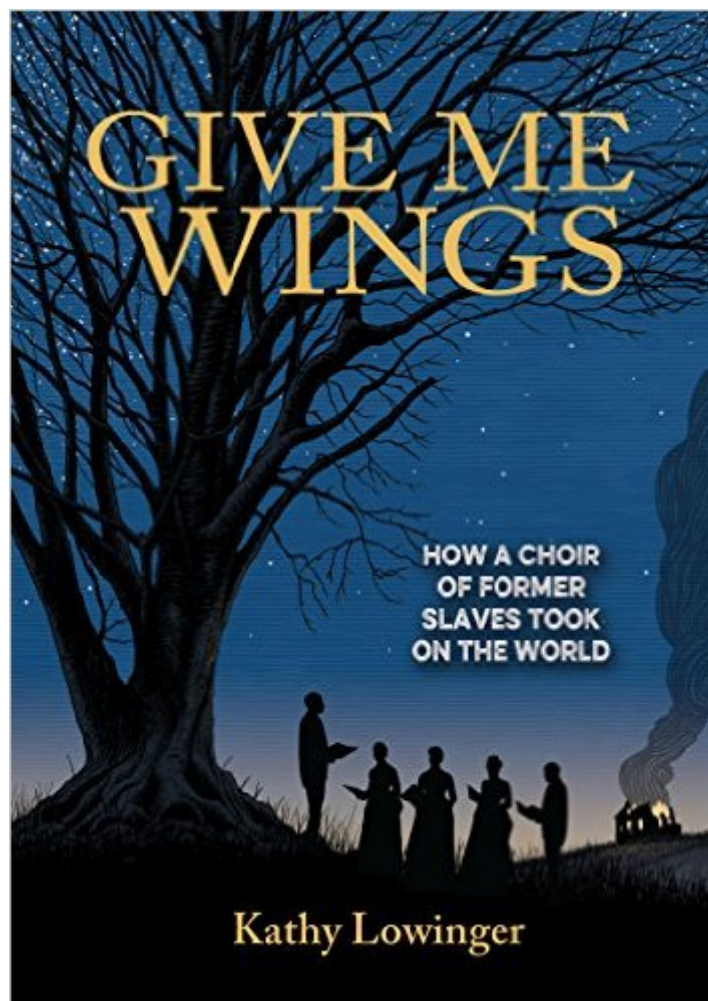


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# Give Me Wings: How A Choir Of Slaves Took On The World



## 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

This is not the flashiest, most exciting book I have ever read, but it moved me powerfully. It is an excellent account of the early history of the Jubilee Singers, all of whom were ex-slaves, who went out on concert tours to raise money for an African-American college-Fisk University. The prejudice and ignorance they faced constantly is staggeringly depressing. And the way in which they cope with it is inspiring. They were, by all accounts, phenomenal singers and they gave the beautiful old

slave spirituals, the performances they deserved. One of the most staggering descriptions is of the day Queen Victoria came to see them. I have written books on nonfiction for children, done talks all over the country about children's books, and I loved this one--and read a few parts of it aloud to my husband.

*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 Clemens (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 Fisk \$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. I received a copy of this book from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

**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.

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