

**Sweating It Out**  
Finishing Line Press  
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**Smallwood:** What is your educational background?

**Turner:** I earned successive degrees from the Universities of California, Berkeley, Michigan, and then Washington, respectively. I majored in English and minored in Native American Studies and moved on to library studies. I eventually earned my doctorate in Information Science, focusing mainly on library management and talking as a way to exchange information.

**Smallwood:** When did sports become an important part of your life?

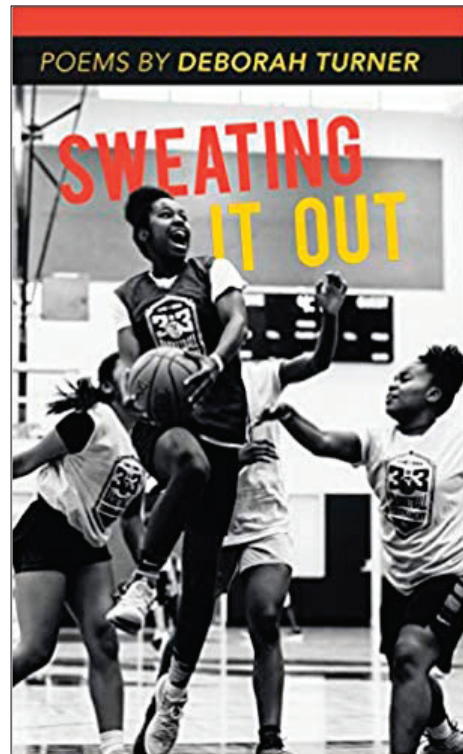
**Turner:** Very early on. My transition from playing to competing in sports went fairly easily. Likely this reflects how I benefited from Title IX. As a kid, I was very active and played sports. I've always been tall for my age. A coach once looked across the school yard and spotted me, head and shoulders above the other sixth-graders. He recruited me for a relay race. Basketball, rowing, softball, and track coaches would later repeat this gesture right up through my undergraduate years.

**Smallwood:** How did you come up with the theme for Sweating It Out?

**Turner:** A mentor and later a fellow member of my feminist writing group, Akasha (Gloria) Hull, heard my first sports poem and encouraged me. It used softball to explore the experience of becoming the family matriarch. "Five poems make up a series," she'd said. Her words motivated me to write additional jock poems, as I called them. That series has become Sweating with its sports poetry.

**Smallwood:** Some lines in the first poem in your chapbook, "Juneteenth," caught my attention:

*And the children run free  
like schools of sardines  
lacing the kelp-like crowd in jubilee.*



Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

Please share some other imagery lines using your sports background:

**Turner:** Ah, thank you for mentioning that line. I do love having been fortunate to have spent several hours mesmerized by marine creatures at the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Such experiences provide wonderful metaphors for poetry.

When elders step in to help right a situation, I feel a reverence that reminds me of the rhythmic tension involved in watching a tennis match (from “Something from Nothin”):

*...a cautious serve, slow and inviting, a volley ensued smooth as a grandfather clock tocking...*

There’s another instance of imagery in “Double Dutch,” perhaps a symbol of Me Too despite it having been written before that movement began:

*...she pretends  
It’s her turn to twirl  
and the game ends  
with rain.*

I first experienced and expressed real anger while playing in a basketball game. An 8<sup>th</sup> grade teammate prevented me from scoring. For the good of the team, I shook a fist at and then one-armed hugged her, tight. Next, I let go of the intense feelings rushing through me and kept playing, certain we could still win. Sports helped me learn how to remain grounded when emotional, while remaining present during challenging situations (“Sidelined”):

*She parents like she’s coming in off the bench.  
Been coached forever, but the real thing—well...*

It can be an incredible sensation to enter into a sporting event tentatively and come out confident—just as it is in life.

**Smallwood:** In the poem, “My Son’s Avatar” please comment on these very relevant lines:

*And I try to recall what a decade of burning bras  
and another of fighting, to make our lives matter,  
meant.*

**Turner:** Each generation does what it can, we hope, to make the world a better place. Yet, we have no idea how the next generation will make sense of our efforts. We strive so earnestly. Meanwhile, children are born; young people get old. When working to make sense of the moments we have, I’m moved to anger, sadness, laughter, and—of course—the unexpected. This poem emerges from watching a beautiful, mixed-race boy passionately select a cartoonish, stereotypically sexual girl from among all the available avatars to be his online game piece. His choice gave me pause and reminded me to make careful

wishes. It results in a poem that, among other things, conveys a warning and a wish that we work to ensure our ethical and social practices keep pace with our technological advances.

**Smallwood:** When did you become conscious of feminism?

**Turner:** Hum, what a good question. It's hard to pin down an answer. I studied it in college. Yet, I lived it as a kid. My mother was a hippie and a feminist. So, looking back, I recall being introduced to feminist ways of being from how she modeled it with her life choices. But I had no word for it back then. While studying it, I felt a sense of familiarity while reading classical works, like those in Cherrie Moraga's *This Bridge Called My Back*. I once shared a stage with her. That was a real honor.

**Smallwood:** There are not that many librarians who also are accomplished poets. How did it influence you?

**Turner:** Yes, that's true. I'm happy to be following in your accomplished footsteps. There's an interesting anthology on this theme, *Poet-Librarians in the Library of Babel: Innovative Meditations on Librarianship*. I really relate to one of its poems about finding an especially moving letter in an archival collection and getting completely distracted from my professional responsibilities! As a librarian, I worked mainly in library public services. Doing so allowed me to watch. I've listened to Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, and many other poets describe how writers need to observe. I find helping and watching how people learn how to get much-desired information very satisfying. I relate to the showing/teaching side of library work. Enjoyment in such educational activities led me into the library and information science professorate. Since, I've realized there is a strong teaching and learning element in poetry. In that way, librarianship enhanced my career as a writer, which predates mine as a librarian.

**Smallwood:** Distinguished Professor of English Education, Jeffrey D. Wilhelm (Boise State University) observed that your poems deal with "... deep issues of identity and transformation." Please share some of these lines:

**Turner:** The concepts of identity and transformation easily bring to mind how we come of age into adulthood. Yet, life is full of many moments in which we fully realize and accept who we are and use it to inform a different way of being.

A professional arrives at a new place of peace and ambition in "Time Out":

*one by one, lessons of assimilating  
fly up and out the mediation retreat window,  
taking with them the good sense your mama made you  
promise to use*

Some lines explore lovingly choosing oneself over others you love ("From the Lighthouse"):

## Wilderness House Literary Review 15/4

*May you know my love even as I leave the lighthouse.*

Other lines reflect accepting one's parents ("Black Patriarch"):

*She used to think him snake-like, shedding families like skin*

Still others focus on changing roles with one's parents ("Switch Hitting"):

*This time  
who has permission  
to grant, to deny?  
Pondering, she feels eight again  
awkwardly switch hitting...  
in the last inning  
of her mother's final season.*

**Smallwood:** Please comment on your contributions to two anthologies: Philadelphia Says: Black Lives Have Always Mattered, and Testimony:

**Turner:** I have a poem and a prose piece in these works. In Philadelphia Stories, my poem, "Young, Gifted, and Back," speaks to life after completing college. The title plays on Lorraine Hansberry's famous play. The second work Testimony has quite a sub-title... Young African-Americans on Self-Discovery and Black Identity. My prose contribution to the volume, "Letters to My Sister," provides a window into the lives of two young women, one in college; another, a mental institution.

**Smallwood:** What are you working on now?

**Turner:** I am working on a novel and a memoir. My first novel, Harvesting Her Own Cranberries is set in 1983. Harvesting tells the story of 12-year-old, mixed-race Tink, who goes missing. Readers follow Tink and her blended family, working to get her home safely. As readers learn what becomes of Tink, they'll journey with her through a cranberry farm that nurtures more than what first appears. It also touches on a theme I mention above, coming of age at different times throughout one's life. I'm also working on a memoir based on my life in West Philadelphia.

For a reading and discussion guide for Sweating It Out, or to learn more about Turner and her works, please check: <http://www.deborahturner.online>

*Carol Smallwood, MLS, MA, Marquis Lifetime Achievement Award recipient, is a literary reader, judge, interviewer; her 13<sup>th</sup> poetry collection is Thread, Form, and Other Enclosures (Main Street Rag, 2020)*