BOOK RESUME: SING A SONG: HOW “LIFT EVERY VOICE AND SING” INSPIRED GENERATIONS

BOOK SYNOPSIS

Sing a song full of the faith that the dark past has taught us.
Sing a song full of the hope that the present has brought us.

In Jacksonville, Florida, two brothers, one of them the principal of a segregated, all-black school, wrote the song “Lift Every Voice and Sing” so his students could sing it for a tribute to Abraham Lincoln’s birthday in 1900. From that moment on, the song has provided inspiration and solace for generations of Black families. Mothers and fathers passed it on to their children who sang it to their children and grandchildren. Known as the Black National Anthem, it has been sung during major moments of the Civil Rights Movement and at family gatherings and college graduations.

Inspired by this song’s enduring significance, Kelly Starling Lyons and Keith Mallett tell a story about the generations of families who gained hope and strength from the song’s inspiring words.

REVIEWS AND PRAISE

★ “Tracing the history of Black Americans since 1900 through five generations of one family, this creative book also connects events and cultural shifts with particular lines in the song, underscoring their relevance during certain times. . . . With clarity and warmth, the illustrations sensitively capture the changing characters, emotions, and eras as time passes. . . . a ‘symbol of faith, brilliance, resistance, and resilience.’”—Booklist, starred review

“Lyons delivers the history of a song that has inspired generations of African-Americans to persist and resist in the face of racism and systemic oppression. . . . Vibrant, realistic illustrations and painstaking facial detail. . . . Bold colors lend emotion to scenes of hope and adversity. . . . All the while, each generation passes the lyrics along, and a final page urges readers to ‘keep singing . . . keep on keeping on.’ A heartfelt history of a historic anthem.”—Publishers Weekly

“Lyons writes with rhythmic warmth, weaving the lyrics into her story. . . . Mallett’s artwork charmingly illuminates the faces of the singers in the book, revealing their passion and often joy in singing what’s become cherished as the African American national anthem. . . . A beautiful celebration of a song that continues to give life to African Americans.”—Kirkus Reviews

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Penguin Random House
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*Publisher suggested age range covers the wide range of readers publishers envision using the book, whether for independent reading, family sharing, group study, or in other ways. Educators have the best sense of the appropriate range for their diverse learners they work with and understand these ranges vary depending on a book’s intended use.
“There are plenty of picture-book editions illustrating James Weldon Johnson’s text of ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing,’ but the song’s historical impact is often relegated to an afterword. Lyons makes that impact the focus of this narrative. . . . Lyons deftly weaves the song into the family’s everyday life while also using that quotidian existence to emblematize historical experiences. . . . Her storytelling cadence makes rewarding use of repetition, emphasizing the generational replication and adding a lyrical lilt to the prose. . . . This may open youngsters’ eyes to the personal side of history and prompt some sharing by the adults in their lives.”—The Bulletin of the Center for Children’s Books

“Lyons’s obvious passion for the song she first heard in church as a little girl is mirrored in Keith Mallett’s ‘freehand’-drawn and digitally painted illustrations. A distinctive use of light suggests hope and a bright future, while the interactions between his realistically rendered subjects emphasize a strong and supportive community of people. Mallett’s art beautifully complements Lyons’s sincere, musical text, producing a reverent tribute to this ‘symbol of faith, brilliance, resistance, and resilience.’”—Shelf Awareness

“A spirited, stunningly illustrated picture book that expresses the historical significance of James Weldon Johnson and John Rosamond Johnson’s hymn. . . . An extended author’s note discusses how the song represents Lyon’s family heritage and her desire that this hymn remain a message of hope for future generations. Lovely illustrations and a fresh look at the historical significance of the hymn add a new dimension that will inspire as well as inform young readers.”—School Library Journal

“Through Lyons’s emotion-filled text and Mallett’s rich illustrations, highlighted with bright purples and warm blacks, browns, and golds, readers derive a sense of the collective historical and cultural significance of the anthem, as well as the deeply personal connections that it carries.”—The Horn Book

AWARDS AND ACCOLADES

- A CCBC Choice
- A 2020 Notable Social Studies Trade Book for Young People
- A 2020 ALSC Notable Children's Book
- Wisconsin Picture Thisl, 2020
- Kansas NEA Reading Circle, 2021
- A BCALA and ALSC Social Justice Reading List
- A Bank Street College of Education Best Books Selection

MEDIA AND RESOURCES

- Educator Guide

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