



★ **Serving Herself: The Life and Times of Althea Gibson**

Ashley Brown

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Serving Herself is Ashley Brown's impressive biography of Althea Gibson, a multifaceted trailblazer in sports.

Gibson was a sports prodigy whose drive and career path bewildered her working-class family. She had to take side gigs to finance her amateur work, and she was a "social misfit" who had to contend with conforming to postwar expectations of femininity and the constant scrutiny of "respectability politics" among paternalistic, chauvinist, and homophobic media and sponsors.

Despite all these struggles, Gibson became the first Black champion at Wimbledon, won five Grand Slam singles titles, and became the first Black American to compete on an LPGA tour and head the New Jersey Athletic Commission. Brown probes Gibson's public and private personas and uncovers fascinating details about the Black amateur tennis circuit, Gibson's time at college, and Gibson's aspirations as a singer. She delves into the reasons why Gibson was not more vocal during the civil rights movement and champions her as an athletic marvel and sports pioneer who deserves wider appreciation. This chronicle is often melancholy; Gibson had a "narrow path" to tread in order to keep in top form and secure invitations to play in country club sports. Others judged her; still, she maintained an unshakable belief in herself.

Brown's absorbing exploration of Gibson's lengthy athletic career also introduces the elite "high-toned and ultra-white" world of tennis and golf in an accessible and entertaining way. But the book is not just for sports fans: it is set against the vivid backdrop of twentieth century social history, detailing the growth of women's athletics, integration, and the 1970s golf and tennis explosion, arcing upwards even as Gibson lost power and speed.

Serving Herself traces a tennis player's iconoclastic journey to athletic greatness.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (March / April 2023)

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