

A GUIDE TO

Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years

Sarah L. Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany
with Amy Hill Hearth

*"I'm a hundred-and-one years old and at my age, honey,
I can say what I want!"*

THE BOOK AT A GLANCE

Having Our Say is an oral history—an account spoken by a participant in or a witness to historical events, or by a teller carrying on an oral tradition. It chronicles the endurance and determination of two centenarian African American women who triumphed over prejudice and sexism.

Form of Book: Memories and anecdotes related directly by the two Delany sisters to journalist Amy Hill Hearth who then arranged the narratives chronologically in chapters. The chapters are grouped into seven parts, each with a short introduction by Hearth.

Point of View: Most chapters are narrated from the first-person point of view by one of the sisters; some are narrated jointly by both sisters.

Major Places and Time Periods Covered: St. Mary's, Georgia, and Yak, Virginia, c. 1831–c. 1910; Raleigh, North Carolina, 1880s–1916; Harlem, New York, 1916–c. 1945; Bronx, New York, c. 1945–1957; Mount Vernon, New York, 1957–present.

Speakers: Sadie (Sarah L.) and Bessie (A. Elizabeth) Delany, African American sisters born a generation after the Civil War, who recount their experiences from the days of segregationist Jim Crow laws through the modern civil rights and feminist movements.

Tone: The overall tone is one of pride, satisfaction, and self-confidence in a lifetime of accomplishment. Some memories are tinged with sadness over losses endured; some are fraught with righteous anger over injustices suffered.

Major Themes: Education and hard work can triumph over poverty and prejudice. Commitment to helping others leads to fulfillment and satisfaction. Family unity and religious faith are reliable supports throughout life.

SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

The vocabulary in this oral history should pose no problems to upper-level students, even though the speakers occasionally use dialect. There are no sexual situations or profanity, but the speakers do quote several racial epithets. Details of violent lynchings (Chapter 12) may disturb some students.

BACKGROUND

Jim Crow. This term, traced as far back as the 1730s, became a common expression in the 1880s and 1890s, and it continued into the twentieth century as an umbrella term for the systemic segregation of African Americans. The term at first referred to dances performed by black slaves. Then in 1828, it became a popular minstrel-show song written by Thomas D. Rice, "the father of American minstrelsy," and was performed both by black singers and by white performers in blackface. Segregation existed long before Jim Crow laws made it official in the South in the 1890s; for example, as early as 1841 the Boston Railroad had a "black only" or "Jim Crow" car, the kind of car that Sadie describes in Chapter 11.

The Harlem Renaissance. The cultural explosion that marked Harlem in the 1920s and early 1930s has been called a renaissance because it reflected not only artistic achievement but also artistic diversity. Writers—notably Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and James Weldon Johnson—made up the core of the movement. They produced a body of lyric and narrative works that gave expression to African American life with a poetic realism the country had not seen before. The writers flourished alongside the greats of the Jazz Age such as Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith, and Duke Ellington.

The Civil Rights Movement. The political and social activism known as the civil rights movement became a major force in the 1950s. The movement was energized by the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) mandating the

desegregation of public schools. Black Americans rose up against the cruelties and indignities of “separate and unequal” America. Protests, boycotts, and marches—some peaceful, some violent—spread rapidly and led to the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed segregation in public facilities and racial discrimination in education and employment. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 followed. During the 1960s and subsequent decades, further progress was achieved, despite setbacks like the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., in April 1968. Nonetheless, as the experience of the Delanys attests, racial prejudice has continued to be a major problem in the United States.

MAJOR PEOPLE IN THE BOOK

Sadie Delany, second child of Henry and Nanny Delany, born 1889; first black person to teach domestic science in New York City public high schools; after 1956, “the head of the family”; one of the two narrators of this oral history.

Bessie Delany, third child of Henry and Nanny Delany, born 1891; studies dentistry at Columbia University and becomes the second black woman licensed to practice dentistry in New York; one of the two narrators of this oral history; died 1995.

SUMMARY

Preface. Journalist Amy Hill Hearth tells of meeting Sadie and Bessie Delany in Mount Vernon, New York, in September 1991, when she was on assignment from *The New York Times* to write an article about them. She came to realize how these two extraordinary women had coped with racism in their individual ways—Sadie by manipulating the system, Bessie through confrontation. Hearth explains that she wove together **anecdotes** the sisters told her from September 1991 to April 1993 and that the words are all the Delanys’—that is, the book is told from the **first-person point of view**.

Part I

Hearth relates that the Delanys were a legendary family in Raleigh, North Carolina, and later in Harlem. The black press held them up as a model family that thrived through education, civic involvement, ethical living, and religious belief.

Chapter 1. The **oral history** begins as Sadie recalls her father, an Episcopal bishop, and her mother, an “issue-free Negro.” Sadie was born in Virginia in 1889; Bessie was born in 1891 in Raleigh, North Carolina, like all the other Delany children. Sadie uses **direct characterization** to describe Bessie as a “feeling” child, sensitive and emotional; she characterizes herself as a “mama’s child,” obedient and agreeable. The **style** of the narration is distinguished by the use of **colloquial speech** and **aphorisms** such as “If it helps just one person, then it’s worth doing.”

Chapter 2. Bessie reveals herself to be more feisty and assertive than Sadie, and she uses **metaphors** to

characterize herself and her sister: Sadie is molasses, Bessie is vinegar; Sadie is sugar, Bessie is spice. Bessie is able to forgive but not to forget, and she particularly condemns racists—“rebbly boys”—who learn early to hate. Sadie, she says, is a true Christian, but her own secret of longevity is the “meanness” that keeps her going.

Chapter 3. Instead of a telephone, which the sisters refuse to have in their home, Sadie prefers to rely on the mail and on Bessie’s intuition. She confides, however, that Bessie watches the neighborhood from her window and is really “a nosy old gal.”

Chapter 4. Bessie loves to laugh, and she sings a funny song that she and Sadie used to sing in the 1890s. Oppressed people, she believes, have a good sense of humor.

Part II

Hearth explains that during the Reconstruction era after the Civil War, the Delanys fared better than most blacks and became stellar examples of the success achieved by the black middle class through entrepreneurship.

Chapter 5. Sadie and Bessie recall their papa, saying that he was well treated on the Mock family plantation in St. Mary’s, Georgia. Nevertheless, on the day the Civil War ended in 1865, when he was only a small boy, he ran about yelling “I am free!” Unlike many freed slaves, who found life very hard after the war, the Delanys learned trades, and Henry attended Saint Augustine’s School in Raleigh, North Carolina, with the help of a white Episcopal priest.

Chapter 6. With evident pride, Sadie and Bessie tell the story of their grandmother, Martha Logan, who lived with James Miliam, a white man. Miliam loved and protected Martha, farmed, pulled teeth, and worked as a root doctor (one who heals with medicinal herbs). Martha and James were deeply devoted to each other, although the law would not allow them to marry, and Nanny Logan—Sadie and Bessie’s mama—was born to them in 1861. After Miliam’s death in 1910, Mama inherited the farm, fought off a legal challenge by a white nephew, and kept the precious land in the family.

Part III

Hearth provides background on the rise of black colleges such as Saint Augustine’s (known as Saint Aug’s).

Chapter 7. Sadie and Bessie tell of their parents’ meeting at Saint Aug’s, marrying in 1886, and raising ten children.

Chapter 8. Sadie uses **direct characterization** when she says that Mama was a strict disciplinarian, but her **indirect characterization** of Mama by describing her actions is stronger: She recounts Mama’s back-breaking life as a working mother and tells how the family thrived on love and mutual respect although they had little money.

Chapter 9. In a **tone** of fond and humorous nostalgia, Bessie recalls her pet pig, which had to be “turned into

bacon” because it bit someone. She also describes family musicales at which each child played.

Part IV

Chapter 10. In a chapter of painful memories, Sadie and Bessie personalize the Jim Crow era. They encountered Jim Crow laws first in about 1896 in Raleigh, when they were forced to sit in the back of a trolley. Going to the drugstore for a limeade also led to a memorable scene: They describe the **irony** of being refused service in the drugstore, which was owned by a white man who “had a colored family on the side” and who should have respected their basic human rights.

Chapter 11. Sadie’s memory of two white china dolls given to her and Bessie by missionaries points up differences in the sisters’ characters: Sadie accepts and loves her doll as it is, but Bessie paints hers brown to match her skin.

Chapter 12. In a **tone** of fierce resentment, Bessie focuses on the main **external conflict**—how her experience of racism, from being called demeaning names to being terrorized by accounts of lynchings, has made her suffer. Although they were somewhat protected by living on the campus of Saint Aug’s, the Delanys feared racist violence.

Chapter 13. In 1910, Sadie takes a job setting up classes in domestic science in Wake County, North Carolina. She does the work of the superintendent (without credit) and has the honor of driving Booker T. Washington (1856–1915), the noted educator and black leader, on a tour of the schools. Through **indirect characterization**, Sadie’s compassion becomes apparent when she describes the plight of people who needed help with the basics of hygiene, food preparation, and baby care.

Chapter 14. **Motivated** to earn money for college, Bessie teaches elementary school in North Carolina from 1911 to 1913 and in Georgia beginning in 1913.

Part V

Chapter 15. Sadie and Bessie move to New York (Sadie in 1916, Bessie a year and a half later) to attend college. In about 1919, they move into their brother Lucius’ apartment with their sister Julia and brother Hubert. Despite cramped rooms and hard work, the Delanys love Harlem because they have the chance there to build a better life.

Chapter 16. Sadie graduates from Pratt Institute in 1918 (where she is the only black woman in the domestic science division) and from Columbia University’s Teachers College in 1920; she decides to make her living in New York.

Chapter 17. Bessie enrolls in the dental school at Columbia University in 1919.

Chapter 18. Sadie tells of teaching at P.S. 119 in Harlem in 1920 and making candy to earn extra money. When she applied for a high school position, Sadie avoided the interview—fearing racial prejudice

would deny her the job—and simply showed up for work. Her teaching career flourished, and between 1930 and 1960 she taught domestic science at several New York high schools.

Chapter 19. Bessie tells of establishing a dental practice with her brother Hap (Henry). Known as “Dr. Bessie,” she became famous throughout Harlem, taking all patients, no matter what disease they had or whether they could pay, and working long hours. Her career embodies the **theme** of the triumph of education and hard work.

Chapter 20. In Sadie’s words, she and Bessie “did not venture too far into the jazz scene” in Harlem in the 1920s, although they met many famous musicians, including Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, and Lena Horne. Their friends, such as William Kelly, the editor of the influential *Amsterdam News*, were mostly professionals.

Chapter 21. Bessie recalls her one encounter with the Ku Klux Klan—in about 1925—when she and a boyfriend were driving back from a beach on Long Island and managed to avoid a roadblock set up by about twenty white-hooded men. Bessie says the incident made her more of an activist, and she went on to march in many civil rights protests.

Chapter 22. Sadie quietly recalls her greatest accomplishment—saving her cousin Daisy’s life. Daisy had pellagra (a disease caused by nutritional deficiencies), and Sadie provided her with menu plans, vitamins, and twenty dollars a month for food. Sadie told no one except Bessie, and her acts **characterize** her as generous and self-effacing.

Chapter 23. Bessie tells of the shock of Papa’s death in 1928, after which she helps Mama move to New York. In 1929, when her brother Hubert runs unsuccessfully for Congress in Harlem, Bessie’s dental office serves as his campaign headquarters.

Chapter 24. Sadie tells of several trips she takes with her mother, including their 1930 European trip when they saw the noted African American actor Paul Robeson in London performing in Shakespeare’s *Othello*.

Chapter 25. Bessie recounts her 1932 trip to Jamaica. In a **tone** of deep sadness, she tells of scenes of heart-breaking poverty.

Part VI

Chapter 26. In a tragically emotional chapter, Sadie and Bessie tell the story of Little Hubie, Julia’s only child and a victim of birth defects. A beautiful child beloved by the entire family, Hubie was enrolled in a special hospital school at Columbia University and given the best possible care. Nevertheless, he died of pneumonia in 1943 at the age of ten. His death was traumatic for the childless sisters.

Chapter 27. Sadie and Bessie share memories of the World War II victory garden that they planted so that

they could help the war effort by growing their own vegetables. The sisters remember their joy at the war's end, but they lament the use of the atomic bomb. After the war, they move to a little cottage in the Bronx.

Chapter 28. Bessie retires from her job in 1950 in order to care for Mama, now frail but “still full of spunk.” With sadness she recounts the deaths of her brothers Manross (1955) and Lemuel (1956), of Mama (1956), of her brothers Samuel (1960) and Lucius (1969), and of her sister Julia (1974).

Chapter 29. Sadie recalls her grief at her mother's death, a death that hurt her more than any other except for Little Hubie's. She had always been dependent on Mama and felt the loss profoundly. In part to get over Mama's death, the sisters buy a house in Mount Vernon, New York.

Part VII

Chapter 30. Bessie explains that in 1957 Mount Vernon was mostly white, and she recalls being mistaken for a maid by the white Welcome Wagon lady. In a **tone** of pride and delight, she points out that the Delany property is the neatest on the block. Bessie recalls her distress at the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Malcolm X, the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., and Senator Robert Kennedy. She feels that the energy of young Americans shifted away from civil rights when protests against the Vietnam War began.

Chapter 31. Sadie describes the sisters' daily regimen and says that age is making her a little “bold.” For example, when a gang of young men started hanging out in front of her house, she faced them, asserted herself, and made them leave.

Chapter 32. Bessie recounts sometimes feeling the blues because of her age, although she is sure she still has the skill to practice dentistry. She tells of the hurt she felt when her little brother Hubert died in 1990 and her brother Hap in 1991. Bessie delights in having her say in this book, and she ends on a note of increased optimism: She feels she may just get into Heaven after all.

APPROACHES FOR POST-READING ACTIVITIES

Discussion groups or students doing individual research projects might focus on the following activities.

1. Identifying and Applying Themes

Discussion groups can articulate the themes that

emerge from *Having Our Say* (or from *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom*) and tell how the themes relate to popular culture or to other real-life situations:

- Students can choose a character from a movie or television show and tell what advice the Delanys might give that character.
- They can choose a popular song or folk song that reflects a theme of *Having Our Say* and tell in what way it does so.
- They can choose a recent historical event and tell what comment the Delanys might make on it.

2. Making a Time Line

Because the Delany sisters' reminiscences evoke so much of American history, students can make a time line that shows historical, cultural, and personal information:

- historical events spanning the American scene from slavery to the present
- cultural events, especially African American achievements that affected the Delanys' lives
- personal events in the Delanys' lives

3. Exploring Other Oral Histories

Students can read, listen to, and report on historical chronicles related by the people who lived them, focusing on common themes, forms, and styles:

- traditional narratives of American Indians
- life stories of American immigrants
- survival stories of the Holocaust
- reminiscences of war veterans

READ ON

Having Our Say, a dramatization by Emily Mann. In April 1995, it opened on Broadway, starring Gloria Foster and Mary Alice. The play, available in paperback, earned three Tony nominations.

Sarah L. Delany and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth, *The Delany Sisters' Book of Everyday Wisdom* (1994). Anecdotes on such topics as “Lessons in Living” and “Standing on Your Own.”

Langston Hughes, “Harlem.” A lyric poem that offers a response to remembered injustice.

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959). A noted drama of an African American family's struggle to realize its dreams.

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