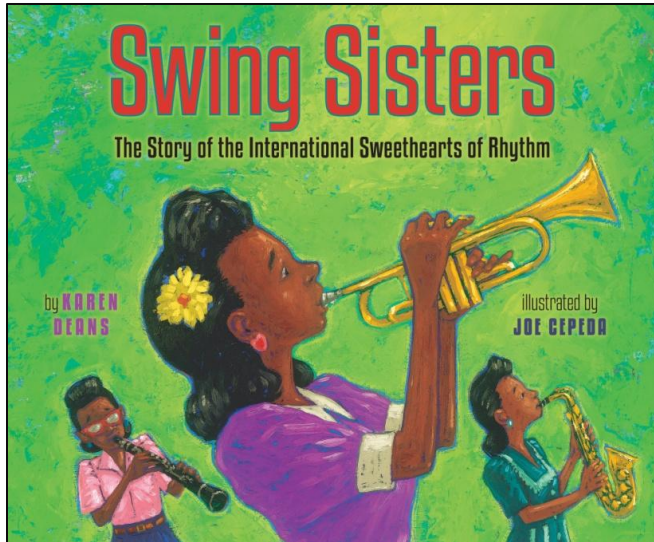


Swing Sisters

The Story of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm



Ages 4-8 • \$16.95 • 978-0-8234-1970-8 • E-book available

A conversation with author Karen Deans

*SWING—now, that music was filled with energy!
It was JAZZ.*

*It had rhythms and melodies that got people up
on their feet to dance.*

*And like any good music, it told stories about
how it feels to be alive.*

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Karen, please tell us about your new book, *SWING SISTERS: The Story of the International Sweethearts of Rhythm*.

The International Sweethearts of Rhythm was an all-girl swing band formed in 1939 at an African American school for orphans in rural Mississippi. The Sweethearts went on to become a professional band of musicians from mixed racial backgrounds. That was revolutionary for that time and place. In the South, so-called Jim Crow laws made it illegal for races to mix. The Sweethearts were violating that code by performing and even traveling together.

Despite racial prejudice and segregation, the Sweethearts performed nationally and in Europe during World War II. Through their music and friendship, they helped to bridge a racial gulf that we still struggle with today.

SWING SISTERS tells the story of an amazing group of real girls who defied racism and sexism to become international music sensations. How did you first learn about the Swing Sisters?

I was on a train chatting with a woman sitting beside me. When I mentioned I was a children's book author interested in writing about women, she told me about the Sweethearts. I was intrigued by their story and called my father, who was a jazz pianist,

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and asked if he had heard about them. He had a book that featured their amazing story, and he shared it with me.

Tell us about your research process for the book. What information most surprised you?

After reading the book my father gave me, I hit the internet to search for other books, photos and film. I tracked down a documentary about them that was informative and showed footage of them performing.

I learned that one of the members, Helen Woods (formerly Helen Jones) was still living, and I interviewed her over the phone. I was surprised to learn that she didn't think children would be interested in her story, especially since I thought it was so remarkable. She was very humble about her experience with the Sweethearts and shared fond memories.

The women in the band had to defy laws of segregation to bring in band members of all races. What do you admire most about this group?

I admire and appreciate how their love for music seemed to defy the many obstacles they faced. Like many pioneers, they didn't fully realize how far they were pushing the frontiers, how much they were challenging American society. Helen (Jones) Woods told me, "We were just girls playing music," as if that were all there was to it. Obviously they were much more than that. They stayed focused on their music, though, and on one another. Even when the police tried to stop them, they played anyway. That took courage.

What do you hope young readers will take away from this story?

People with disparate backgrounds can gather around a shared passion, and that experience can forge deep bonds. For the Sweethearts, that led to the creation of music that became a rich gift to many people.

I hope kids will understand that art lives in a place of deep connection and inclusivity. The Sweethearts exemplified that. Their music connected them to one another, despite their differences. It helped them reach, and embrace, the larger world around them.

When did you decide you wanted to become an author?

I have loved writing and drawing since I was a child. On long car rides from Atlanta to visit my grandparents in New Orleans, I would spend hours writing pages of fictional stories and illustrating them and binding them into little books with staples and glue.

Making things, and expressing ideas in this way, has always excited me. Writing and drawing, even now, restore that sense of wonder and awe I first knew as a child.

What advice would you give to young authors?

It's important to make time to write. Keeping a journal and writing in it every day is a good idea. Look at the world around you. Listen to what people say. Remember things that attract your attention. Take notes, otherwise you might forget your experiences. And remember, getting better at anything takes practice. The Sweethearts practiced their music every day!



Credit: Lynne Harty

KAREN DEANS has worked as a journalist and is also a fine artist and an entrepreneur. She lives in the Washington, DC, area.

Praise for *Swing Sisters*

"The infectious joy of swing music comes across nicely with details about instrumentation and performances. . . . Readers will certainly want to grab recordings and dance and swing to the sounds." – *Kirkus Reviews*

"The oil-and-acrylic artwork also gets the book jumping as the band wails on their instruments and couples hotfoot across the pages. More than just a history of the band, this takes on a larger picture, including Jim Crow laws and how the Sweethearts helped break down both gender and racial barriers." – *Booklist*

"Deans's text shines a light on the racial, social, and gender boundaries the band crossed, while emphasizing the bond of sisterhood that these girls created because of their talent, mutual struggle, and love of swing." – *School Library Journal*