



## Book Collaboration Expands Boundaries for the Artist, the Poet—and Readers



**Jerry Pinkney and Marilyn Nelson Collaborate to Capture a Story and a Sound in**

***Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World***

Children's illustrator Jerry Pinkney's latest book grew out of a surprising coincidence.

Through a personal connection, he was invited to give a motivational talk at Piney Woods Country Life School, an African-American boarding school about 20 miles south of Jackson, Mississippi.

Although the visit never materialized, Pinkney kept on file the information about the school's history that had been sent to him, including materials related to the International Sweethearts of Rhythm, a popular, World War II-era, all-girl swing band that originated with students at the school.

So Pinkney already had a lot of reference material on hand when his publisher contacted him about illustrating a book on the barrier-breaking band. Not only that, but the book project would offer him an opportunity to fulfill a long-standing desire to partner with award-winning poet Marilyn Nelson, whom Pinkney has always admired.

"The stars were all aligned," he said.

The result is *Sweethearts of Rhythm: The Story of the Greatest All-Girl Swing Band in the World*, to be published in October by Dial Books, a member of Penguin Group USA.

Although it was easy to stumble into the project, the book was not easy to complete. Pinkney and Nelson did extensive research into the history of the time period, swing music, and the band itself, which defied Jim Crow laws by playing as an integrated outfit with women of African American, Native American, Asian, White, and Latina backgrounds.

The book, through poetry and watercolor-and-collage art, explores the rise of the band, which originally was made up of touring Piney Woods students seeking to raise money for the school.

Soon, the girls' strong and entertaining musicianship became so popular that they went off on their own, their

reputation growing rapidly at a time when many of the male swing musicians were serving overseas in the war.

Performing at packed venues such as the Cotton Club and the Apollo Theater, the band was active from the late 1930s to 1949, even playing occasional gigs in the racially acrimonious South, where the white band members had to darken their faces with makeup to avoid being arrested for violating Jim Crow laws.

Both Pinkney and Nelson were captivated by the band's courage and dedication to make beautiful music in the face of social boundaries of race and gender.

"It's an American story of children coming from little means to achieve great things," Pinkney said. He is amazed that such musicianship could stem from such a small school.

The band members "had this ability, that musicianship, that aptitude to be able to play those instruments and play them in a way that was the form of the day—swing," he said. "You had them doing it under the pressure of Jim Crow, and yet they had the courage, the grit to do it, and do it well," he added. "You have to remember that music was a man's profession. It was for men. It wasn't for women.

"And it was thought that no woman could play an instrument as well as a man," he continued. "I think what (young readers) and all of us get out of it is this ability to shoulder whatever weight is part of your time and is placed on you. And at the same time, become a contributing, positive force."

Nelson was also interested in exploring the reasons why the nation was fascinated with swing at this time, concluding that the upbeat genre was a way of escape in a time of international turmoil.

"Swing music was a way of listening to something that is fundamental about human hope," she said. "And swing

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music was about uniting a nation at a time when we needed unity and a way of thumbing our noses at Hitler.”

But both artists had to expand their horizons and tool set to resolve a dilemma: How can poetry and art be used to capture the vibrant and fluid sound of swing music? How to get readers to use their visual sense to inspire an entirely different sense, that of sound?

To accomplish that, Nelson—who grew up on jazz and whose brother plays jazz—turned to several literary devices, including a rhyming pattern that was new to her. Rather than her normal iambic pentameter, Nelson wrote poems for the book in triple meter, which she felt was “swingier,” more resembling the rhythms of jazz, she said.

To further emphasize the music and at her brother’s suggestion, the poems are written in the voice of the various instruments, who talk about their experiences and people who played them. Each poem’s title is that of a swing tune. On each poem she also lists the name of a real-life band member who played the particular instrument.

She researched jazz music and talked to musicians to ensure that the “voices” of the instruments in each poem were authentic.

“Since the speakers of the poems are instruments, I wanted the information that was conveyed about the instrument to be accurate, so that someone who plays a clarinet, for example, would read the poems and say, ‘Yeah, that’s right,’” said Nelson, a three-time National Book Award Finalist and a winner of the Poets’ Prize.

For Pinkney, illustrating music required him to expand boundaries. “I think that was certainly the challenge,” he said. “And when I first started, I felt in a way that I would be able to paint the music, the images in terms of color. And then I found that that wasn’t working for me, that I needed a sense of feeling of notes and small and large sounds. . . . The task is to capture the image, the energy and the color of sound.”

The art in the book, like his other work, is watercolor. But Pinkney said that the watercolor paintings in the book rely far less on lines and clarity than his previous works.

He also turned to collage, a technique he had never used before. To capture a greater feeling of music, he copied the actual sheet music of the songs onto textured papers and attached them to his watercolors. Other collage elements include small pictures of flowers that were cut and placed in such a way that they became hair decorations for women in the painting.

“I began to collage things that were symbolic to the time and to what I was trying to say with the images,” said Pinkney, a five-time winner of Caldecott Honor Medals and

four-time recipient of the *New York Times* Best Illustrated Book Award.

On some of the paintings he also placed small color squares of different sizes, “so those squares suggest in a sense notes or the color of music when we talk about music.” Squiggly colored lines also provoke thoughts of the fluid movements of swing music.

His creative process was also different with this book, as he relied more on the poems than on his own initial vision for ideas and inspiration.

“It’s the first time as long as I have been doing art where it had to come to me through, not necessarily where I thought where the art should go, but what the poem suggested,” he said. “I had to listen very carefully to the tone of the poem and also to the research and try to strike a balance of those two—which is no easy task, by the way.”

Some of the female musicians illustrated in the book are real-life band members whom Pinkney reconstructed from old photographs.

Pinkney and Nelson hope that their efforts will be useful to teachers, who they say could use the book to explore language, vocabulary, and history.

“It’s an amazing and aesthetically satisfying way to talk about that time period, that horrific time period in this country,” he said.

The book may also inspire youth by telling an “American story of starting with very little and achieving a lot,” Pinkney added.

For Pinkney, working on the book forced him to expand his artistic tool set, and more.

“After the project, I know that I expanded in terms of my working approach and manner, but also as a person I grew,” he said.

Nelson said that she hopes readers not only learn about the time period, but draw lessons from the story.

“Robert Frost said poems begin in delight and end in wisdom,” she said. “And that’s the highest hope you can have for a poem, I think.”

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Jerry Pinkney and Marilyn Nelson will speak at the Children’s Literature Assembly Breakfast on Sunday, November 22, at 7:30 a.m., at the 2009 NCTE Annual Convention in Philadelphia.