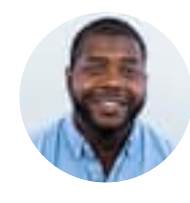


Books • Review

# Richard Antoine White once had little more than his tuba. Now, he’s a musical pioneer.



Richard Antoine White, behind the scenes during the filming of “R.A.W.,” a documentary about his life and musical career. (John Waire)



By Clyde McGrady  
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The tuba is a large, low-pitched instrument that most people associate with a marching band and those big brassy sounds that fill high school stadiums on Friday nights in the fall.

So one could be forgiven for overlooking the tuba’s elegance or its contribution to classic symphonies. Perhaps you didn’t know that one can earn a Ph.D. in tuba studies. Or that the tuba would be a vehicle for a powerful story about a young man whose focus, persistence and talent helped him survive a chaotic life in Baltimore while achieving what no Black man in his field has ever done.

*[The radical power of ordinary Black life]*

“You either slingin’ crack rock, or you got a wicked jump shot,” the Notorious B.I.G. lamented on his 1994 rap album “[Ready to Die](#).” The line depressingly argued that prospects for young Black men in urban America were so circumscribed that the only way out was the illicit drug trade or growing at least six feet tall and becoming one of the lucky and talented few to play professional basketball.

“[I’m Possible: A Story of Survival, a Tuba, and the Small Miracle of a Big Dream](#)” tells the story of how Richard Antoine White found another way: classical music.



(Flatiron)

White’s story is equal parts heartwarming and heart-wrenching. He tells of how he overcame circumstances — a family plagued by substance abuse, domestic violence and poverty, and became the first Black American to earn a doctorate of music in tuba performance.

Along the way, we meet a young Tupac Shakur, whom White befriended in the cafeteria in the 1980s when they were both students at the Baltimore School for the Arts. The two even performed together. The budding rapper challenged White to push himself and inspired him to further hone his craft, but there is sad, dramatic irony in knowing Shakur would be gunned down at age 25 after reaching the heights of music stardom.

White, who is also the star of the 2019 documentary “R.A.W. Tuba,” is a gifted storyteller. He has a knack for building suspense and placing the reader in the audition room alongside him, feeling his heart race, and making a tryout with the New Mexico Symphony Orchestra seem like a matter of life and death. That may be because for a man trying to escape White’s circumstances, it was.

Sometimes, the words White doesn’t say are just as jarring. Take this horrifying scene of violence involving his mother: “He knocked her, hard. She tripped on a chair and hit the floor. When she scrambled up, he slapped her hard enough that blood started dripping from her nose.”

In another book, the writer might expound on what has just taken place, maybe discuss the impact of domestic violence on a household. But White doesn’t linger on this shocking scene — and the implication is clear: This was not an extraordinary event. It was just another chapter in the unfolding chaos and drama of his young life.

The most enduring theme of “I’m Possible” is precariousness. White, 48, and currently an associate professor of tuba/euphonium at the University of New Mexico, is always just one mishap away from not realizing his dreams. Student loans, expensive instrument purchases and household bills all threaten to derail him. His life is in many ways unique, but good writers can locate the universal in the specific. Financial precarity is arguably the most relatable struggle in today’s economy.



Musician and author Richard Antoine White (J. Adam Fenster/J. Adam Fenster / University of Rochester)

But the story is also an ode to support networks. Early on, White is taken in by his adoptive grandparents as his mother battles alcoholism. He also has an incredible talent for attracting mentors and patrons who see his potential and want to help him, such as David Fedderly, then the principal tubist for the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra.

Historically, memoirs are written after accumulating a degree of fame. But there is a rich Black literary tradition of writers leading with memoirs. From Frederick Douglass and Lucy Delaney to Ta-Nehisi Coates, Black writers tell their stories not just to share fascinating yarns but as acts of liberation.

White’s story is inspiring, and he writes movingly about those who weren’t given the same opportunities, those without talent and a strong network, who didn’t make it out.

White’s resilience becomes more apparent as the book unfolds. He meets setback after setback, and yet finds a way to overcome. But one question lingers: Should ordinary people need to have a special talent for others to see value in their lives?

I’m Possible

A Story of Survival, a Tuba, and the Small Miracle of a Big Dream

Flatiron. 256 pp. \$27.99



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