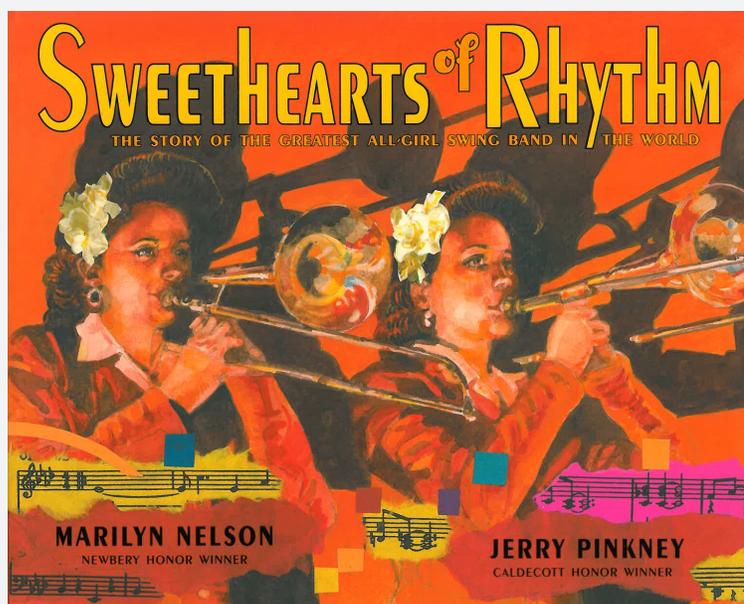


## First Opinion: The Rhythms of Swing as Social Dialogue for Understanding World War II America

Nelson, Marilyn. Illus. Jerry Pinkney. *Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World*. New York: Dial Books, 2009.

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*Sweethearts of Rhythm* is an inspirational story of a resilient, diverse World War II-era all-female swing band that refused to be bounded by racism and sexism. These powerful jazz divas sought to delight and uplift a war weary populace rather than conform to societal misconceptions. Historically, jazz music as rhythmic dialogue has governed the social context in the United States. A confluence of African and European, it is uniquely American. Born out of the southern discomfort African Americans faced at the beginning of the twentieth century, jazz music utilizes improvisational rhythms and swing notes popular in West Africa. For many Americans swathed in the complexities of a world war, jazz music was more than syncopation. The sweet sounds of swing played on trombones, drums, saxophones, and bass changed the method by which this generation of citizens observed music, cultural dynamics, and themselves during trying times. *Sweethearts of*

*Rhythm* provides distinctive odes to those whose vibrant tones fortified the American spirit and challenged democratic principles.

Through a series of syncopated poems, the author describes the promise of jazz music against the backdrop of war and racial segregation; an atypical World War II picture book, *Sweethearts of Rhythm* brings into relief lived experiences of an all-female band who set out to prove that all are created equal. Vivid metaphors are used to personify an ensemble of musical instruments. Through words and pictures, each melodic tool describes the story of and relationship to their owners. *Sweethearts of Rhythm* opens with a galvanizing recount of how several brass instruments found their way into the hands of an all “gals’ swing band way back in the day” (unpaged). From there, each instrument brings to life the sound of World War II American society, which included blues in C and high hat tickle beats. The audience is taken on a musical journey where Latinas, Blacks, and Whites produced sounds that conveyed a sense of shared sacrifice and common ground. In the haze of Jim Crow, swing music accorded culturally different women an opportunity to assert their talents in a “man’s profession” (unpaged). For me, the most intriguing aspect of this piece is how key verses highlighted America’s original sins: racial oppression, gender discrimination, and poverty. For example, “Jump, Jump, Jump” emphasized economic disparity and the infirmities of racial apartheid prevalent in “the United States of Colored America” (unpaged).

Time and again we are inundated with stories portraying the heroism and tribulations of World War II soldiers. In converse, several notable children’s trade books have chronicled the exploits of women who resembled the fictitious “Rosie the Riveter” or who dared to dream of an all-female baseball league. But what of the other women who remained at home? *Sweethearts of Rhythm* fantastically demonstrates the totality of American women during the war. It utilizes words, art, symbols, and stories to extend children’s perceptions of World War II American society. This quality piece of children’s literature can be quite helpful in teaching social studies concepts to elementary students; moreover, the book can provide memorable social information about World War II-era women’s actions; influence student acquisition of social studies specific knowledge; and encourage an agility of mind needed to fuse social studies oriented knowledge, processes, and dispositions. For this reason, *Sweethearts of Rhythm* is a marvelous asset for any elementary classroom.

### About the Author

**Chrystal S. Johnson**, an assistant professor of social studies education at Purdue University, has publications in the *Journal of Research in Character Education*, *Theory and Research in Social Education*, and *Social Studies and the Young Learner*. She currently serves as president of the Indiana Council for the Social Studies and the African American Educators for Social Studies.