



Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years

By Sarah L. Delany, A. Elizabeth Delany, Amy Hill Hearth

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Warm, feisty, and intelligent, the Delany sisters speak their mind in a book that is at once a vital historical record and a moving portrait of two remarkable women who continued to love, laugh, and embrace life after over a hundred years of living side by side.

Their sharp memories show us the post-Reconstruction South and Booker T. Washington; Harlem's Golden Age and Langston Hughes, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Paul Robeson. Bessie breaks barriers to become a dentist; Sadie quietly integrates the New York City system as a high school teacher. Their extraordinary story makes an important contribution to our nation's heritage—and an indelible impression on our lives.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

"I never thought I'd see the day that the world would want to hear what two old Negro women have to say," says Bessie Delany. But Bessie and her sister, Sadie, born in 1893 and 1891, saw plenty, by eating a low-fat, high-vegetable diet and outliving the "old Rebby [rebel] boys" who once almost lynched Sadie. This remarkable memoir was a long-running bestseller, spawning a Broadway play and adding to their list of seasoned acquaintances (Marian Anderson, Langston Hughes, Paul Robeson, Cab Calloway) such spring chickens as Hillary Clinton. Born to a former slave whose owners broke the law by teaching him to read, the sisters got a solid education. North Carolina was paradise--despite the Rebbies--until Jim Crow reared its hideous head. The girls had loved to ride in the front of the trolley because the wind in their hair made them feel free, but one day the conductor sadly ordered them to the back. The family moved to New York, where Bessie became the town's second black woman dentist and Sadie the first black woman home-ec teacher. They befriended everyone who was anyone in the Harlem Renaissance (their brother won the 1925 Congressional primary there), pursued careers instead of husbands, and lived peacefully together, despite their differences. Sadie was more peaceable, like Booker T. Washington, while Bessie was a W.E.B. Du Bois-style militant.

They're funny: Bessie notes that blacks must be sharp to get ahead, "But if you're average and white, honey, you can go far. Just look at Dan Quayle. If that boy was colored he'd be washing dishes somewhere." And they are wise: Sadie says, "Life is short, and it's up to you to make it sweet."

From Publishers Weekly

In this remarkable and charming oral history, two lively and perspicacious sisters, aged 101 and 103, reflect on their rich family life and their careers as pioneering African American professionals. Brief chapters capture Sadie's warm voice ("Now, I was a 'mama's child' ") and Bessie's fiestiness ("I'm alive out of sheer determination, honey!"). The unmarried sisters, who live together, tell of growing up on the campus of a black college in Raleigh, N.C., where their father was an Episcopal priest, and of being too independent for the men who courted them. With parental influence far stronger than that of Jim Crow, they joined professions--Sadie teaching domestic science, Bessie practicing dentistry. In 1920s Harlem they mixed with black activists and later were among the first to integrate the New York City suburb of Mount Vernon. While their account of the last 40 years is sketchy, their observations about everything from black identity to their yoga exercises make them worthwhile company. Freelancer Hearth, who wrote an initial story on the sisters in the New York Times in 1991, has deftly shaped and contextualized their reflections. Photos. 35,000 first printing; first serial to American Heritage; BOMC alternate.

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From Library Journal

The Delany sisters' story is a collective meditation on American life since Sadie's birth in 1889 and Bessie's in 1891 in Raleigh, North Carolina. As daughters of a black Episcopal bishop, they experienced the multifarious damage and distance of class and race in the segregated South. The sisters migrated to New York City's Harlem in the 1910s and in the 1950s to the suburb of Mt. Vernon, New York. The assertive Bessie battled racism and sexism as the only black female member of her Columbia University Dental School class in the 1920s. The more reticent Sadie became the first black domestic science teacher in the New York City high schools. Through the prism of poignant, personal episodes, these honest, thoughtful reminiscences illuminate two individual lives and a multitude of encounters along gender and color lines.

Recommended for general collections on African Americans, women, and 20th-century America.

- *Brenda Brock, SUNY-Buffalo*

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George Degregorio:

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