**Felicien, Perdita. *My Mother’s Daughter: A Memoir of Struggle and Triumph.* Doubleday Canada, 2021.**

**Reviewed by Caela Fenton, University of Oregon**

“Sport mimics everyday life. It can be rewarding, and it can be entirely unfair. What we believe we deserve, what we have worked hard to attain, isn’t always what we get.”

With these words, ten-time Canadian national champion, four-time world championship medallist and Olympic hurdler Perdita Felicien rebuffs the pervasive cultural narrative of sport—a powerful act by a notable athlete.

Oprah Winfrey has a popular quote along the lines of: “Running is the greatest metaphor for life, because you get out of it what you put into it.” And this quote represents the pervasive cultural narrative of sport, which sport psychologists refer to as the “performance narrative,” the stories we see about going all in, hard work being unstoppable, and the requirement for athletes to exclude or regulate all other areas of their life to focus on sport. The performance narrative tells us that when we dedicate ourselves entirely, we’ll win, top the podium, break the record—and that those things are what make us important.

Perdita Felicien is an athlete that has, in many respects, been publicly defined by a failure. So how does she personally define herself in her memoir? Well, it means throwing out what we expect of a “sports story” and demands that we look for meaning beyond winning and identity beyond the singular figure of “the athlete.”

Felicien began writing what would become *My Mother’s Daughter* (Doubleday Canada) after retiring from professional sport in 2013. Determined not to work with a ghost writer, as many athletes do, Felicien worked through a creative writing certificate at the University of Chicago to hone her style. It was there that she decided to, in her words, “break the rules” of self-life-writing by starting the story before she was born. *My Mother’s Daughter* begins with her mother Catherine’s childhood selling seashell necklaces to tourists on the beaches of St. Lucia.

Felicien frames this decision by stating, “I could have just told you my sports story...but I could never just write a sports story...the foundation of my life is my mother’s story. How could I tell the sports story if you don’t know how I got here?” As such, *My Mother’s Daughter* is a sports story in a refreshing light, one that communicates how sport does not exist in a vacuum, no athlete is just “an athlete,” that sports stories are also intergenerational stories and immigration stories, and that they can contain domestic abuse, racism and financial instability.

For those expecting details of a collegiate and professional training program, workout descriptions, or advice about how to improve their hurdling, this is not your book. Felicien doesn’t even get to her first experience with track and field until about halfway through the memoir. But what comes before that experience is foundational to understanding her as a person and as an athlete—charting her mother’s struggles as an underpaid domestic labourer and Felicien’s complex relationship with her father and his treatment of her mother. The women’s shelter, The Denise House, that Felicien and her family stayed in for a period of time in 1987, is receiving a portion of all proceeds from *My Mother’s Daughter*.

The performance narrative is almost universally identifiable in mainstream athletic memoirs. Media columnist Bryan Curtis pithily describes the formula for the “jockography” as 1) beginning with the athlete’s most memorable performance; 2) charting how sport got them through their unhappy childhood and; 3) follows their trajectory to stardom. This formula is uncannily similar to the “athlete hero narrative” that literary scholars have identified, in which the underdog experiences some success, faces a series of difficult setbacks, goes all-in, rallies, overcomes, and then he (as Angie Abdou and Jamie Dopp note in their anthology of Canadian sport literature “yes, it is almost always a he”) wins. (*Once a Runner*, anyone?).

Felicien, conversely, does not just chart her rise to success (in fact, she seems to frame her incredible athletic talent as the least interesting thing about her), but also intimately details the heartbreaking experience of falling in the 2004 Olympic Finals when she was the gold medal favourite. In the book, she gives herself some of the space to grieve that loss, which is not something athletes are encouraged to do, in part because of the enculturation of the performance narrative, which means experiences of failure have to be immediately framed as reasons to “stage a comeback” or “overcome.” Felicien writes: “Looking back, what I needed wasn’t someone to help me get back on the horse—at least not initially. What I needed was someone removed from the pursuit of sporting excellence, who was simply there to help me deal with my broken heart.”

And then, during training for the 2008 Olympics, or “the comeback,” a terrible accident occurs during training. During a practice, Felicien and a training partner’s hurdles were placed on the wrong marks, a small mistake with the major consequence of Felicien fracturing her foot. It is pretty hard to frame an experience like that as: “you get out of it what you put into it.” Felicien ultimately ends up attending the 2008 Olympics, not as an athlete, but as part of the broadcasting team.

*My Mother’s Daughter* is not a story of overcoming the origins of one’s birth, or overcoming injury, but rather one that affirms that you do not have to stand on the top of the podium to be worthy of love, respect and safety. Running, and the broader sport community, could use more of such narratives, those that provide counterstories to a singularity in focus on performance, and place athletes not as icons of rugged individualism, but within their relational networks of kinship.

The ultimate message of the book is delivered by Felicien’s mother to her in the aftermath of her 2004 fall: “*You* are the gold, my darling.”