



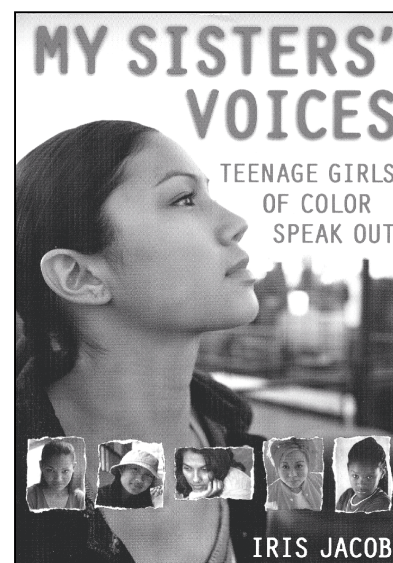
My Sisters' Voices

Teenage Girls of Color Speak Out

by Iris Jacob

"A collection of honest, insightful essays."

—*The San Diego Union-Tribune*



272 pages • 978-0-8050-6821-4



An
Accelerated
Reader
Title

"The writers speak
about the issues
that matter
most to teens."
—*Booklist*

TO THE TEACHER

My Sisters' Voices presents a vast array of frank, perceptive, and richly varied writings by teenage girls of African American, Hispanic, Asian American, Native American, and biracial backgrounds. With honesty and intelligence—with ample grace and generosity of spirit—these young women tell their stories in their own words. In this anthology of more than 100 essays and poems, we find personal accounts that are by turns inspiring, affirmative, angry, revealing, and challenging—and always real and instructive. The writings collected here cover a wide range of subjects, among them family, friends, sex, love, racism, loss, oppression, class, culture, society, tradition, spirituality, and assimilation.

In *My Sisters' Voices*, young women of color are being given, at long last, the chance to speak out, stand up, sound off, and be counted. As Iris Jacobs—the eighteen-year-old biracial diversity activist who is also the smart, sensitive, and articulate editor of this collection (and its guiding narrator)—points out in her Introduction: "We as girls of color not only deserved but needed a book, recognition, and a voice so that we could be properly heard and acknowledged" (page xvi). Indeed, as adolescents, women, and minorities, the young authors in this book represent a significant demographic that has had—until now—no voice

of its own, a group often spoken for but rarely given the opportunity to be heard on its own terms. *My Sisters' Voices* rights this wrong.

With readable stories and approachable poems that communicate fears, dreams, loves, and hopes, this anthology explores and critiques both past and present issues. Demanding respect and equal justice throughout, *My Sisters' Voices* is essential reading for a generation of girls struggling to define themselves in a world that keeps trying to do it for them. Continuing with her Introduction, Jacobs proclaims: "This book is for teen girls of color to express what they have for so long kept to themselves . . . [We] as a group need to support one another, care for one another, use our voices, and most of all demand to be heard . . . We come from all different ethnic, cultural, and spiritual traditions. We are immigrants, some of us. We are beauties, inner and outer. We are heroines. We are winners, every one of us. We are poets. We are the present. And, make no mistake, we are the future" (page xxi).

However, *My Sisters' Voices* also has much to say to, and much to teach, preceding generations. The disparate yet unified writings collected in this book are, after all, intended for not only for young women of color but for all adults now raising, teaching, befriending, or otherwise mentoring today's young women of color in America. Perfectly suited for individual study as well as the classroom, this book conveys a broad spectrum of issues and ideas about race and gender with candor, sincerity, lucidity, and wisdom.

PRAISE FOR
MY SISTERS' VOICES

"A powerful peek into the lives of teens at a crossroads—girls on the cusp of womanhood grappling with racism, sexism, heritage, poverty, family, and self-image in a world where they are largely unheard."—*Chicago Tribune*

"This work should encourage discussions about diversity and let teens know that they are not alone in their struggle."—Lynda Jones, *Black Issues Book Review*

"A volume that intersperses short poems and prose selections written by teens of color from all over the country . . . The writers speak about the issues that matter most to teens (self-image, family, sex, love, abuse, pride, education, courage, race, and beauty), and Jacob's voice in her general introduction is clear and completely her own—direct, insightful, angry, and alternately adolescent and adult . . . The range of voices and experiences [is] enlightening."—*Booklist*

PREPARING
TO READ

“*My Sisters’ Voices* highlights the beautiful, brave voices of our much-silenced young women. This book is especially exciting because Jacob not only wants to broadcast the hopes, fears, and realities of young women of color—she wants them to hear each other and come together . . . Alternately heartbreaking and empowering . . . The book seems to embody community.”—*AsianWeek*

“Jacob solicited works from teens across the country, writing thousands of letters to friends, English teachers and social organizations. The result is a stirring collection of essays and poems detailing the coming-of-age experiences of a diverse group of young women identified by name, age, and ethnicity. Jacob and company tackle such issues as interracial friendships, poverty, oppression, and family . . . All [of these writings] are important and will resonate with teens and their parents, teachers, and mentors.”—*Publishers Weekly*

READING AND
UNDERSTANDING
THIS ANTHOLOGY

This Teacher’s Guide is designed to aid all instructors who wish to use *My Sisters’ Voices* as a tool for exploring issues of cultural and ethnic diversity, awareness, and/or sensitivity amid the young women of color in their classrooms. The Guide is primarily divided into two sections, which both appear immediately below. The first section, “Reading and Understanding this Anthology,” is meant to help students with reading comprehension, conceptual appreciation, interpretation, identification, and related matters. “Questions and Exercises for the Class,” the second section, aims to help students think more freely, creatively, associatively, or comparatively about the varied writings comprising *My Sisters’ Voices*. A “Suggestions for Further Reading” list is offered as a brief conclusion.

1. In the Introduction, Jacob explains the thoughts, experiences, and motivations that led her to create *My Sisters’ Voices*. “Everywhere I looked,” she writes, “I began to see the need for such a book” (page xvi). Describe the “need” she is referring to. What were Jacob’s personal and universal reasons for producing this book? Which reasons do you identify with—and why?
2. Later in the Introduction, Jacob reflects on her friend named Rosa. Who is Rosa? Describe her, explaining where, when, and why she and Jacob became friends. What does Jacob mean when she says of Rosa: “She was furious that she was forced to be the translator between her parents and the rest of the city” (page xviii)?
3. “My First Love: Skratching” (pages 9-11) is an informative and entertaining essay by Brooke Wilson that critiques today’s TV commercials and our society (which basically mirrors these commercials). “I can’t decide what to make of it,”

writes Brooke. But what do you—as a reader of Brooke’s piece, as a viewer of American TV, as a young woman of color—“make of it”? Where would you place the blame for the particular blend of sexism and objectification that Brooke is complaining about?

4. Look again at the essay called “Fear” (pages 18-9) by Nneka Nnaoke Ufere. Why do you think this certain title was chosen? Explain the “fear” described at the conclusion of this piece. How, if at all, does Nneka connect this “fear” to the other key points of her narrative?

5. There are two different poems (by two different authors) entitled “The Color Line” (pages 30, 31-4) in this book. Re-read these poems, then compare and contrast them.

6. The sharp, vivid poem called “All-American Girl” (pages 37-8) relies heavily on irony. What is ironic about it? What is the point of this poem, in your view, and how does irony help to get this point across?

7. Revisit the poem called “Assimilation” (page 48), as well as the introductory recollection by Jacobs immediately preceding it. Both writings are highly critical of the idea of assimilation. Why? Do you agree with these writings? Explain why or why not, citing your own thoughts and experiences concerning assimilation.

8. One of the most tragic and unsettling essays in this anthology is “Our Street” (pages 67-70). Describe the neighborhood and home life that Sia J. Yobah looks back on. What did you learn about world affairs by reading this piece?

9. “Daddy’s Girl” and “Life’s Lessons” (pages 82-5) are two essays by Taia Waltjen that are printed back-to-back. How are these essays contradictory? And how are they similar? Why has Waltjen presented two very different views of a single individual? And how, if at all, do her essays show us that love itself can be contradictory or paradoxical?

10. In the short essay “Friends” (pages 114-5), Sarah Richardson tells the painful story of her friend Amber. “Is there a correct definition of a friend?” Sarah asks. After providing a dictionary definition, Sarah provides one of her own. What is Sarah’s individual definition of friendship—and do you agree with it? Why or why not?

11. The final paragraph of Alicia Lea Haley’s “Untitled” essay (pages 123-125) begins with a “lesson” from the author. Paraphrase this lesson, and then explain how she arrived at it.

12. Explore the complicated and conflicted ideas about girls of color as “caretakers” that Jacobs discusses (pages 125-6) in her introductory remarks for “Battered Butterfly: A Story of an Abusive Relationship.” What is meant by this term? And how is the notion of such “caretaking” both right and wrong, according to Jacobs?
13. “The Child of Our Younger Years” (pages 142-3) is a detailed and adventure-some poem about the separate identity one has during one’s childhood. Does the poem, in your view, suggest that one’s childhood identity is lost when one reaches adulthood? Or does the poem allow that both identities—childhood and adulthood—can co-exist? Explain. Also, what questions would you add to the list of questions comprising this poem (assuming author Neftara O. Clark invited you to contribute to her poem)?
14. Samantha McKinney’s short essay “Sex” (pages 155-6) ends with the author’s individual view of what a man is. Look again at the last paragraph of her essay. How does Samantha define “men”? Do you agree with her? Is her definition fair, accurate, and complete? Explain.
15. What, if anything, did the piece called “Mortality” (pages 157-8) tell you about the difference between showing emotion and playing it cool? Defend your answer by citing specific passages in this piece.
16. Summarize the somewhat complex mother-daughter relationship that is presented by Cecilia Nguyen in her “Behind the Wheel” essay (pages 168-70). How do these two women ultimately feel about one another?
17. In the troubling poem called “Love Taps” (page 193), who or what is being identified by the “hyena” imagery? Who is being addressed in this poem? How and why is the speaker of this poem critical of the “hyena” figure?
18. Two brief, moving, and difficult poems appear consecutively in the “Sharing Our Sorrows” section of *My Sisters’ Voices*: “Nonsense” and “That Child” (pages 206-7). What does each poem tell us about its speaker or subject? What does each tell us about its individual home environment and life experiences? And does the fact that these two writings are poems in any way influence the emotional or intellectual affect that they have on you personally? Explain.
19. “What Made Me Stronger” (page 231) is a work of short prose written by Deymis Baquero. Identify and comment on the different kinds of “strength” that Deymis mentions or infers here.
20. The beautiful poem called “Untitled” (page 236) by Sunny Rasmussen thrives on a single yet powerful symbol—a flower. Explain this flower metaphor, especially in the context of this anthology as a whole.

1. The aim of this book is to help young women of color talk about, understand, affirm, and celebrate their ethnic, socio-cultural, and personal identities. Given this aim, discuss how the book influenced your thoughts, changed your views, etc. Refer to writings from throughout the book to make your points, giving special attention to matters of race—your own race and that of the author(s) you are citing.
2. *My Sisters' Voices* is, collectively, a book about speaking out, being heard, getting included, and achieving empowerment. But were there any pieces in this book—either stories or poems—that you, as a young woman of color, felt were *not* representative of who you are? Identify these works, explaining why they did not speak to/for you.
3. Is the essay entitled “It’s Hard” (pages 34-5) ultimately for or against “tolerance”? Or is there a paradox presented here? Discuss.
4. Iris Jacobs, who edited this book and composed its many reflective introductions, is a biracial young woman and diversity-minded activist. How did her personality and personal history affect your reading of *My Sisters' Voices*? Discuss the asides and introductory remarks that she offers throughout the book. Where and why did you especially identify with what Jacobs was saying? And were there any instances where your impression of a certain story or poem was different from hers? Identify them, if so, and explain why.
5. At once point in *My Sisters' Voices*, Jacobs confesses in an aside: “I have yet to understand what ‘too angry’ means” (page 45). Discuss both the specific context and the broader meanings of this rather bold remark. Do you agree with it? Explore your views as a class.
6. Creative writing—perhaps all writing—might be roughly categorized as an act of expression or an act of communication. (What does it mean to express something? What does it mean to communicate something? And what is the difference, in your view?) As a class, select a few different writings from this book—favorite poems, memorable stories, etc. Then, in each case, discuss what exactly is being communicated or expressed.
7. Re-read the poem called “My Heartbeat” (pages 100-101). As a class, try to identify all of the authors, poets, and performers listed in this poem. Which other past or present artists (literary or otherwise) would you choose to add, if you were attempting a poem like this one? Explain your choices.

8. “Because [young women of color] are so often judged on our skin color, it’s an important part of our identity,” Jacobs notes toward the end of this book (page 221). As a class, identify several different pieces in *My Sisters’ Voices* that deal explicitly with skin color. How is skin described or discussed, ranked or rated, praised or prized in these writings? Also, how does skin color relate to the concept of “internalized racism” (see page 23 and elsewhere)?

9. Look back at the six different sections that comprise this book. Which sections—“More Than Skin Deep,” “Our Roots,” and so forth—did you, as an individual reader, learn the most from? Which particular section most closely reflected your own ideas and experiences? And which section seemed the least familiar to you? Explain your answers by referring to various writings from throughout *My Sisters’ Voices*.

10. Try to create your own contributions to this anthology. Write six short pieces—one that you think would be appropriate for each of the book’s six sections. When you are finished, share and discuss these writings with your classmates. (Or, if you wish to write anonymously, give your finished works to your teacher so that he/she can present them to the class without revealing your identity.)

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café (edited by Miguel Algarin and Bob Holman), *American Negro Poetry* (edited by Arna Bontemps), *The Girl from Purple Mountain* (by May-Lee Chai and Winberg Chai), *Black American Short Stories* (edited by John Henrik Clarke), *I Wouldn’t Thank You for a Valentine: Poems for Young Feminists* (edited by Carol Ann Duffy), *Short Stories of Langston Hughes* (published by Hill and Wang), *Annie John* (by Jamaica Kincaid)*, *Lucy* (by Jamaica Kincaid), *My Brother* (by Jamaica Kincaid), *Betsey Brown* (by Ntozake Shange)*, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (by Ntozake Shange), *Liliane* (by Ntozake Shange), *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (by Ntozake Shange), and *Women of the Silk* (by Gail Tsukiyama).

(* Macmillan Teacher’s Guides are also available for these titles.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Iris Jacob is a biracial young woman with a strong commitment to diversity issues. She has been a student facilitator at numerous diversity conferences, started affinity groups for students of color and women at her high school, and co-directed a youth leadership institute addressing topics of oppression, prejudice, and awareness.

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ALL BUT MY LIFE, Gerda Weissmann Klein*
ANNE FRANK, Jacobson & Colón
ANNIE JOHN, Jamaica Kincaid*
BETSEY BROWN, Ntozake Shange*
Building Solid Readers (A Graphic Novel Teacher's Guide)
ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY, Francis Bok*
I AM A SEAL TEAM SIX WARRIOR, Howard E. Wasdin & Stephen Templin*
I CAPTURE THE CASTLE, Dodie Smith*
I NEVER PROMISED YOU A ROSE GARDEN, Joanne Greenberg*
THE ILIAD, trans., Robert Fitzgerald*
THE INFERNO OF DANTE, trans., Robert Pinsky
LIE, Caroline Bock*
LIKE ANY NORMAL DAY, Mark Kram, Jr.*
A LONG WAY GONE, Ishmael Beah
MIDNIGHT RISING, Tony Horwitz
MY SISTERS' VOICES, Iris Jacob*
THE NATURAL, Bernard Malamud*
NAVY SEAL DOGS, Michael Ritland*
NICKEL AND DIMED, Barbara Ehrenreich
NIGHT, Elie Wiesel
THE NIGHT THOREAU SPENT IN JAIL, Lawrence & Lee*
THE ODYSSEY, trans., Robert Fitzgerald
RAY BRADBURY'S FAHRENHEIT 451, Tim Hamilton
ROBERT FROST'S POEMS, Robert Frost
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