

# **Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years Study Guide**

**Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters' First 100 Years  
by Sarah Louise Delany**

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# Plot Summary

"Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years" written by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth is a work of non-fiction and therefore has a unique tone for a memoir. The Delanys, particularly Bessie, are well known for being outspoken, straightforward and unapologetic.

Although the book is a joint memoir, the sisters are able to present many facts objectively. The author adds in some historical time frame markers to assist the narrative, which is helpful to the reader. The sisters also relay their view of things as they were (e.g., Harlem during the Depression) and compare those things to the accounts written in history books.

Henry Delany and Nanny Logan Delany did something very few people did in the early 1900s. Both went to college at St. Augustine's School and received degrees. Henry became a preacher and Nanny more or less ran the school. Of the ten Delany children, each went to college and followed the path set by Henry and Nanny, remembering to perform service whenever and wherever possible. Because St. Aug's was a predominantly black school, there wasn't much racism to be encountered. The children began to experience racism and the need for civil rights after they left home and went out into the working world. While there were many movements going on all around them, the Delanys may have been one of the most powerful advocates for civil rights simply through their way of life, both personal and professional.

Part 1, "Sweet Sadie, Queen Bess," begins with the author saying, "Both more than one hundred years old, Sarah ("Sadie") Delany and her sister, Annie Elizabeth ("Bessie") Delany are among the oldest living witnesses to American history" (Part 1, page 3).

At the time the book was written in 1991, Sadie was 103 years old, Bessie was 101 years old. Despite their advanced ages, Sadie still took on the role of big sister, protecting Bessie from a world she had conquered long ago. In a time when many black families were relegated to less than acceptable employment and living conditions, the Delany family rose above, eventually becoming one of the most prominent families in black America and the country as a whole.

Service was a huge part of the Delanys' lives. Henry and Nanny stressed it and perhaps more importantly, practiced what they preached at every opportunity. This was ingrained in both long before they became an evangelical family. Those ideals and practices were passed down to all of the ten children. When each Delany child went to college, he was informed that they could expect no charity and must make their own way. Along the way, throughout the rest of their lives, they would be expected to help their fellow man, regardless of color. In that way, all of the children followed the path set by Henry and Nanny, remembering to perform service whenever and wherever possible. Many went into service professions such as medicine and teaching.



The Delanys are a testament to their upbringing and worked hard to do as they were taught in regards to being good, productive people. The family also had a great sense of humor if Sadie and Bessie fairly represent the rest. The sisters are quite funny, blunt, bold, and wise.

At the time the book was written, only three of the ten children had survived. The sisters saw the book as their opportunity to tell about their family's history, not as a black family, but just as a family who strived to do right by each other and the community.



# Parts 1-2

## Parts 1-2 Summary and Analysis

Part 1, Sweet Sadie, Queen Bess, begins with the author saying, "Both more than one hundred years old, Sarah ("Sadie") Delany and her sister, Annie Elizabeth ("Bessie") Delany are among the oldest living witnesses to American history" (Part 1, page 3).

At the time the book was written in 1991, Sadie was 103 years old, Bessie was 101 years old. Despite their advanced ages, Sadie still took on the role of big sister, protecting Bessie from a world she had conquered long ago. In a time when many black families were relegated to less than acceptable employment and living conditions, the Delany family rose above, eventually becoming one of the most prominent families in black America and the country as a whole.

Henry Beard Delany, the women's father, was freed from slavery at seven years of age. In his early twenties, Delany was offered the chance to go to college. He converted to the Episcopal faith and went to St. Augustine's School. Delany would continue to be ambitious throughout his life, eventually becoming a bishop. All ten of the Delany children went to college, a high standard in the modern world and almost unheard of in the early 1900s, especially for blacks.

At the time of Delany's career, the family was relatively unknown outside their hometown of Raleigh, North Carolina. In a book written by Gail Lumet Buckley, the daughter of songstress Lena Horne, the Delanys would rank at the very top of black intelligentsia.

The black press chronicled the family's ascent. The Delanys were not without their share of detractors, many of which were lower-class black families. Many of the detractors thought the Delany clan was attempting to live outside its means, elevating itself among their own people. This did not deter Henry Delany or his family.

Chapter 1, "Sadie," begins the actual narrative from the sisters. Sadie was 103 at the time the book was written; Bessie was 101. Sadie says that she cannot remember life without Bessie. Bessie intends to live to be 120 - as old as Moses - and Sadie claims she will have to live to be 122 so she can take care of her little sister.

Although the Delany sisters never married there was never a lack of beaux. Sadie muses that the Delany sisters were most likely too smart and too independent and therefore frightened away any potential husbands. So the sisters made their way in the world with each other in their Mount Vernon home. Even at an age when most people were infirm, if not dead, the sisters did everything for themselves, including banking, shopping, cooking, and keeping house.

Although the sisters spent 75 years in New York, they considered Raleigh their home. It was in Raleigh that their parents met while attending St. Augustine School. Sadie



describes her parents and proudly discusses the day her father became a bishop in the Episcopal Church in 1918.

Chapter 2, "Bessie," begins with the younger, feistier sister saying, "People learned not to mess with me from Day One" (Part 1, chapter 2, page 9).

Unlike the sweet natured Sadie, Bessie will say whatever comes to mind and is often combative. This makes Bessie a fierce woman, one that would surely be running a large corporation in today's world. There is a balance between the sisters as they have many opposite traits. Bessie jokes that while Sadie will surely get into Heaven, her journey is not so certain. "I'm afraid when I meet St. Peter at the Gate, he'll say, 'Lord child, you were mean!'" (Part 1, Chapter 2, page 10).

Chapter 3 returns to Sadie. Sadie talks about Bessie's intuition, which was not practiced often as it was not within the church's guidelines for appropriate behavior. Sadie talks about people visiting the house, many of which want to evangelize to the sisters. Bessie will not hear of it. There was no phone in the house which suited the sisters just fine, in fact they absolutely refused to have one. Sadie muses that the toughest thing about being so old is that most of their loved ones are long dead and have turned to dust.

Sadie laments that being so old has its drawbacks. There was a time when the Board of Education wanted to cut off her pension because they thought she was dead.

Chapter 4 returns to Bessie who tells a story about how the neighbors and many others are surprised at how spry and alert the women are despite their advanced age. Bessie attributes their longevity to never marrying so that a husband could worry her to death.

The women rarely touched liquor. They also avoided going to doctors to avoid being over-treated or being seen as some kind of sideshow act.

Bessie shares a childhood song and memories of their father. The women continued to celebrate their father's birthday with a special meal even though he died in 1928.

Part 2, "I'm Free!" begins with Henry Delany's reaction to being freed from slavery. At seven years old, Delany did not really understand what it meant to be free. The Mock family owned the plantation on which the Delanys worked. Mrs. Mock was very fond of Henry's mother and the entire family was treated well. Mr. Mock even broke the law by teaching them how to read and write. This was particularly courageous during that time in history and also uplifting since most people thought there was no reason for blacks to be educated. In fact, many believed that blacks could not be educated. Henry Delany was just one of the people that proved them wrong.

Members of the Logan family, including Nanny Logan Delany's parents, were issue-free Negroes living in Virginia. This meant that the people were free yet their rights and privileges were little more than the slaves' in service. At the time there were as many as 250,000 freed slaves in slaveholding states, many of which would migrate north after the Civil War.



The author gives some brief background on the Logan family. Henry Delany's background was also discussed, up to the time he went to St. Augustine's School. It was 'St. Augs' that Delany met Nanny James, the class valedictorian.

Chapter 5, "Our Papa's People," is one of the few narratives told by Sadie and Bess in tandem. The chapter discusses Delany's parentage, youth and the opportunity to go to college. St. Augustine's School was formed by the Episcopal Church, one way in which blacks could have a college of their own. The man was an Episcopalian but the Delanys were die hard Methodists. Delany converted in order to get the extraordinary opportunity and never regretted it.

Chapter 6, "Our Mama's People," addresses Nanny James Logan's family much the same way as chapter 5. This chapter contains much more detail than the previous chapter. The Logan family maintained some prominence in Virginia, especially because Nanny's grandfather, Mr. Milliam, was white. On top of that, the man was meaner than a snake and no one dared to bother him or his own. Although the children and grandchildren had a difficult time of it, there was some small reminder that Mr. Milliam loved them and would care for them. After Mr. Milliam died, a sum of money and a plot of land went to Nanny's mother, who was black. An irate nephew fought the case but lost. The Delanys still maintain the land, perhaps as a remembrance to their grandfather.

## Parts 3-4

### Parts 3-4 Summary and Analysis

Part 3, "St. Aug's," begins with the author's narrative about St. Aug's and its formation in 1867. The school was one of a handful of colleges and universities that catered to blacks and whites at a time when traditional universities were completely off limits, especially to former slaves. The author mentions other schools and the importance they would have on the reshaping of America.

Chapter 7 is another joint narrative from the sisters. When Nanny James Logan lived in Virginia it became clear that there needed to be a change. Nanny was always embarrassed that her parents were not allowed to legally wed, even though there was a ceremony. Nanny left Virginia for Raleigh where she would attend St. Augs, a school predominantly focused on the ministry and educating teachers.

It was at St. Aug's that Nanny met Henry.

Henry Delany had not yet graduated when he decided he wanted to marry Nanny. Henry's advisers were against it, suggesting that he wait until after graduation. Henry got married anyway. The sisters remarked that although Henry shunned the advice, he was able to do it in a way that offended no one. Henry and Nanny married in 1896.

The chapter discusses the births of the Delany's ten children: Lemuel Thackara Delany in 1897; Sarah Louise (Sadie) in 1889; Annie Elizabeth (Bessie) in 1891; Julia Emery in 1893; Henry, Jr. (Harry) in 1895; Lucius in 1897; William Manross in 1899; Hubert Thomas in 1901; Laura Edith in 1903; and Samuel Ray in 1906. At the time the book was written, only Sadie, Bess and Laura were still alive.

The Delanys lived right on St. Aug's campus. Although the world was relatively safe for the family, the children were not permitted to go off campus alone. In fact, if it was late in the day, the children were accompanied by one of their parents or Henry's cousin Laura. Henry often referred to Laura as "Cousin Lot" which, for the children, translated into "Culot."

The sisters talk about Culot and how she had worked for a white lady in Florida. Culot sewed for a living and was treated poorly. After relocating to Raleigh, Henry got Culot a job at the university teaching sewing. Culot never worked for white people again.

The sisters talk about various families in the area and how service to others was ingrained in them since birth.

Chapter 8 details the structure of the Delany home. Mr. and Mrs. Delany were frightfully busy people but always made time for their children.





Nanny was a loving mother and also a strict disciplinarian. This was surely due in part to having ten children. There was no thing as surefire birth control in those days. After Nanny had her tenth child a friend suggested that she could tell Nanny about a way to stop the pregnancies. Nanny was irate and claimed that she wanted each and every child.

Sadie stepped into the role of Mama's little helper, canning fruits and vegetables and watching over Nanny each time there was a new baby. Nanny was referred to as "Mother Delany" by almost everyone on campus and was always in demand. Because Sadie was constantly at her mother's side, Bessie was in charge of supervising the younger children. Apparently nothing could get by Queen Bess, who was seen as a dictator by her siblings.

Other family dynamics are discussed from nighttime rituals of Bible stories to morning inspection and expected behavior. The children believed that teachers were harder on them most likely due to the high standards of their parents and the high expectations that each would be an accomplished person.

Sadie recounts the only time she and Bessie were ever lashed. The girls had wandered away from the house and into an apple grove. Henry found the girls there and grabbed a switch from a tree. In retrospect, it is clear that the girls could have been molested even though they were 6 and 8 years old. The girls made a pact not to cry during the whipping. Bessie did not cry. Sadie howled right away and only got one swat. Bessie was furious.

Chapter 9 gives more detail about family life. Nanny was a proud and private woman, one that was known to be quite feisty. Bessie takes after her. Henry was quiet, proud, and hated confrontation, traits passed on to Sadie.

All of the Delany children had ambition. It is not to say that they were perfect little angels. Bessie talks about torturing their little sister Julia with bugs to make her behave.

The children were taught how to shoot guns and prepare supper from their kills. Lemuel was involved in an accident and was shot through the hand. Without antibiotics, it could have caused Lemuel's death but the attention of the white doctors and Nanny, Lemuel was healed. It was the experience that prompted Lemuel to go to medical school and become a prominent physician.

At age 15 Bessie contracted typhoid. It nearly killed her and she had to be in the hospital for six weeks. There was always a fear that the typhoid would have long lasting or returning effects which could have caused Bessie to lose the ability to walk. Bessie jokes that at 101 years old, she is probably in the clear.

Part 4, "Jim Crow Days," details the institution of the Jim Crow laws. In 1896, new racially restrictive laws went into effect. The laws were referred to as Jim Crow laws. Jim Crow was a minstrel character. The sisters refer to the day the laws went into effect as the day the world changed. It had been clear that there were no equal rights to be had for blacks in America at that time. Jim Crow simply spelled it out and made it law. The



laws only increased the racial violence. The first major breakthrough in eradicating the Jim Crow laws came in 1954 with the Supreme Court ruling on Brown vs. the Board of Education. Other cases followed but the official death of Jim Crow took place in 1968 with the Fair Housing Act.

Chapter 10 is a joint narrative. The Jim Crow laws had a lot to do with two things: fear and sex. The fear came from the white men who were worried about giving up their piece of the pie. The other, and perhaps larger, fear surrounded sex. People were worried that without Jim Crow laws interracial marriages would thrive. Whites saw themselves as being so incredibly superior that the thought of being tainted by Negro blood was unthinkable. The sisters talk about the opinions of people at that time. Their father often said that there were few white people without Negro blood. Even if a woman appeared white, the kinky hair had to come from someplace! During the height of slavery it was common for men to molest their slave women or turn to them if they were refused sex by their wives or other white women. Later, interracial breeding occurred due to simple attraction. The latter is the story of Nanny's parents.

There was a great deal of hypocrisy which was not backed up by law. The Delanys saw it and combated it in any way they knew how, including economic boycott.

Chapter 11 includes a couple of stories told by Sadie. The Delanys' first experience with whites predated the days of Jim Crow and so they had a very different opinion than many Negroes. The first whites they met were missionaries at St. Aug's and the girls worshiped them. Although Jim Crow laws controlled even the most sympathetic white people Sadie remembers playing dumb so she could sit in the white section of the shoe store.

Chapter 12 returns to Bessie. Bessie talks about the fact that neither she nor Sadie had ever worked in a white family's home. Many blacks were surprised at that. When an opportunity came for Bessie to work for a white woman, Nanny forbade it. Bessie didn't understand it until years later.

Bessie also discusses violence against Negroes. The stories are ones everyone has heard before and are no less horrific. Bessie says she did not understand the violence then and is still baffled by it and what it was supposed to prove. Fortunately, the people at St. Aug's were left alone for the most part. Bessie thinks it might have to do with the fact that the school housed a seminary.

In chapter 13, Sadie discusses growing up under the watchful eye of her parents. Sadie thinks that perhaps they were too sheltered from the outside world. After graduation, neither Lemuel nor Sadie wanted to leave St. Aug's but Henry insisted. Lemuel wanted to be married and Henry said that Nanny was the queen of their house and you couldn't have two queens in one hive. Lemuel headed off to Philadelphia to complete his medical internship.



Bessie talks about how Papa controlled who the girls saw on a romantic level. Frank, one of Sadie's beaux, did not make the best impression on Papa and was never heard from again.

Chapter 14 begins with Bessie talking about Frank. Bessie never liked Frank but believed that Papa should have given Sadie an opportunity to do what she liked since she was a grown woman. Although Sadie and Bessie were focused on their education, there was no lack of beaux for the sisters. Bessie believed that the women were simply too smart and independent for most men, which succeeded in scaring them away. This was evidently clear when Bessie traveled to Boardman in 1911 for her first year in college.

Much like Sadie, Bessie got the lecture about focusing on education and making sure one paid one's own way. The girls were not allowed to accept scholarships because it would make them beholden to another. Each girl was expected to work to pay the way. Additionally, it was important for the girls to live up to the family's motto of service to others.

Bessie left home at age 20. Papa took her to the train station. Bessie managed to keep herself together until it was time to go. The girl sobbed so hard on the train that people from other cars came to see what was wrong. Eventually Bessie was all cried out.

Bessie was not at all pleased by Boardman. The people were uneducated and the situation was a far cry from life at St. Aug's. There were many flirtatious men but Queen Bess managed to keep them all in line. Bessie stayed with the Atkinson family. She complained about the food but jokes about how she got fat anyway. The biggest incident of rebellion for Bessie was making a silk dress that showed her ankles.

Bessie eventually took a teaching job at Athanasius School in Brunswick, Georgia. Bessie referred to Georgia as a mean place. There was one incident during which Bessie was lucky enough to avoid being lynched. The incident says a lot about Bessie when she claims that she would rather die than back down to a white man or anyone else. While in Georgia, Bessie met Elizabeth Gooch who would become a lifelong friend.



## Part 5

### Part 5 Summary and Analysis

Part 5 begins with a brief history of the Harlem Renaissance. The Renaissance took place in the 1920s and early 1930s when nearly 200,000 blacks lived in the Harlem district of New York City. The Harlem Renaissance was a vibrant celebration of the black culture and featured many famous people and places including writers Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston; musicians Duke Ellington, Bessie Smith, and Louis Armstrong. Harlem would also become known as the heart of jazz with places like the Cotton Club.

Although many saw Harlem as going through a kind of uprising, the author states that the area also had a stable, church going side.

Chapter 15 begins with Bessie and Sadie's first trip to New York with Nanny. All were fascinated by the sights and sounds of the city. Sadie was the first to move to New York in 1916. Bessie moved about a year and a half later. The author discusses housing and the general relocation of much of the family.

Chapter 16 is Sadie's tale of her first days in New York. Sadie admits to being incredibly green and having no concept of how to behave in the city. It was so different from St. Aug's! One day a man greeted Sadie and she returned the greeting. She was immediately warned that New York is not Raleigh. When strange men approached, you did not acknowledge them. It was too dangerous. Sadie does say that she never felt unsafe in the city, however.

Sadie went to school at Pratt and found that she was very much in the minority. St. Aug's was not a wealthy school so Sadie would have to struggle to get through chemistry, a subject not thoroughly addressed. Sadie did manage to get through it, often remembering Papa's words of encouragement. Sadie claims that many people at Pratt were mean. However, it was not easy to tell if they were simply mean or racist.

Sadie graduated in 1918 and went on to Columbia Teacher's College. During the summers Sadie would return to Raleigh to boost her savings account. After a while it became clear that New York was meant to become home. Living in New York was hard but not as hard as it was living in the South.

Chapter 17 returns to Bessie telling about her school days at Columbia. Harry (Hap) Delany had graduated in dentistry from New York University and attempted to get Bessie enrolled there. NYU would not take Negroes so Bessie went to Columbia where she was the only colored woman. There were six colored men but their presence didn't make it any easier on Bessie. As hard as the people tried to beat her down, the harder Bessie pushed back. Some of her work was unacceptable simply because of her skin



color. A fellow student began to steal dental tools and tried to frame Bessie. Bessie prevailed. Still, the thief and her thieving boyfriend were both allowed to graduate.

Bessie worked hard to get a job to support herself. By then Julia had moved to New York to attend Julliard. Many people would hire Julia, who was light skinned, but not Bessie. The sisters were a package deal.

Bessie talks about how Negroes always have to be better than everyone else to succeed. She jokes: "When Negroes are average, they fail, unless they are very, very lucky. Now, if you average and white, honey, you can go far. Just look at Dan Quayle. If that boy was colored, he'd be washing dishes somewhere" (Part 5, chapter 17, page 114).

In the end, Bessie says she cannot change the world, she can only change Bessie and that's a difficult task in itself.

Chapter 18 returns to Sadie. During Sadie's early years at PS 119, she made and sold candy and cakes for extra money. It went well enough until the Depression hit and Sadie got a job at a high school. There was little time or money for the activity. Sadie was clever in getting a job at the high school. A friend warned her that the school wouldn't hire her if they knew she was colored. Sadie waited three years for the chance. The friend suggested sending a letter about a mix up with the interview and because she was already hired she should just show up on the first day of classes. Sadie did just that and the school had no choice but to let her teach. She taught at the school for thirty years and excelled all the way.

Chapter 19 details Bessie's start as a dentist in New York. She shared an office with Hap and another dentist. Eventually, they shared a suite with another dentist that had attended St. Aug's and brother Lucius who was an attorney. The offices were in downtown Harlem. Bessie talks about being the second colored women in New York to practice dentistry. Everyone knew her as Dr. Bessie.

Bessie was devoted to helping everyone regardless if they could pay. It was her duty.

Chapter 20 discusses the Harlem scene. Many people thought they were above others by living in Harlem. Bessie and Sadie rarely got involved in the jazz scene but their brother became friends with many entertainers, including Cab Calloway. Despite all of the changes around them, the Delanys were often reminded that they were a bishop's children and must act accordingly. After WWI, Bessie and Sadie moved to the Bronx. All throughout the time in Harlem and the Bronx, the family stayed together and saw each other at least once a day.

In Chapter 21, Bessie talks about protests in Harlem. There were many sit-ins and the like held by Frazier and W.E.B. DuBois, a family friend. Bessie wanted more action and did everything possible to campaign for rights for Negroes and women. Being a woman was difficult but being a Negro and a woman was almost impossible. Bessie could not get the respect of people in her own profession because of racism and sexism. In the end, the racism seemed to be worse and Bessie focused on that. Of course, the day the



women got the vote was a triumphant day. Sadie and Bessie voted in every election they were able.

Bessie also talks about the only time she brushed up against the KKK. She and a boyfriend managed to outrun them. Nanny was horrified that in all the years in Raleigh the Delanys avoided the KKK. Bessie had her only experience with them on Long Island.

Chapter 22 discusses Sadie's success in domestic sciences. Vitamins and minerals were coming to the forefront of nutrition. Sadie was already well versed in the subject since Nanny had known all along about the benefits. A cousin was sick from not eating enough fruits and vegetables and developed a disease. Sadie sent vitamins and money for food. The cousin's diagnosis was reversed and she lived to be 83 years old.

Chapter 23 tells of the death of Henry Delany. He died in 1928 and it was a shock to the children. Bessie and Sadie did not make it back to Raleigh on time. After a period of grieving, Nanny moved back to New York to be with nine of her children, leaving only Lemuel behind.

Hubert became very active in politics and ran for Congress. He won the primary but lost in the general election. Hubert rose up through the ranks at the side of Fiorello La Guardia, eventually becoming Justice of the Domestic relations court on 1942.

Chapter 24 discusses various trips taken by the family. Nanny was eager to see as much of the world as possible. The family traveled as much as possible and even went abroad with a tour group in 1930. Nanny finally got to see Niagara Falls. Several family members also traveled to Los Angeles to see the Olympics.

Chapter 25 details the Depression. It was harder for Bessie and Hap than Sadie. They were thrown out of their office several times. Patients constantly went to Bessie for help and oftentimes, she gave more than she could afford.



## Parts 6-7

### Parts 6-7 Summary and Analysis

Part 6 is titled "The Ties That Bind." It relates to many family issues, including the births and lives of many nieces and nephews. Throughout all of the hard times, the Delanys stuck together. The Depression hit Harlem hard. Many people went without food and rummaged through dumpsters. Jazz clubs turned into civic organizations to help feed the hungry and house the homeless. The Harlem Renaissance was over. Only Langston Hughes stayed in Harlem to write. However, painters and sculptors began to carve their way in the region.

Despite all that was going on around them, the Delanys had other fish to fry.

Chapter 26 is a joint narrative between Sadie and Bessie. They tell the story of Little Hubie, Julia's only son. Hubie was a spastic child and never learned to walk. The family doted on Hubie who was very bright. Because of the nature of Hubie's illness, doctors were unable to properly diagnose or treat the boy. Everything that could have been done was done to help. At age ten, Hubie died from complications from pneumonia.

In chapter 27, the women talk about WWII and the planting of victory gardens. The sisters did not have space in Harlem so they grew the most beautiful victory garden in the Bronx. Sugar and gasoline were heavily rationed during WWII which made it difficult in many ways.

Nanny was nearly 90 by this time and began showing signs of senility. She would often misplace her pension check and her judgment was often cloudy. The sisters saw no choice but to quit their jobs to take care of her.

Chapter 28 details the passing on of most of the Delanys. Manross died first of a heart attack, followed by Lemuel. Then Nanny died, followed shortly by Sam. Eventually, Lucius and Julia died. Julia died through negligence at the hospital.

Chapter 29 details Sadie's extreme grief over Nanny's death. Sadie had always been her Mama's child. Nanny often referred to Sadie as her shadow. The sisters stayed in the Bronx. The government wanted to tear down the cottage to put in a housing development. The sisters threw such a fuss that the cottage was eventually moved across the street but only after Bessie gave the judge a comeuppance in his own courtroom.

The children in the projects seemed to bother everyone but Sadie and Bessie. The sisters were well loved however and rarely got a moment's piece. Hap's wife convinced the sisters to move to Westchester. After figuring out expenses, the sisters decided they could do it. They bought a duplex and rented out the other half.





Part 7, "Outliving the Rebbly Boys," details the end of the Jim Crow era and the birth of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and '60s. The movement was often violent in the South. While it certainly existed in the North it was much more subtle.

Chapter 30 details the Delanys moving into their house in Westchester. Hap had paved the way by building a house first but the neighbors were still not thrilled with having Negroes in their community. They soon found out that you can't keep a Delany down!

The assassinations of JFK, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy are discussed. The sisters believed that a white woman would become president before any black man.

In chapter 31, Sadie talks about the benefits of exercise, vitamins and plenty of sleep. The women still did all their own cooking and took care of their day to day lives. Sadie began to become bolder and talks about shooing gang members off their street.

Chapter 32 is where Bessie gets the last word. The sisters may be old but often forget how old. They are capable and in decent health. As Sadie got bolder, Bessie became just a little nicer. In the end, Bessie says she might just get into Heaven after all.





# Characters

## Sarah (Sadie) Delany

Sarah ("Sadie") Delany (1889 - 1999) is one of the famous Delany children and one of the main subjects of "Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years" by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth.

Sadie was the second child in a family of ten born to Nanny and Henry Delany. Sadie was born in Virginia at her Aunt Eliza's house and then transported to Raleigh where she would live until her early twenties.

Sadie was always her Mama's child, a sweet agreeable girl that followed in her mother's footsteps and did everything she was told. While Bessie watched the younger children, Sadie learned how to run a home. Sadie was also the first Delany child to go to college.

The Delany children were always taught to serve others and their choices in professions echo that ideal. Sadie became a teacher. Sadie broke through the color barrier and taught in New York Public Schools throughout her entire career, often being the only Negro in the school system. Sadie was determined to make her way and to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that a colored woman was just as good as any other person, woman or man. Sadie became a wildly popular teacher and was well loved by many.

Sadie never married and spent her life living with her younger sister, Bessie. The sisters spent their retirement years in Mount Vernon. Bessie died first, in 1995, followed by Sadie, four years later in 1999.

## Annie Elizabeth (Bessie)

Annie Elizabeth ("Bessie") Delany (1901 - 1995) is one of the famous Delany children and one of the main subjects of "Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years" written by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth.

Bessie was the third child in a family of ten born to Nanny and Henry Delany. Like most of the Delany children, Bessie was born and raised in Raleigh where she would live until her early twenties.

Where Sadie was always her Mama's child, Bessie was the dictator of the house. Bessie believed in speaking her mind, no matter what kind of trouble it brought. The word best used to describe Bessie is "acerbic."

Like all of the Delany children, Bessie worked her way through college. Following in her brother Hap's footsteps, Bessie decided to become a dentist. It was a long hard road but Bessie prevailed. Bessie Delany quickly became known as Dr. Bessie, the second



colored woman to be licensed as a dentist in the state of New York. Bessie was also licensed in North Carolina and broke barriers there as well.

Like Sadie and the other Delany children, Bessie was determined to make her way and to prove beyond a shadow of a doubt that a colored woman was just as good as any other person, woman or man. Bessie and the other Delany children became an integral part of the Harlem culture and helped many people in need.

Bessie never married and spent her life living with her older sister, Sadie. The sisters spent their retirement years in Mount Vernon. Bessie died in 1995.

## **Nanny Logan Delany**

Nanny Logan Delany was the mother of the ten Delany children and the wife of Bishop Henry Delany. Nanny was a highly intelligent woman that worked at St. Aug's School in Raleigh.

## **Henry Delany**

Henry Delany was the father of the ten Delany children, husband to Nanny Logan Delany. Henry became recognized as a Bishop, a true breakthrough in the early 1900s.

## **Delany Children**

There were ten Delany children in all: Lemuel Thackara Delany in 1897; Sarah Louise (Sadie) in 1889; Annie Elizabeth (Bessie) in 1891; Julia Emery in 1893; Henry, Jr. (Harry) in 1895; Lucius in 1897; William Manross in 1899; Hubert Thomas in 1901; Laura Edith in 1903; and Samuel Ray in 1906.

## **Langston Hughes**

Langston Hughes was a famous writer, activist and integral part of the Harlem Renaissance.

## **W.E.B. DuBois**

W.E.B. DuBois was an activist and friend to the Delany family.

## **Cab Calloway**

Cab Calloway was a famous jazz personality and friend to Hubert Delany.



## **Eleanor Roosevelt**

Eleanor Roosevelt was first lady when Hubert took Nanny to see Marian Anderson. Mrs. Roosevelt showed deference to Nanny which pleased the family to no end.

## **Elizabeth Gooch**

Elizabeth Gooch was Bessie's roommate in college.



# Objects/Places

## Segregation

Segregation is a main topic in "Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years" written by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth. The book makes references to slavery throughout the country, before and after the Civil War. Henry Delany was a slave until age 7. Even after slavery became illegal, Negroes were seen as being inferior beings, not much better than animals. The Delanys, and people like them, fought hard to prove that the belief was erroneous and ridiculous.

Even the issue-free Negroes in Virginia and other places were victims of segregation. However, the sisters point out that the lighter the person's skin, the less racism he would experience. It would never be easy.

After the Civil War, education became crucial to blacks wanting to advance in society. Schools for Negroes began to crop up all around the country. St. Augustine's School was such a place, one that readily and happily accepted the Delanys and other blacks looking for a better life.

The Jim Crow Laws made things even worse rather than better. The laws created legal segregation, often tying the hands of those that would normally not discriminate against a person on the basis of color.

Segregation did not truly end, at least legally, until the 1960s.

## The Civil Rights Movement

The Civil Rights Movement is a major component in "Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years" written by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth. The Delany family was involved in civil rights before the movement even had a name. The book mentions rights and racism from page one; how it affected the authors, family and friends, and the entire black community.

Henry Delany and Nanny Logan Delany did something very few people did in the early 1900s. Both went to college at St. Augustine's School and received degrees. Henry became a preacher and Nanny more or less ran the school. Of the ten Delany children, each went to college and followed the path set by Henry and Nanny, remembering to perform service whenever and wherever possible. Because St. Aug's was a predominantly black school, there wasn't much racism to be encountered. The children began to experience racism and the need for civil rights after they left home and went out into the working world. While there were many movements going on all around them, the Delanys may have been one of the most powerful advocates for civil rights simply through their way of life, both personal and professional.



The Jim Crow Laws are discussed as are the highlights of the Civil Rights Movement involving Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and others.

## **New York**

New York became home to the majority of the Delany family, including Nanny after Henry died.

## **Mount Vernon**

Mount Vernon is the location of the Delany sisters' home from the time they retired until their deaths.

## **Harlem**

Harlem was a section of New York City well known for artisans and jazz as well as being the center of New York's black community.

## **Columbia University**

Columbia University was the school attended by Bessie and other Delanys.

## **Bronx**

Bronx was the suburb of New York City lived in by some of the Delanys.

## **Danville, Virginia**

Danville, Virginia was home to the Logan family, including Nanny until she moved to Raleigh to attend St. Augustine's School.



# Themes

## Civil rights

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## Service

Service was a huge part of the Delanys' lives. Henry and Nanny stressed it and perhaps more importantly, practiced what they preached at every opportunity. This was ingrained in both long before they became an evangelical family. Those ideals and practices were passed down to all of the ten children. When each Delany child went to college, he was informed that they could expect no charity and must make their own way. Along the way, throughout the rest of their lives, they would be expected to help their fellow man, regardless of color. In that way, all of the children followed the path set by Henry and Nanny, remembering to perform service whenever and wherever possible. Many went into service professions such as medicine and teaching.

When the children were small, they often paid visits to the lonely, hungry and infirm. No one went without when the Delanys were around, even though the family had little to no money to give. The sisters talk about various townspeople that became "auntie this" and "uncle that" exhibiting a true sense of community.

There are many examples of service given during the tales of the Depression. Bessie was known to help anyone who asked, giving out food, dental care, and anything else she could manage. Sometimes Bessie gave away more than she had to give.



Although the family was often faced with hard times and extreme prejudice, none ever forgot the lessons learned at home.

## Family Ties

The book discusses the births of Nanny and Henry Delany's ten children: Lemuel Thackara Delany in 1897; Sarah Louise (Sadie) in 1889; Annie Elizabeth (Bessie) in 1891; Julia Emery in 1893; Henry, Jr. (Harry) in 1895; Lucius in 1897; William Manross in 1899; Hubert Thomas in 1901; Laura Edith in 1903; and Samuel Ray in 1906. At the time the book was written, only Sadie, Bess and Laura were still alive.

The Delanys lived right on St. Aug's campus. Although the world was relatively safe for the family, the children were not permitted to go off campus alone. The structure of the Delany home was also discussed. Mr. and Mrs. Delany were frightfully busy people but always made time for their children.

Nanny was a loving mother and also a strict disciplinarian. This was surely due in part to having ten children. There was no thing as surefire birth control in those days. After Nanny had her tenth child a friend suggested that she could tell Nanny about a way to stop the pregnancies. Nanny was irate and claimed that she wanted each and every child.

Other family dynamics are discussed from nighttime rituals of Bible stories to morning inspection and expected behavior. The children believed that teachers were harder on them most likely due to the high standards of their parents and the high expectations that each would be an accomplished person.

Throughout their long, productive lives, the Delanys spent every spare moment together, providing a strong example for the preciousness of family ties.

# Style

## Perspective

"Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years," written by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth, is a work of non-fiction and therefore relies on the perspective of the author and narrators to relay pertinent information relative to the women's journey. Although this book is a memoir, the addition of Hearth helps to present many facts objectively.

Part 1, in the book, "Sweet Sadie, Queen Bess," begins with the author saying, "Both more than one hundred years old, Sarah ("Sadie") Delany and her sister, Annie Elizabeth ("Bessie") Delany are among the oldest living witnesses to American history." (Part 1, page 3)

At the time the book was written in 1991, Sadie was 103 years old, Bessie was 101 years old. Despite their advanced ages, Sadie still took on the role of big sister, protecting Bessie from a world she had conquered long ago. In a time when many black families were relegated to less than acceptable employment and living conditions, the Delany family rose above, eventually becoming one of the most prominent families in black America and the country as a whole.

Sadie went on to become a teacher; Bessie became the second colored woman licensed to practice dentistry in New York. She also broke the color barrier by being licensed in North Carolina.

Throughout the book, it is clear that much of the sisters' perspective was formed by their parents, particularly their father, Bishop Henry Delany. All of the Delany children were well educated, service oriented people that were taught that no one is better than anyone else just because of the color of their skin.

## Tone

"Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years," written by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth, is a work of non-fiction and therefore has a unique tone for a memoir. The Delanys, particularly Bessie, are well known for being outspoken, straightforward and unapologetic. This book reflects that same tone without being overpowering or biased to the point of being viewed as the work of a zealot.

The wisdom of the sisters shows through clearly in the narrative. Both sisters are extremely funny and outspoken, not afraid to tell things like they were back then and are today. At one point in the book, one of the sisters says that only children and old people tell the truth. At ages 101 and 103, the sisters have certainly earned the right.





Although the book is a joint memoir, the sisters are able to present many facts objectively. The author adds in some historical time frame markers to assist the narrative, which is helpful to the reader. The sisters also relay their view of things as they were, e.g., Harlem during the Depression, and compare those things to the accounts written in history books.

Unlike many memoirs of this sort, the Delany sisters create a sense of joy as they walk through history and show that every second is precious and should be lived to the fullest.

## Structure

"Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years" written by Sarah and A. Elizabeth Delany with Amy Hill Hearth is a work of non-fiction. It is comprised of 210 pages broken down into seven parts and 32 chapters.

Part 1, "Sweet Sadie, Queen Bess," contains 4 chapters and contains 15 pages. The shortest chapter is comprised of three pages; the longest chapter is comprised of 5 pages; the average number of pages per chapter is 4.

Part 2, "I am Free!" contains three chapters and contains 14 pages. The shortest chapter is comprised of three pages; the longest chapter is comprised of 5 pages; the average number of pages per chapter is 4.

Part 3, "St. Aug's," contains four chapters and contains 21 pages. The shortest chapter is comprised of three pages; the longest chapter is comprised of five pages; the average number of pages per chapter is 4.

Part 4, "Jim Crow Days," contains four chapters and contains 30 pages. The shortest chapter is comprised of three pages; the longest chapter is comprised of nine pages; the average number of pages per chapter is 7.

Part 5, "Harlem-Town," contains four chapters and contains 15 pages. The shortest chapter is comprised of three pages; the longest chapter is comprised of five pages; the average number of pages per chapter is 4.

Part 6, "Ties That Bind," contains 10 chapters and contains 65 pages. The shortest chapter is comprised of three pages; the longest chapter is comprised of nine pages; the average number of pages per chapter is 7.

Part 7, "Outliving the Rebbly Boys," contains three chapters and contains 19 pages. The shortest chapter is comprised of three pages; the longest chapter is comprised of five pages; the average number of pages per chapter is 6.

Of all the parts, the longest part is 65 pages in length; the shortest part is 14 pages in length. The average number of pages per part is 30.

There is a two-page prologue at the beginning of each part. The prologue is written by Hill, giving a time frame and relevant historical references to complement the narrative by Sadie and Bessie. The narrative is generally split between Sadie and Bessie, with both sisters narrating in some sections.

The chapters tend to run in a basic chronological order with some use of flashback to create necessary background and fill in details that might otherwise be missed or overlooked.

Also included in the book are a family tree and photos.



## Quotes

"Both more than one hundred years old, Sarah ("Sadie") Delany and her sister, Annie Elizabeth ("Bessie") Delany are among the oldest living witnesses to American history" Part 1, page 3.

"People learned not to mess with me from Day One" Part 1, chapter 2, page 9.

"Funny thing is, some days I feel like a young girl and other days I'm feeling the grave, just a-feeling the grave" Part 1, chapter 3, page 18.

"In the decades after the Civil War, "education" became the rallying cry of those seeking to improve the lot of former slaves, whose prospects were limited usually to hard labor in the fields or to domestic work in white people's homes" Part 3, page 39.

"Black colleges were the crucial stepping stone to progress, and they flourished" Part 3, page 39.

"I take after Mama's people. Mama could be very feisty, and somehow like me, she lived to tell about it" Part 3, chapter 9, page 54.

"We encountered Jim Crow laws for the first time on a summer Sunday afternoon" Part 4, chapter 10, page 66.

"Jim Crow was an ugly, complicated business" Part 4, chapter 11, page 69.

"Well here I am an old maid. Ooops, I shouldn't say 'old maid' because it makes Bessie mad" Part 4, chapter 13, page 97.

"Harlem in its heyday of the 1920s and early 1930s was the spiritual center of black America and the birthplace of a vibrant culture that came to be celebrated as the Harlem Renaissance" Part 5, page 97.

"When Papa became bishop in 1918, people were mighty impressed" Part 5, chapter 18, page 116.

"I didn't realize how safe I felt in this world because of Papa" Part 5, chapter 24, page 149.

## Topics for Discussion

How do you think the values of professional women have changed since the Delany sisters' heyday? Do you think the Delany sisters were unusual or before their time?

How might things have changed if one or both of the Delany sisters had married?

Do you share the opinion that someone who has reached 100 is used up? Do you think that the Delanys still had something to offer either professionally or personally? Explain.

Discuss elderly people you know and compare them to the Delany sisters. How are they similar? How are they different? What do you think you will be like when you become elderly?

What kind of influence did the Delany sisters' parents have on the way they view the world? How might the parents have given better advice? Do you think that their advice and guidance would have changed if the parents knew how long the sisters would live? Explain.

What do you think of the opinions of the Delanys' detractors? Do you think the family attempted to be above others in their so-called class? Do you think lower-class blacks were jealous or weren't as ambitious as the Delanys?

Sadie talks about the difference in treatment between her and Bessie due to the shade of their skin tone. Do you think that the shade of one's skin matters as much today or are all blacks treated equally? Do you think other races have the same opinions and/or experiences?