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Word Warrior: Richard Durham, Radio and Freedom

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Richard Durham was a post–World War II literary action figure. This biography of him, written by a professor in Howard University’s School of Communications who became captivated by his radio work, is well up to the task of showcasing Durham’s exploits.

Durham easily could be compared to his friend and contemporary Langston Hughes. He went from job to job, making a living, but also carving out a niche for himself that was uniquely his own. Also like Hughes, he began his public writing as an employee of the Works Progress Administration, which hired writers during the Great Depression. At the WPA’s state division, the Illinois Writer’s Project, he met fellow writers such as Studs Terkel and learned the craft of writing radio drama. (Among his early credits is an episode of The Lone Ranger). Durham became a star reporter at the Chicago Defender, the powerhouse black newspaper, while he tried to break into radio writing. When he did, it was with Destination Freedom, a program about black historical figures that was initially sponsored by the Defender. He editorially controlled the program in the late 1940s, years before black disc jockeys became commonplace on American radio. The program only lasted two years, but it positioned Durham for the next three decades of his writing career, which lasted from his departure from Freedom in 1950 until his death at the age of sixty-six.

The most intriguing thing about this book is how much more interesting Durham is after Freedom. He went to work as an executive for the United Packinghouse Workers of America, a post that allowed him to meet a young Montgomery minister (Martin Luther King) fresh from a successful bus boycott. Durham eventually found his way back to black journalism, but in a very unusual place, with Muhammad Speaks, the organ for the Nation of Islam, the black-nationalist religious group. He was the editor of the newspaper when it became a weekly and when it squabbled publicly and violently with founder Malcolm X. Williams attempts to show Durham’s internal conflict as much as primary sources allow her, as he was forced to print columns and editorial cartoons that come dangerously close to calling for Malcolm X’s death.
In 1969, Durham became the chief writer of a pioneering PBS drama—WTTW’s *Bird of the Iron Feather*, a nighttime drama about black–white race relations in Chicago told in flashback from the diary of a dead black police-man. Then, from 1970 to 1975, he was part of Muhammad Ali’s entourage, as the fighter regained the title he sacrificed because of his conscientious objection to the Vietnam War. The book they created, *The Greatest! My Own Story*, brought Durham not only a public profile, at least as large as his radio days, but book and film-option royalties that allowed him to think and write for a time. His final public task was being a top aide to black congressman Harold Washington, who became mayor of Chicago in 1983.

The estimated fifteen years of work Williams poured into *Word Warrior* shows. She interviewed more than forty-five people and crisscrossed Durham’s collected papers in Chicago with primary source material in at least eleven university libraries and several historical societies. She tries mightily to fill the narrative gaps with the oral histories of Durham’s friends, relatives, and even his editor for the Ali autobiography, a black woman at Random House named Toni Morrison. Williams, however, tries too hard to become a dramatist. The historical narrative would have been stronger if she had placed the emphasis on Durham deeper within the context of African American broadcasting history instead of attempting to ensnare a general audience.

Williams gives new insights on not just *Destination Freedom* and Durham’s legal struggles against the management of WMAQ, the Chicago NBC affiliate that aired it (and tried to steal it), but the inner workings of *Muhammad Speaks* (a rarity in twentieth-century black American media studies) and the early days of Chicago’s PBS station. This book sets the groundwork for needed histories of Chicago’s black mass media, and of *Muhammad Speaks* and its successor within the Nation of Islam.

*Word Warrior* is too specific for an American media survey class, but the book can serve as an important supplemental resource for courses on the history of twentieth-century black media, the history of twentieth-century black Chicago, or the history of the twentieth-century Nation of Islam. By fleshing out Durham and his career, Williams rescues this mass media adventurer of the segregated and modern eras from the fate of remaining a one-paragraph entry in the history of twentieth-century US black media.