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Having Our Say: The Delany Sisters First 100 Years

Sarah Delany, Annie Elizabeth Delany, Amy Hill Hearth

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"When you get real old, honey," says Bessie Delany, "you lay it all on the table. There's an old saying: Only little children and old folks tell the truth." In Having Our Say Bessie, age 101, and her sister Sadie, age 103, do just that-and then some. Filled with humorous and poignant anecdotes, this inspiring dual memoir offers a rare glimpse of the birth of black freedom- and the rise of the black middle class-in America. It is a chronicle of remarkable achievement.

Sadie and Bessie Delany recall growing up with eight other siblings in turn-of-the-century North Carolina: their father was born in slavery, yet became the nation's first elected black Episcopal bishop; their mother could have "passed" for white but chose not to.

With irrepressible pluck, the sisters confronted the first days of Jim Crow and legal segregation, and took part in the World War I-era migration North, rising to professional prominence during the heyday of Harlem. Along the way they met such legendary figures as black leaders Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. Du Bois and entertainers Cab Calloway and Lena Home. Both sisters favored careers over marriage, despite many opportunities. Later, they settled in the still partly-rural Bronx, then integrated a suburban neighborhood in the '50s.

Each has triumphed in her own way:
"Queen Bess" with feistiness; "Sweet Sadie" with quiet determination. Though warmly skeptical of each other's style, they remain devoted. "She may be one- hundred-and-one years old, comments Sadie, "but she's still my little sister."

Today they are fragile, yet fiercely independent. They still live alone in their own house. They make their own peach preserves and their own soap, and don't own a telephone ("it's the biggest nuisance invented by mankind"). Radio keeps them informed-and their opinions on current events are to be reckoned with.

Sadie and Bessie Delany's lifelong insights provide us with a priceless oral history of our nation's past century. And what they "have to say" shows us, as no one else can, where we've been, how far we've come...and how far we have to go.

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