

# DURHAM COUNTY LIBRARY

## Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

---

*Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family*  
by  
Pauli Murray  
(Boston : Beacon Press, 1999, c1956.)

---

### **Author:**

Pauli Murray (1910 – 1985) was a life-long champion for civil and human rights who grew up in Durham. As a historian, attorney, poet, activist, teacher and Episcopal priest, she worked to address injustice, educate and promote reconciliation between races and economic classes.

### **Summary:**

Pauli Murray's book *Proud Shoes: The Story of an American Family* (1956) is as much a story about Durham as it is about her family. Her descriptions of places and people in Durham and her analysis of Durham's roots offer tremendous insight into our community's contemporary culture.

Her autobiography, *Song in a Weary Throat: An American Pilgrimage* (1987) reissued with new title, *Pauli Murray: The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (1989) traces her life of exceptional activism, adventure and passion.

Her volume of poetry, *Dark Testament and Other Poems* (1970) is lyrical and profound, foreshadowing a time when Americans would be reckoning with their past in order to redefine their ideas of citizenship and identity.

Pauli Murray is a great writer, so her books are fun to read. Her compelling narratives bring to life the experiences of African Americans who emerged from slavery and weathered Jim Crow laws, people who fought for the opportunity to contribute to Durham, our region and our nation. You will learn about the social and cultural forces that shaped Durham's early history through stories of kindness and cruelty, hard work, celebration and disappointment. Her keen descriptions will make you will want to go and see the house she grew up in and the neighborhoods she walked through.

### **Questions:**

1. How do Pauli Murray's descriptions of her family life in *Proud Shoes* compare to the story of your family? What are the similarities and differences?
2. Pauli Murray describes post Civil War North Carolina as a time when African Americans had a great hunger for education. Does this same hunger for education exist in Durham today? In the minds of the freed slaves, education was intimately

connected to freedom and their own ability to rise in the world. How do you view the relationship between education, freedom and economic opportunity today?

3. The West End neighborhood and Maplewood Cemetery are both important places Pauli Murray describes in the book. What are your thoughts/memories about those places? How do you respond to Pauli Murray's description of Durham in its first seventy-five years?
4. Pauli Murray describes the very different early lives of her grandmother Cornelia Smith Fitzgerald and her grandfather Robert Fitzgerald. Their respective ideas about the meaning of the Civil War, Emancipation and Reconstruction diverged greatly even though they were married to each other and loved each other very much. How did reading these two accounts affect your thinking about the Southern experience during this time?
5. Pauli Murray said, "True emancipation lies in the acceptance of the whole past, in deriving strength from all my roots, in facing up to the degradation as well as the dignity of my ancestors." (pg. 61) Pauli Murray, in this quote, was referring to her own personal journey. What does this mean to you when you think of the Durham community?
6. Pauli Murray carefully describes social relations in Durham at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. How does her experience compare to social relations in Durham today? What kind of progress have we made? What issues continue to challenge us?
7. Pauli Murray talks about the shifting attitudes in Durham over time about race and suggests there is more to it than just black and white. How does your family or your personal experience compare to this idea?
8. Pauli Murray writes about her historical experience of the variations in skin color among both white and black Americans and its implications in terms of status and how people treated each other in public and private spaces. How do her observations compare to your/our contemporary experience?
9. Pauli Murray identifies herself as a mixed-race person as does Barack Obama. How do the ways Murray and Obama identify compare to mainstream racial categories? Do you think their perspectives offered them any new insights or understandings? Historically, white supremacists have used charges of miscegenation and "race-mixing" to instill fear and animosity in the larger community, and marriages among people of different races was illegal in many states until the 1960s. Today, the interracial landscape in American is very different. In your experience, how is mixed-race heritage viewed today? Could this identification be seen today as an advantage, or not?
10. After the Civil War, Pauli Murray's grandfather, Robert Fitzgerald, was very hopeful about the power of the voting booth for newly freed African Americans. He believed

that reconciliation between the races was possible at that time. How do you view prospects of racial reconciliation today?

11. Pauli Murray very honestly describes her experiences around the issues of race, class, color and gender. How would you describe your experience around race, class, color and gender in Durham today? How might we describe our experience around race, class, color and gender as a community?
12. “As I look back on those years in grandfather’s house I see that I inhabited a world of unbelievable contradictions.” (pg. 266) In this quote Pauli Murray refers to the culture of her family in juxtaposition to the culture of the worlds, both white and black around her. She is also referring to her grandparents’ different experiences of the Civil War. What kinds of contradiction do you experience today? Are they focused on the same kinds of issues that Pauli Murray describes?
13. Durham is home to several monuments and public memorials, from the Confederate soldier on the lawn of the Durham County courthouse to the Pauli Murray *True Community* mural near Durham Central Park. What do you think about the value and importance of memorials? What or whom do you think should be memorialized in Durham?

[Content provided by Pauli Murray Project]