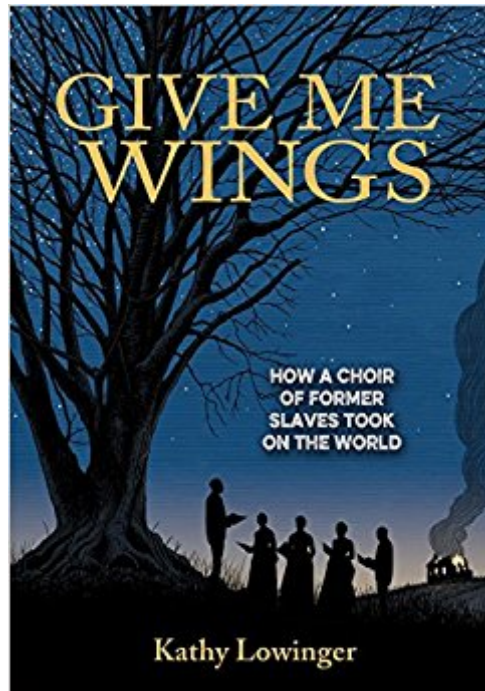




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# Give Me Wings: How A Choir Of Slaves Took On The World



## Synopsis

Changing minds one song at a time. The 1800s were a dangerous time to be a black girl in the United States, especially if you were born a slave. Ella Sheppard was such a girl, but her family bought their freedom and moved to Ohio where slavery was illegal; they even scraped enough money together to send Ella to school and buy her a piano. In 1871, when her school ran out of money and was on the brink of closure, Ella became a founding member of a traveling choir, the Jubilee Singers, to help raise funds for the Fisk Free Colored School, later known as Fisk University. Framed within Ella's inspiring story, *Give Me Wings!* is narrative nonfiction at its finest, taking readers through one of history's most tumultuous and dramatic times, touching on the Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction Era.

## Book Information

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Age Range: 12 - 14 years

Grade Level: 6 - 12

## Customer Reviews

Gr 7 Up • Readers learn the story of Ella Sheppard and the Jubilee Singers of Fisk University. Born a slave, Sheppard survived the Civil War and eventually enrolled in Fisk Free Colored School (now Fisk University) in Nashville, TN. However, this underfunded school for newly freed blacks floundered within a few years. In order to raise money, George White, Fisk's treasurer and music teacher, organized a choir with Ella Sheppard as his assistant and took them on tour.

Meeting with only minor success at the outset, the choir hit their stride when they began singing the old slave songs we now call spirituals. Eventually, they toured Europe, even singing for Queen Victoria, and raised enough money to build Jubilee Hall, which still stands on the Fisk campus. Interwoven with Ella's story are details of the dehumanizing institution of slavery and the immediate postwar years as experienced by African Americans and their advocates, as well as pictures and primary-source excerpts. Lowinger does not shy away from the more unpleasant aspects of that history and grounds it in the very human and relatively little-known story of Sheppard and the Jubilee Singers, which makes the struggle all the more touching and real. VERDICT Recommended for all libraries, this excellent title will be especially useful in collaboration with school curricula. —Katherine Koenig, The Ellis School, PA

— a truly inspiring story. —Amy Rae, cs Reviews, 07/14/15  
— a story of triumph —The Pirate Tree, 08/04/15  
— “Recommended for all libraries, this excellent title will be especially useful in collaboration with school curricula. —School Library Journal, \*starred review, 08/15  
— beautiful, informative, and inspiring —The Literate Quilter, 08/16/15

Give Me Wings: How a Choir of Former Slaves Took on the World by Kathy Lowinger is a beautiful, informative, and inspiring book for readers ages 11 to 14. This is the story of Ella Sheppard who was born a slave. Ella's father bought her, but her mother was considered 'indispensable' by the mistress and even though she had agreed to sell her to her husband, she backed out and took her to Mississippi. Her father struggled to provide for the family. He eventually purchased another house slave who he married and she became Ella's step-mother. It was years later that they found out that he had bought Ella and his wife but had never filed their free papers so they had to leave. They ended up in Cincinnati Ohio. Her father managed to give Ella a piano and music lessons and she was extremely gifted. By this time, the Emancipation Proclamation had been signed and they were free. When her father died, she and her step-mother went back to Nashville to try and earn a living. She yearned for an education and applied to and was accepted to the Fisk Free Colored School. Ella became one of their first black teachers when they heard her playing piano and singing. She became a music teacher. Unfortunately, the school was on the verge of bankruptcy. They came up with the idea of concerts to raise money for the school. Ella led the school choir, consisting of mostly former slaves, in performing Esther, the Beautiful Queen. Audiences were impressed but donations

were scanty. People were expecting a minstrel show! They traveled all over the US performing but were still not making a substantial amount of money. One day Ella had the choir sing Steal Away and discovered that audiences were moved by the slave songs which the freed blacks wanted to leave behind in the past. They made more money at that show than any others so far. They changed their repertoire to Spirituals and found a promoter in Henry Ward Beecher. The choir's success was ensured when they went to New York. Samuel Clements (Mark Twain) became one of their promoters. Eventually, The Jubilee Singers went to England where they met and performed for the Queen of England. In Europe they earned Frisk \$20,000. The school was saved. Today Fisk University lists among its graduates W.E.B DuBois, Ida B. Wells, Nikki Giovanni and the Honorable John R. Lewis. Several stories illustrate the prejudice the Jubilee Singers had to contend with. When they were introduced by General Fisk himself he noted the singer's values before emancipation and commented that after the audience heard their voices they would agree they were vastly undervalued. He thought he was making a joke, but the singers did not think so. In England their introduction warned the audience not to expect sophisticated artistry. Often they were kicked out of hotels and slept in train stations. This book includes side bar stories on slavery and historical background to the story. Some of the descriptions of slavery may be upsetting to early elementary readers, which is why this book is recommended to older students. A timeline is included and further reading suggestions as well as letting us know what happened to the Jubilee Singers and others in their lives. Full color as well as black and white illustrations and photographs appear on nearly every page. I was very impressed with this book. It gives a different look to this period in history while still imparting the information about slavery, prejudice and some of the civil rights issues of the time. Definitely a book for school and public libraries. The publisher generously provided me a copy of this book through Netgalley.

The Warm-Up: A well written, well researched account of the Jubilee Singers using the experience of Ella Sheppard as the focal point. The Jubilee Singers were the former slaves who were the first students at Fisk University. The Melody: Lowinger gives a fairly thorough account of Sheppard's life as a whole. The main thrust of the book, though, is the rise and success of the Jubilee Singers. Lowinger doesn't mince words about the racism and prejudice these brave young people faced, nor does she hide the brutality towards and injustice of the slaves in the U.S. prior to, during, and after the Civil War. The South wasn't the only bastion of hate and bigotry, and the Civil War didn't immediately solve all the problems. Lowinger also offers information on various Jubilee Singers and those that helped the

Singers. A biography of Ella Sheppard, yes, but this is also a terrific social history of the U.S. during the mid-1800s that is more than a slave narrative, a cry for abolitionist causes, or an account of the differences between the South or the North. The Applause: Well done, Ms. Lowinger! More emotional connection with Shepherd and her fellow singers might have been too much for middle school and high school readers, but she offers sophisticated writing, well researched information, lyric to old spirituals, and plenty of maps, photographs, and other memorabilia reproductions to interest any reader age 10 and up. Lowinger also alludes to the Christian faith of Shepherd and some of the others without making this a main focus. Those who don't share Shepherd's faith will not be offended, but those of us who do very much appreciate this aspect! Note for concerned parents: there is some heavy content in this book, as is fitting with the subject material. One historical image (not a photograph) shows a mob beating a black man to death. Scenes like this, references at the beginning to male masters taking their female slaves to bed, and the like make this a book better suited for upper middle grades and up if you are dealing with sensitive young readers. I received a free copy of this book from the publisher for review purposes.

I was fascinated by this story of Ella Shepard, the Fisk Free Colored school and the Jubilee Choir singers. This middle school book has some pretty tough passages about life as, not just a poor person, but a poor black slave in the late 1800s. Ella's story of hard work, the generous help of friends, strangers, teachers and fellow students, and her lifelong dedication to music is inspiring. The story never talks down to readers, while at the same time presenting a background on slavery and keeping explanations at an excellent level for 6th-8th grade. There are photos on most pages, and occasional boxes with lyrics to spirituals or other music. Older readers will also most likely appreciate this well researched and written story. This is great to suggest to middle school readers fascinated by tough-as-nails heroines in popular YA fiction, and who want something a little different. Ella Sheppard lives in a world just as harsh as most imagined dystopias...only Ella's world actually existed in our past. About me: I'm a middle school/high school librarian How I got this book: review copy from the publisher.

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