Second Reaction: A Singing and Swinging Partnership—Marilyn Nelson and Jerry Pinkney Bring History Alive

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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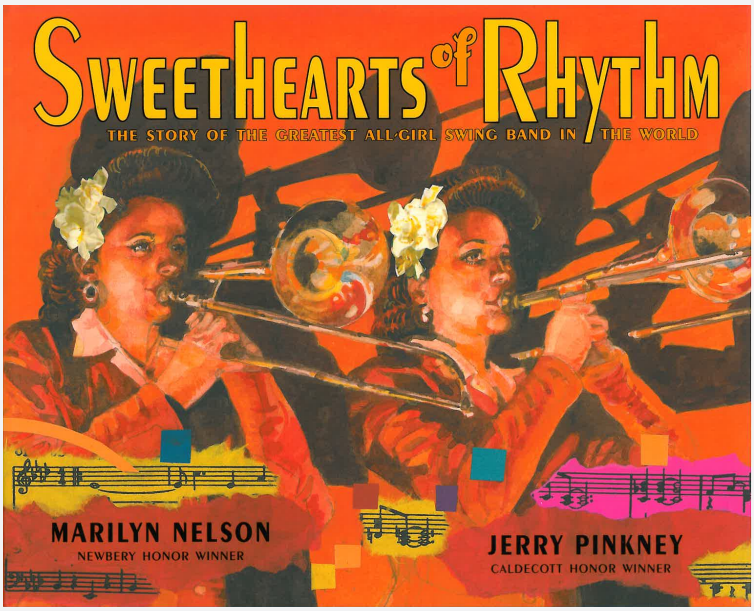

Bring together the thought-provoking, poignant poetry of outstanding contemporary poet Marilyn Nelson and the lyrical, rich signature watercolors of Jerry Pinkney, and it is hard to imagine an end result that is anything less than stellar. *Sweethearts of Rhythm* delivers all that readers have come to expect from its award-winning creators . . . and much more.

This picture poetry book tells the story of the daring young women from the Piney Woods Country Life School in Piney Woods, Mississippi "for poor and orphaned African American Children" (unpaged) who formed the first integrated all-girl jazz band in the world. Established in the late 1930s, the band traveled the US and abroad, sharing their music and crossing racial, class, and gender boundaries in unprecedented ways. With African American, Asian, Hawaiian, White, Latina, and Native American members, this World War II-era international phenomenon defied Jim Crow laws while filling a void left

by male musicians serving in the war. For some of the Sweethearts, this meant wearing dark makeup and wigs while performing to "pass" as Negroes since it was illegal for Blacks and Whites to perform together.

Nelson takes creative license, telling each musician's story from the perspective of the instrument she played and titling each poem after a tune from the swing era. In "Galvanizing," (unpaged) the first poem, for instance, Nina De La Cruz's "ancient tenor sax," which now sits dusty in a New Orleans pawn shop, tells about its life a "thousand, thousand gigs ago" (unpaged) when it spent time on the road with the all-girl band. Three trombones in the same pawn shop add their voices as they tell of being played by Ina Belle Byrd, Judy Bayron, and Helen Jones, respectively. Despite their current neglected state, the four instruments recall their shinier days and still enjoy an occasional swing together. Readers who bring preconceived notions to the book of what instruments women of this era played might be surprised by the bagpipes, the accordion, the drums, baritone sax, and bass. These speaking instruments tell of love, of loss, of the relationships between the women who played them and their soldier boyfriends or husbands, and of the motivations of the women for remaining with or leaving the band.

Striking for the sense of motion they convey and their vibrant colors, Pinkney's watercolors accompany Nelson's poems, but every few pages, a wordless, double-page spread appears. These depict expansive scenes of the players with their instruments, the entire band performing, and snippets of what life was like for Americans during this difficult time in history. Following the poem "Red-Hot Mama" (unpaged) of trumpeter "Tiny" Davis, which tells of hard times, internment camps, and D-Day, is a double-page, full-color illustration of a man carefully tending his victory garden on the left juxtaposed against a sepia image of travelers arriving at an internment camp on the right. Sprinkled throughout all of the illustrations are colorful clippings from swing sheet music of the 1930s and 1940s that seem embedded in the very fabric of the images because of the collage technique that Pinkney used to create them. Pinkney comments in the "Author's Note": "I'd like my art to look the way that music sounds." It does. But the historical details he includes are just as powerful as these musical-aural images. In the sepia depiction of a Dust Bowl scene, for example, while the dust has buried a wagon, a truck, the fence rails, and most of a house, still, the snippets of music, which contain some of the few bits of color in this scene, float above the landscape as if to imply that despite the Depression, the dust, poverty, and loss, music can prevail to bring a bright spot to the bleakest situation. This image generated the most discussion with my seven-year-old daughter, with whom I read the book. Although Amelia has not yet learned about the Dust Bowl and therefore could not understand why dust would cover so much of the landscape, she did notice that the colorful musical stanzas amidst that dust gives the illustration a little bit of color and therefore maybe a little hope as well.

As Nelson does in *A Wreath for Emmett Till* (2005) and as Pinkney does in *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman* (1996), this book does some important recovery work, particularly since this will be the first exposure that many contemporary young readers have to the historical details of the lives of these talented women. The inclusion in the back of the book of a photograph of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm brings home the reality of who they were and what they accomplished. "Fiction" and "non-fiction" are still somewhat elusive concepts for my daughter, but when she saw this photograph, she exclaimed, "Oh, so they were real!" Indeed they were. And this wonderful, visually stunning picture book helps to bring them to life for readers. Perhaps the next edition will also include a CD of their music—an addition that would undoubtedly give readers a richer understanding of these women who loved to swing and whose music, in Jerry Pinkney's words, "became a balm to all Americans."

Works Cited

Nelson, Marilyn. Illus. Philippe Lardy. *A Wreath for Emmett Till*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005.

Schroeder, Alan. Illus. Jerry Pinkney. *Minty: A Story of Young Harriet Tubman.* New York: Dial, 1996.

About the Author

Michelle Martin, an associate professor of English at Clemson University in South Carolina, published *Brown Gold: Milestones of African-American Children's Picture Books, 1845-2002* with Routledge in 2004 and co-edited (with Claudia Nelson) *Sexual Pedagogies: Sex Education in Britain, Australia, and America, 1879-2000* (Palgrave, 2003). Martin is currently working on a book-length critical examination of the collaborative and individual works that Arna Bontemps and Langston Hughes wrote for young people during their friendship and collaborative working relationship that lasted from the 1920s until the 1960s.