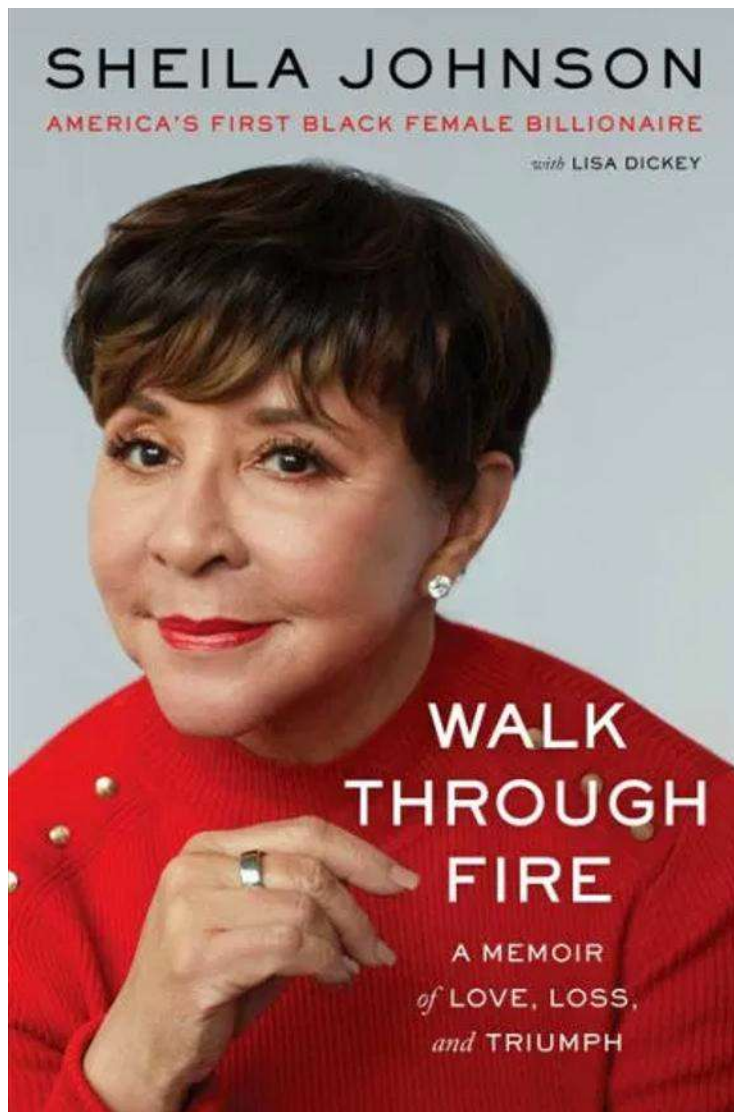


# ‘Walk Through Fire’ covers depth of Johnson’s life, career

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*“Walk Through Fire: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Triumph” by Sheila Johnson. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2023, 256 pages, \$27.99 (hardcover).*



“But you know what they say about best laid plans, don’t you?” Sheila Johnson laments near the beginning of “Walk Through Fire: A Memoir of Love, Loss, and Triumph,” a frenetically engaging and brutally honest look back at her extraordinary life journey. “Ironically enough, my fierce determination not to end up like my mother put me on a path that took me straight there. I wouldn’t see this for years, blinded as I was by love, loyalty, and a whole lot of naïveté. But the shock and fear that flooded my soul in the kitchen that day would color everything that came after in my life: My thirty-three-year marriage to Bob Johnson. My feelings about money and security. My relationships with other people, my work, and my family. Even my sense of self. And my eyes didn’t truly open to all of this until it was almost too late.”

“These days, I’m a successful businesswoman, a happy wife, a mother and grandmother,” she continues. “It might look from the outside that I had it easy, riding the rise of Black Entertainment Television to a life of wealth and privilege. But believe me when I tell you, I had to walk through

fire to get here. And after many years of staying silent, I’m ready to reveal how it all went down, in hopes that my story might help other women who find themselves facing the fire too.”

Talk about an understatement. Equal parts autobiography and psychotherapy, Johnson’s visceral description of pivotal life events and the intense introspection those experiences precipitated as she struggled to make sense of it all is nothing short of breathtaking. And inspiring. Seldom have I run

across a chronicle that elicits such strong emotions. The fact that I can now intrinsically relate to a world she describes in such vivid detail is a testament to her ability to transcend cultural barriers as she tells the story of what it was like to grapple with constraints that still impede the potential and progress of women – and especially women of color – right up to the present moment. Her prose is that powerful.

After graduating in 1970 from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, with a B.A. in music, Johnson took a job as a music teacher at a private school. By the end of the decade, she had cofounded Black Entertainment Network with her husband Robert. Viacom bought BET for \$3 billion in 2001. After her divorce in 2002, she sold her interest in the cable network and invested in horses, planes, real estate, and especially hotels. The first African-American female billionaire (as noted on the book cover), Johnson is also the first woman to be an owner or partner in three professional sports franchises; she currently owns stakes in the WNBA's Washington Mystics, the NBA's Wizards, and the NHL's Capitals.

One of the defining moments in Johnson's life was undoubtedly her decision to divorce Robert, who she married in 1969 a year before graduating from college. Witness her re-telling of the moment she realized her marriage was becoming an impediment to her children's mental and physical health as well as her own; this is from "Prayer Path," the ninth chapter:

"Susan (Starrett) was there for me over the Thanksgiving holiday in 1999, when Bob was particularly cruel to me at our family meal. I had recently joined the international board of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children, and I was telling Brett and Paige about the work we were doing. Bob said, 'Oh my god, here we go,' his voice dripping with sarcasm. 'Aren't you just something, saving the world like that.' Humiliating me in private was one thing, but doing it in front of our kids was another. So I finally stood up for myself. I told Bob to get out, that he wasn't welcome at the table if he was going to insult me. And sure enough, he pushed his chair back, put down his napkin, and walked out the door. Another meal, another moment, another day, ruined. All I could think was, 'This has to be the last one.'"

"I called Susan Starrett that night, and she and I talked until the sun rose. She helped me to see that staying with Bob was actually damaging to the kids, and that my efforts to hold the family together would do more harm than good in the long run. When I finally said aloud the words that I had dreaded for years – 'I've got to get a divorce' – she responded with sympathy and grace. 'I think you're seeing this clearly,' she told me. 'And I support you.' Finally, after all these agonizing years, I was ready."

Structurally, the book is comprised of a prologue, fourteen readily accessible chapters and an epilogue which cover the full breadth and depth of the author's life and career. Johnson's literary style is fluid and conversational; I felt as if she was talking directly to me as I made my way through various episodes and anecdotes that permeate the stranger-then-fiction transformation she describes in such exquisite detail. Moreover, the text is beautifully augmented by a 16-page photo album that brings the narrative to life in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. I didn't know much about her before I saw an interview she did with MSNBC (which is why I requested the book for review); by the time I finished the manuscript she seemed like an old friend.

As I alluded to previously, I learned a great deal from the author about a world I knew virtually nothing about for most of my life. For example, if you had asked me what CARE was before undertaking this assignment, I wouldn't have had a clue. Now I know CARE is the Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere, "an international humanitarian organization that provides emergency aid and assistance to people around the world." Johnson explains in "Zero to Sixty," the thirteenth chapter, how this organization makes a real difference:

“Women living in poverty can’t get traditional loans, not only because of sexist banking practices but also because they have nothing to offer as collateral. In microfinance programs, groups of women commit to supporting each other and being responsible for each other’s loans. They meet every few days to talk about how their small businesses are doing, make loan payments, and offer encouragement if anyone needs help. The women succeed only if they support each other – and in that, I saw a lesson for all of us, no matter our socioeconomic position. Women have got to bond together, to help each other break the dependency so many of us have on men.”

Makes perfect sense – but I would never have thought of it without the author’s superb explanation and insight. And this happened several times as I made my way through “Walk Through Fire.” Shelia Johnson has a real gift for helping people who look like me to see what it’s like for people who look like her. Which is why more people who look like me (and even those who don’t) need to read it. Highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*

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