good about myself: I'd attended a news conference with Dr. King and even asked him a question, my basketball career was going well with scholarship offers coming in, and in another year I'd be out of New York City starting a life on my own.

As I climbed the steps from the underground subway to the street, I immediately banished all thoughts of the record store or strolling to the rally. Instead, I was running for my life. Gunshots burst around me. Glass windows shattered.

I ducked down behind a lamppost as people ran by screaming, some in anger, some in terror. When you're a cop's kid, there's always a deep-down feeling, however irrational, that you are somehow protected from the dangers of the street. That night, any ideas of special protection were shattered along with the storefront windows around me. I crouched in fear until I gathered the courage—or maybe desperation—to run away as fast as I could. My long legs helped, but they also made me a taller target, and as I ran, I imagined that any moment a stray bullet might punch through my back.

I later discovered that the riot had started a few blocks away, outside the 123rd Street police station. A thousand protestors were shouting, hurling bottles, setting garbage cans on fire. A police officer had tried to

calm the crowd by shouting through his megaphone, “Go home! Go home!” One of the crowd had shouted back, “We *are* home, baby!”

The riot lasted six days. One person died, 118 were injured, and 465 were arrested. Later, to no one’s surprise, a grand jury cleared the cop who killed James Powell.

As I ran that night in fear for my life, it was hard to remember the admonishments for peace from Dr. King. Mixed in with my fear was anger and frustration—and the knowledge that I would never feel safe again. What kept coming back to me was that man in the crowd shouting back at the cop in anger and frustration, “We *are* home, baby!” That outcry resonated throughout my body like a wailing jazz saxophone rattling my bones. We were trying to define what home meant to us, not what it meant to them. What our values were, not what they told us we should value. Mostly, home meant being safe—from criminals and from cops. And when we expressed our fear and frustration about any inequities, we were told to “move on.”

It reminded me of Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House*, when the poor, sickly boy, Jo, who’s always told by the police to move on, breaks down and cries:

> “I’m always a-moving on, sar,” cries the boy, wiping away his grimy tears with his arm. “I’ve always been a-moving and a-moving on, ever since I was born. Where can I possibly move to, sir . . . !”

When a sympathetic adult questions the constable’s actions by asking where exactly the boy should move on to, the constable replies by rote: “My instructions don’t go to that . . . My instructions are that this boy is to move on.”[8]

The constable wasn’t a protector of the marginalized, he was a tool of the wealthy who didn’t want to see disparity or be reminded of the dire consequences of their greedy policies on real people. So, where did that leave my dad? Was being a Black cop really being a role model like I’d thought all my life, or the opposite? Did he poke people with a nightstick and tell them to “move on”? Did the white boss cops point to him to prove they weren’t racists? I knew he was a good man, but was he doing a good thing for our people?

# Black Cop's Burden

As the civil rights protests and police violence against Blacks increased, I remained conflicted by my father's role. Because I knew my dad's compassion for people and the pride he took in protecting them, I concluded that my dad was doing good by pioneering in a profession that earned him scorn, derision, and even caused his own son to question him. What if my dad had been the cop on the scene with ninth-grader James Powell? Would Powell still be alive? I decided that yes, he would be. That my dad wouldn't look at a Black child, who witnesses said was unarmed, and shoot him twice. Had Big Al shown up first, there would have been one less Black kid shot by a cop and no Harlem Riot of 1964. Which is why we needed more Black cops on the force, and the only way to achieve that was for Black people like my dad to endure the daily slings and arrows and do their job well. Of this I was certain.

After I left home, my faith in him as a Black role model was rewarded. During a courtroom hearing, an accused man grabbed the bailiff's gun and shot the bailiff between the eyes. The shooter then escaped the courthouse and ran into the subway tunnels. My father captured him *without firing a shot*, for which he received a citation for bravery from the mayor and a promotion.

To be fair, I didn't really understand the full complexity and toll of being a Black cop until after I'd left home. In *Locking Up Our Own: Crime and Punishment in Black America* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2017), author James Forman Jr. discusses the conundrum of being a Black cop in America. Because of systemic racism, white officers may "overpolice" and use violence against African Americans, which then implicates Black cops in those racist actions. Black officers who don't openly share white officers' biases about African Americans might be viewed as being soft on crime and more lenient toward their own, which would alienate and isolate them from

white cops. Some Black cops respond by overpolicing African Americans to prove their loyalty to "blue" over "black."[9]

Although we never discussed it, I have no doubt that my father had to deal with these same conflicting loyalties. I can't imagine his having to deal with the stress of being a cop in New York City as well as the stress of knowing your fellow cops didn't have your back.

This internal struggle is reflected in the recently uncovered confession of Ray Wood, a Black undercover cop for the NYPD. Wood's assignment was to infiltrate civil rights organizations in order to feed information to the FBI so they could discredit the groups and arrest the leaders. Wood's letter was written as his health deteriorated and was held by his cousin until Wood's death. In the letter, Wood admitted that his job was to "draw . . . two men into a felonious federal crime, so that they could be arrested by the FBI and kept away from managing Malcolm X's door security on February 21, 1965."[10] He was successful. On that day, Malcolm X was assassinated, for which three members of the Nation of Islam were convicted. Wood wrote that he acted for the NYPD under duress and fear. He wrote:

> After witnessing repeated brutality at the hands of my coworkers (Police), I tried to resign. Instead, I was threatened with arrest by pinning marijuana and alcohol trafficking charges on me if I did not follow through with the assignments.

Wood expressed remorse that he "participated in actions that in hindsight were deplorable and detrimental to the advancement of my own black people."[11] The Manhattan District Attorney's office is investigating these new revelations. Of course, we can't help but wonder about current undercover operations into Black Lives Matter, the NAACP, National Urban League, Congress of Racial Equality, and other active civil rights groups. And are Black cops still being coerced to participate?

At the very least, Black cops are still struggling with parity. In 1960, when my dad was a cop, the NYPD was 5 percent Black, when the Black population was 14 percent. Over sixty years later—not much has changed. Although New York City is now 24.3 percent Black, as of 2020, only 15.5 percent of NYPD is Black.[12] New York City is now only 42.7 percent white, and yet 75 percent of police officers above the rank of captain are

white.[13] Upward mobility on the force for Blacks definitely hits a white ceiling. How are they to feel of equal worth in a job that doesn't value them equally?

The Black cop has a complicated conflict of loyalties. On one hand, they represent and are sworn to uphold the American judicial system. On the other hand, they are well aware that the selective enforcement of many laws and the open biases of our justice system unfairly burden their own communities. They know that it doesn't matter that they are cops when their own sons or daughters are driving around and may be unreasonably stopped by white police and injured or killed. It's a tremendous act of faith in our country to continue to defend its lopsided values, in the hope that we are still on a righteous path of equality for all. A path they are helping forge.

But, man, it's hard to keep your eyes on that prize when you're getting bear mace sprayed in your face.

# Assault on America

The January 6, 2021, insurrection in Washington, DC, epitomized the current troubled and contradictory relationship America has with police—and Black police have with America. The MAGA rioters who stormed the Capitol Building broadcast to the world the uncertainty regarding the standing of the police in this country, even among its professed base of supporters. There were so many conflicting issues and betrayals revealed by the riot that have resulted in crumbled alliances.

Some of the rioters carried signs bearing a thin blue line, a symbol for support of the police. Others wore T-shirts proclaiming, "Blue Lives Matter." Yet, when police started pushing the crowds back, these same people began chanting, "Traitors! Traitors! Traitors!"[14] One rioter attacked a cop with his "thin blue line" flag.[15] Cops were sprayed with bear mace; they were dragged; they were trampled and pummeled. One officer was killed. One Proud Boy later proclaimed about the police, "Hang them on the capitol [*sic*] steps."[16]

And yet, not only were there numerous off-duty law enforcement and military among the rioters but some of the Capitol Police actually aided the rioters, giving them water to wash the chemical irritants from their eyes, posing for photos with them, and letting them barge in with no resistance. So far, six Capitol Police officers have been suspended with pay, and thirty-five other officers are under investigation for what they did—and didn't do—during the riots.[17] This includes helping the people who murdered their colleague, who wanted to hang the Vice President for not doing what he constitutionally couldn't do, who wanted to shoot the Speaker of the House for disagreeing with their candidate. These officers aided people who basically wanted to tear up the Constitution, the document that establishes our freedoms, our values, our vision for the future. What drove them to such heights of passion that they were willing to turn traitor to the country?

They wanted to "Stop the Steal" of the election, despite the fact that there was no steal. No credible proof of widespread fraud has ever been provided. None! And most of the people who were responsible for counting the ballots and for dismissing the court cases were Republicans and Trump-appointed judges. For this ludicrous nonreason, Officer Brian Sicknick died after confronting rioters on January 6.

What's a cop to think? Certainly, that some of those civilians who profess support for the police only do so out of hive mentality rather than moral or rational conviction. Certainly, that some of their fellow cops that they rely on to guard their lives can't be trusted. The best symbol of what it means to be a Black cop among all this self-doubt and questioning of others is Eugene Goodman, the Black US Capitol Police officer who risked his life by diverting a mob of rioters away from the Senate Chamber where armed officers were waiting with the senators who had still not been evacuated. His courageous actions earned him a Congressional Gold Medal.[18] For me, he represented the essence of the Black cop: selfless service and duty to the ideals of the badge. The same as my father.

The Capitol riot was extremely hard on Black cops, who were not only assailed for being "traitorous" but also bombarded with racial slurs as they confronted a mob that, unsurprisingly, was 96 percent white.[19] One Black cop admitted to breaking down in tears in the Capitol rotunda, saying, "I got called a n----- 15 times today."[20] When one Black officer learned that his white fellow officer was taking selfies with the rioters, he said, "That one hurt me the most because I was on the other side of the Capitol getting my ass kicked. If you're going to treat a group of demonstrators for Black Lives Matters [*sic*] one way, then you should treat this group the same god---- way."[21]

This was not the first time Black cops complained of racism in the US Capitol Police. Since 2001, the department had been sued for racial discrimination by *hundreds* of Black officers.[22] Allegations include sustained racial slurs targeting both Black officers and white officers who befriended Black officers. One issue is that the Capitol Police are only 29 percent Black despite DC's population being 46 percent Black. This seems especially egregious when compared to the Washington Metropolitan police force, which is roughly the same size and has the same budget, and is 52 percent Black.[23] If you're a white cop, your first instinct may be to try to justify or explain why this is; if you're a Black cop, you already know why.

I think about all this whenever I sit down to write about the police, because I don't have a default setting regarding them. Sometimes I recognize the terrible burdens of their job and support them, and sometimes I'm outraged at the terrible blunders in their job. The problem is we're used to lumping groups together as a monolithic block. Blacks are all this. Whites are all this. Cops are all this. This is inaccurate and, worse, an obstacle to improving our society.

One especially popular defense of police is that there are a few "bad apples," but that police forces are basically made up of good and honorable people. We all want to believe this, me as much as anybody, because I want to honor the memory of my father. We all want them to be as selfless, compassionate, and dedicated as they're mostly portrayed on TV and in the movies. However, it's not that simple. The full saying is "one bad apple spoils the bunch," because the rotten apple by proximity makes the others rotten. That is the current system. Because when those bad apples do something egregious, the rest of the force feels compelled to defend them. Like a squad of Roman soldiers, they hunker down around each other and surround themselves with raised shields. That makes them just as guilty of the crimes as their fellow officers. That makes them all bad apples.

Black cops may not want to join that barrel of rotten shields but feel they have no choice if they want to keep their jobs or if they want white cops to have their backs in life-threatening situations. They are forced to go along or face the dangers of speaking out. That group mentality can have devastating effects on Black cops with the most noble of intentions. Alex Kueng was one such Black cop. His mother said he became a cop to be a force for good in the Minneapolis Police Department: "That's part of the reason why he wanted to become a police officer—and a Black police officer on top of it—is [*sic*] to bridge that gap in the community, change the narrative between the officers and the black community."[24] Unfortunately, he was the cop who held George Floyd's back while white officer Derek Chauvin pressed his knee into Floyd's neck, killing him.

The Thin Blue Line to protect the law-abiding members of society from the lawless has become an extension of the Thick White Line acting as a personal security force for white paranoia. The cops are just a phone call away from excluding Blacks from white society. In 2019, a Colorado resident called the police to report a Black man wearing a ski mask and waving his arms. He was not accused of any crime. Elijah McClain, twenty-

three, a musician and athlete, was merely walking home from a convenience store, listening to music. The ski mask was because he had a blood condition that made his skin cold. White officers responding to the call subdued him with a hold cutting off blood to his brain, then injected him with an overdose of a sedative. He died three days later. An investigation concluded the officers had no reason to stop him.[25] In 2018, a Black Harvard graduate student was napping in the common room of her dorm, which a white student found suspicious and called the police. She showed the cops her room, but they still demanded to see ID to prove she belonged there.[26] A Black man walking his dog in Central Park told a white woman her dog needed to be on a leash. She called the police and claimed he was threatening her life.[27]

A kid walking home. A girl napping in her university commons. A man walking his dog. Women golfing too slowly. Two men waiting for a friend at Starbucks. A college student eating lunch in the commons. A man working out at LA Fitness. An eleven-year-old boy on his first day delivering newspapers. The list of Black men, women, and children doing mundane activities whom white people have called the police on goes on and on.[28] Once police show up, these confrontations with innocent Blacks can end in humiliation, arrest, injury, or even death. It's what Black people refer to as the crime of BWB: Breathing While Black.

To me, defending the police is more a defense of the ideals of the police and what they should strive to be rather than the reality of what they so often are. The majority of officers want to live up to those ideals, but they are being handcuffed by the rotten system of police unions and law enforcement executives that strive to protect jobs over justice, promotions over people. I'm an unwavering supporter of labor unions and understand that they are currently in a death struggle with corporate overlords grinding workers' rights under their tasseled Gucci loafers. But that doesn't give police unions the right to turn a blind eye to wrongdoing. Of course, first they have to acknowledge that systemic racism is actually wrongdoing.

Those crusaders within the departments struggling to reform them and make them a force for good rather than manifestations of the darkest prejudices of society need support to realize their vision. Those necessary changes require civilian oversight and the continued supervision from all Americans. That support may come in the form of reassigning money in police budgets so uniformed officers can do the jobs they were trained for

rather than being assigned specialized jobs for which they have no expertise and are therefore set up to fail. Police departments have to strive to have their racial makeup reflect that of their communities, which has proven to lead to less violent conflict resolutions. Racist police, no matter what their rank, have to be weeded from every department and not allowed to work in law enforcement again anywhere.

The Black Lives Matter protests over police brutality during the summer of 2020 highlighted just how bad the relationship between cops and the general public—not just Blacks—has gotten. Experts estimate that between 15 and 26 million people in the US participated in the BLM demonstrations—93 percent of which were peaceful[29]—making it the largest movement in the country's history.[30] Their goals were simple: That Black people go about the activities of their daily lives feeling as physically safe as white people. That they look at a cop with relief rather than fear.

Like the people in my neighborhood looked at my dad.

As inspiring and heartening as those demonstrations were, I'd seen hope turn to disappointment many times before. Following the Harlem Riots of 1964, a short-term program called Project Uplift provided thousands of jobs to young Blacks in Harlem. This was always the pattern after major protests: Band-Aid solutions to a systemic disease. That protest was over a white cop shooting a Black fifteen-year-old boy, and here we were again, hundreds of dead bodies of unarmed Blacks later, still protesting the same thing. Even since the BLM protests, the rate of Blacks being killed by police hasn't changed.[31] Blacks are killed, and body cam footage goes missing, is suppressed, or cameras were mysteriously never turned on. Worse, the political backlash has resulted in Republican-controlled legislatures across the country passing laws to make voting more difficult for minority voters. Punishment for raising your voice is to silence that voice.

# On the Ball

Becoming a professional athlete was my roundabout way of going into the family business. To me, the family business wasn't law enforcement, it was fighting for justice.

Being a cop, my dad instilled in me an appreciation for the power of the law to protect people and bring justice. Being a Black cop, my dad made me aware that bad laws can be passed and good laws can be unfairly enforced. Being a Black cop's kid made me especially sensitive to injustice. Especially the injustice caused by people judging others based on the color of their skin, nationality, gender, religion, or sexual orientation. As a child, it was difficult to understand the logic of demeaning, beating, even killing another human being simply because they didn't look like you. I found it especially strange since most of those expressing their prejudice came from ethnic or national backgrounds that had also endured extreme prejudice. That's when I understood that prejudice was the result of emotional brainwashing of children from birth and that without rational thinking to break that Pavlovian conditioning, the world could never be fair, or just, or good.

Part of what drew me to sports was that there was a clear and fair set of rules that everyone had to follow and that an individual's success was based solely on merit. It didn't matter who your parents were, what religion you were, or the color of your skin. Your upbringing, beliefs, or popularity weren't a factor. Either you could perform or you couldn't. Referees were like cops, making sure everyone followed the rules, and if they didn't, they were penalized. Teammates overcame personal biases to work together for a common goal. Most of us became more empathetic and better people because of that. It seemed like a utopian model for an equitable society.

Throughout my teenage years, as the Civil Rights Movement became more urgent and the white pushback became more vocal and violent, the

basketball court was an escape into a more controlled and fairer world. The more I practiced, the better I got. The better I got, the better our team did. It was a world in which I had some control over how I was treated. On the court, I was cheered as a hero. On the street, I was in mortal danger, and nothing I could do would change that.

My success as an athlete at UCLA and in the NBA brought me opportunities to speak out against injustice, and I seized those opportunities with a renewed purpose. It became part of my mission as an athlete to promote not just my beliefs about civil rights but also to shatter the stereotyped notion that athletes were just dumb slabs of beef with no commitment to their communities or thoughtful opinions about their country. I hoped that the more I spoke out, the more other athletes would be inspired.

My first major opportunity came in 1967 when I was only twenty and a sophomore at UCLA. NFL legend and civil rights activist Jim Brown invited me to join a group of Black athletes and activists in Cleveland to discuss Muhammad Ali's refusal to be drafted. I would be the youngest person at what would become known as the Cleveland Summit. The meeting was to determine whether or not Black professional athletes would publicly support Muhammad Ali in his refusal to be drafted. This was by no means a rubber-stamp committee. Several of the participants had been in the military. Brown himself had belonged to the Army ROTC and graduated from Syracuse University as a second lieutenant. Attorney Carl Stokes, who in a few months would become the mayor of Detroit, making him the first Black mayor of a major US city, had served in World War II.

Although Ali had been the heavyweight boxing champion of the world since defeating Sonny Liston in 1964, he refused to play the role of Good Negro that white America demanded from its prominent Black athletes and entertainers at that time. They expected lots of humble "Aw shucks" smiles, fawning gratitude, and disapproving head shakes aimed at the uppity Negroes who marched through their streets crying out for equality. Instead, Ali riled up white America by writing humiliating poems about his opponents and arrogantly predicting which round he would knock them out. Worse, he converted to Islam and abandoned his white name, Cassius Clay. He was the poster boy for Uppity.

In 1967, with the Vietnam War raging and more and more of our young men being drafted, Ali refused to be inducted into the armed forces.

Ali was immediately convicted of draft evasion, sentenced to five years in prison, fined $10,000, and banned from boxing for three years. Although he remained out of prison while appealing his case, the ban alone cost him millions of dollars.

On June 4—sixteen days before Ali would be convicted—we gathered in the offices of the Negro Industrial Economic Union. Despite our admiration for Ali, we grilled him for hours. Many in the group had come with their minds already made up to persuade Ali to accept his military service. The discussions became pretty heated as questions and answers were fired back and forth. Pretty soon, though, we all realized Ali was not going to change his mind. For two hours he lectured us on Islam and Black pride and his religious conviction that the Vietnam War was wrong.

We were all well aware that in the early days of the Vietnam War, kids who could afford to go to college were exempted from the draft, which left poor kids, many of them Black, forced to do the actual fighting. Ali argued that it was a war against people of color fought by people of color for a country that denied them their basic civil rights.

In the end, he convinced us, and we decided to support him. Bill Russell summed it up for all of us:

> I envy Muhammad Ali . . . He has something I have never been able to attain and something very few people possess. He has absolute and sincere faith. I'm not worried about Muhammad Ali. He is better equipped than anyone I know to withstand the trials in store for him. What I'm worried about is the rest of us.[32]

We did our best at that Cleveland Summit to support Ali's legal fight and to publicize the injustice of the draft, but we knew how powerless we were against those promoting the war for their own political and financial gain. Nevertheless, I was thrilled that I was finally doing something important rather than just complaining. That feeling of wanting to be part of a movement to ensure justice and opportunities for all Americans hasn't left me since.

The more I spoke out against racial injustice, the more hostile the press became. For many, my conversion to Islam was seen as a rejection of America, the same America that had given me my career. In fact, it was a

rejection of the name of the man who had once enslaved my ancestors and an embracement of the religion that connected me back to my African roots. My decision to choose my own identity angered many people, and that anger was expressed continuously by harsh sports writers who were antagonistic and insulting. Naturally, I withdrew a bit from the onslaught, for which they punished me by characterizing me as aloof and cold. Like my dad. Maybe he was the role model for how to protect myself, the way he was able to compartmentalize his street life and home life.

Because most of the athletes speaking out during the past fifty years were Black, by continuing to encourage society to see them as brain-addled cattle, those in power could convince the populace to dismiss Black athletes' opinions. Over the years, as more athletes spoke out about injustice, the pressure from conservative whites in power—whether politicians, league officials, team owners, or Fox pundits—increased to demean and infantilize them. Fortunately, many of today's athletes across all sports have ignored the threats to their careers and even lives to publicly denounce injustice.

Of course, my youthful belief that sports reflected a utopia has evolved. Yes, people should be judged on their own merits, but those merits aren't just about measuring accomplishments, they are also about measuring kindness and compassion. The game isn't about celebrating the best players; it's about giving everyone a chance to play and thrive, and helping anyone who needs it find their place on the team.

Every step of the way throughout my life as an athlete and activist, I felt my father's large hand on my shoulder guiding me down a path of service and justice.

When an individual is protesting society's refusal to acknowledge his dignity as a human being, his very act of protest confers dignity on him.

—Bayard Rustin[33]

# Why I Chose Words

When people used to ask me what career I would have chosen if I hadn't played basketball, I told them history teacher. One major motivator was that while I was attending school in New York City, we never learned about Black people's roles in history. We were slaves. End of story. Other than work plantations, we just sat out history. Like mules. Or we could sing and dance on the sidelines while white people did all the important world-changing work. Like cheerleaders. If you keep children from having any role models that look like them, you're suppressing their self-esteem and stifling their ambition.

This was proven by the famous "doll experiments" conducted in the 1940s. Researchers gave Black children identical Black and white dolls and asked them which they preferred. Shockingly, 63 percent of the Black children preferred the white dolls. When asked which doll looked most like them, some children ran from the room "emotionally upset at having to identify with the doll that they had rejected."[34] Being Black and seeing how we were viewed in society was like being raised by an abusive parent screaming at us daily that we are worthless.

After retiring as an NBA player in 1989, I chose to become the history teacher I always claimed I'd wanted to be by writing books to publicize the many deliberately overlooked Black heroes in history who helped change this country for the better. I wrote books about military heroes, inventors, writers, artists, civil rights leaders, and more.

But I also realized that history is a long river and that most of the time, history books jump in way downstream where the water has slowed down and gathered into a calm pond. I wanted to jump in upstream, where the water was swift and churning over rocks like a washing machine. That was popular culture, where new language is invented, where movies, TV, books, sports, music, and art reflect the turbulence of new ideas smashing into old

ideas like fast-moving river water into jagged rocks. It's where history can be nudged to go in one direction or another.

Popular culture is the vital sign of the spiritual health of a society. How it portrays marginalized people, how it contradicts its own professed values, how it celebrates certain behavior over others, how it imagines fantastic ideas and worlds that never existed—and then strives to bring them into existence. It's a cauldron of the boiling unconscious that then tries to sieve out the unacceptable.

I played in the NBA for twenty years, but I've been writing about history and popular culture for thirty-two years. I have written articles for the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Washington Post*, *Time* magazine, *Newsweek*, *Sports Illustrated*, *Huffington Post*, the *Hollywood Reporter*, and others. Sometimes I think of myself as a modern version of my Black cop dad. I patrol the TV and radio airwaves, internet, movie theaters, art galleries, and bookstores the way my father patrolled the streets and subways. I, too, look for assaults and other crimes, but on the values of the US Constitution as perpetrated in popular culture and politics.

Sometimes the crimes are subtle, but they contribute to a larger crime wave. For example, my first major article on popular culture was "Horton Hears a Racist" in *Huffington Post* in 2008. I wondered why the filmmakers had chosen to add a subplot that wasn't in the book about how the mayor, who has ninety-six daughters and one son, chooses the son to save the day while the daughters cheer him on. I also wondered why none of the dozens, maybe hundreds, of people who had read the script while in development thought to point out the blatant misogyny of this addition. So I wrote:

> If our society is willing to tolerate any form of social injustice and discrimination toward any single group, then they have created a breeding ground for injustice throughout society. If we allow sexism, ageism, homophobia, religious intolerance, then racism can only flourish as well. We expose our impressionable children to funny cartoons about wacky animals voiced by famous actors and what do we think is going to happen? Will a little girl step out of *Horton* feeling empowered and motivated, or just slightly less capable than the little boy walking beside her?[35]

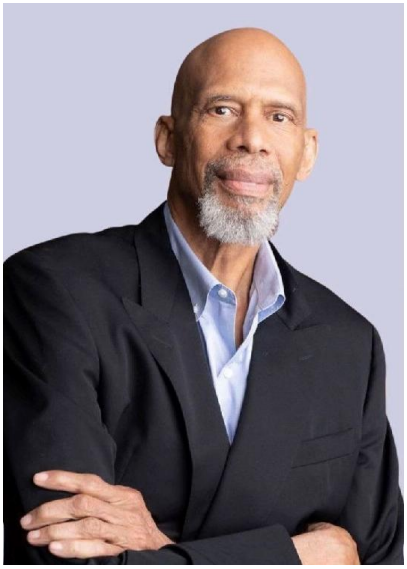
As with my reason for writing history books, I decided I didn't want to just comment on the works of others, I wanted to contribute original works of my own to the pop culture canon. I focused on mysteries because I was a huge fan of the genre, having read the classic writers like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Walter Mosely, and Chester Himes. I wrote several novels featuring Mycroft Holmes, Sherlock's older brother, and his sleuthing Black best friend, Cyrus Douglas. I also wrote a middle-school series with a racially mixed group of friends who solve mysteries.

But there was another reason I chose mysteries. I liked the way people wholeheartedly dedicated themselves to finding the murderer, treating each person's death as a sacred obligation to avenge. There's a feeling in mysteries of trying to heal society through uncovering the murderer. Plus, what better homage to my Black cop dad than writing about Black people solving crimes.

My dad didn't like to talk. So I listened to what he did rather than what he said. He rode a beat on the subways to protect people, and I write to protect people. Whenever I would ask him a question, he would silently hand me a book; so I write books and articles that answer questions. He stood tall in our neighborhood not because of his physical height or uniform but because everyone respected his deeds. I hope to achieve the same respect, not because of my #33 basketball uniform or my abnormal height, but because I did the right thing when doing nothing would have been easier.

I'm a Black cop's kid. And, to quote Robert Frost, "that has made all the difference."

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Kareem Abdul-Jabbar is a Basketball Hall of Fame inductee, one of the most recognized and accomplished basketball players in US history, and the *New York Times* bestselling author of seventeen books, including *Coach Wooden and Me*, *Becoming Kareem*, *What Color Is My World?*, *Writings on the Wall*, and a trilogy about Mycroft Holmes. In 2016, Kareem was awarded by President Barack Obama the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian honor. A five-time winner of the Columnist of the Year Award and winner of the NAACP Image Award, Kareem is a contributor for the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Hollywood Reporter*, and the *Guardian*, among many others. For more information, visit www.kareemabduljabbar.com.

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