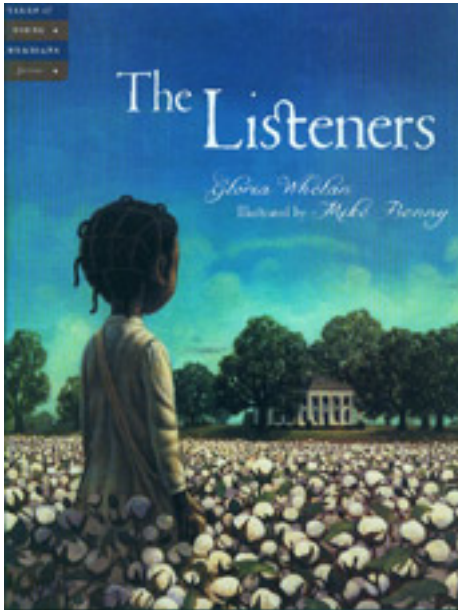


## Book review: “The Listeners” by Gloria Whelan

Written by Terri Schlichenmeyer

---



Shhhhhhh. Practically from the minute you were born, somebody was shushing you. Hushing your crying when you were a baby. Whispering to get you to settle down and listen. Yelling at you so you'd be silent as a mouse. Giving something to do so you'd leave them in peace for five minutes.

You're a kid, and kids make noise. But sometimes, it's important to stay still and use your ears. In the new book “The Listeners” by Gloria Whelan, illustrated by Mike Benny, three children use their listening skills in a most important way.

All day long, starting well before daylight, Bobby, Sue, and Ella May have work to do. Bobby drives the cows to pasture. Sue helps the grannies take care of babies. And Ella May helps everyone in the fields. But after supper, the three children have more important work.

As the skies get dark, Bobby, Sue, and Ella May sneak over to the great house, quiet as little bugs, and they listen beneath the window. Mistress and Master don't tell the slaves anything, so the news that the children hear is carried back to their families.

Sitting in the dark outside a window can be scary. Ella May is afraid that someone might catch them, or that Mistress Grace's piano playing might carry them away. But night after night, they take secrets back to Daddy and Mammy.

Once while listening, Ella May heard that Daddy was going to be sold, but Master said that wouldn't happen. Cotton picking is a hard job and Ella May has to pick lots to fill her basket. If she doesn't, the boss flicks her with his cane. Daddy sometimes helps her by giving her his cotton. Master says Daddy is a good cotton-picker. Ella May knows that's true.

One night Daddy says that listening is doubly important and that Ella May, Bobby, and Sue must remember everything they learn at the window of the great house. What they hear makes Ella May think that their listening job may be over, but Daddy says it's only just begun.

Sometimes – most times – it's hard to get small kids to sit still and use their ears. But if you've

## Book review: “The Listeners” by Gloria Whelan

Written by Terri Schlichenmeyer

---

got this book, “The Listeners” is a self-fulfilling title.

Author Gloria Whelan tells a story of a little girl who does a big job for those in her community, as well as a subtle tale of life as a slave from a kids’ point of view. Little Ella May is spunky and smart but with a sweet innocence that makes her appealing to other kids and to adults who’ll be doing the reading.

Or, maybe that adorableness is due to the excellent illustrations by Mike Benny. Benny is generally stingy with color (using mostly earth tones), which gives this book a somewhat furtive tone, which seems just right.

If you’re looking for something that will keep a group of kids (or just one child) quiet for awhile, find this book. For kids ages 3-to-8, “The Listeners” will have them sitting ears forward.

“The Listeners” by Gloria Whelan, illustrated by Mike Benny  
c.2009, Sleeping Bear Press | \$17.95 / \$21.50 Canada | 40 pages