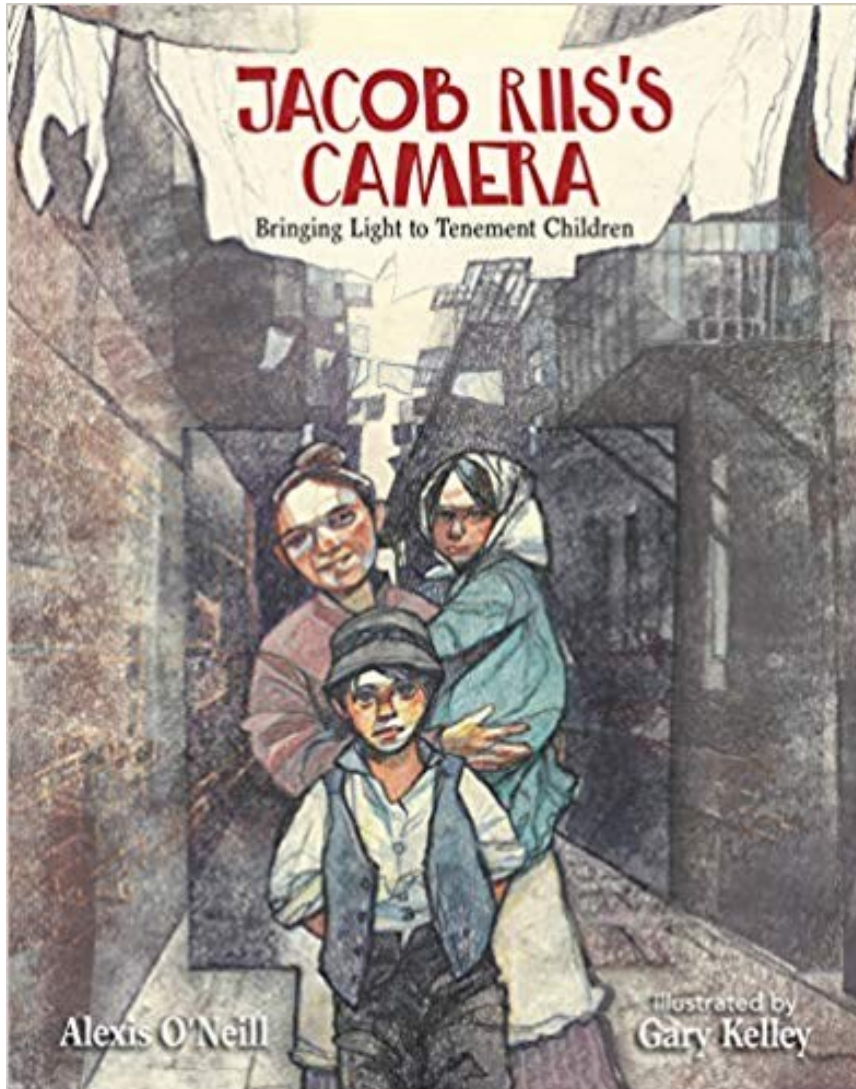


Because You Asked . . .

Questions & Answers About
Jacob Riis's Camera:
Bringing Light to Tenement Children



How did you get the idea for writing the *Riis* book?

The idea didn't come in a flash (no pun intended), but more in a layer cake fashion. This happens when an idea builds up over time. For example:

First layer: I've always had an interest in photographers like Lewis Hine who documented children at work in order to make changes to child labor laws.

Next layer: I belonged to the Syracuse Camera Club and showed my photographs in competitions. The one competition I liked best was for narrated slide shows.

Another layer: I picked up a book called *How The Other Half Lives* by Jacob A. Riis at Lowell Mills National Park and realized I had seen the photos he took, but knew nothing about the man. I discovered his tool for social justice was pairing narration with photos of terrible conditions in the tenements—in essence, a slide show like I used to do!

Icing on the cake: I read Riis's autobiography, *The Making of An American*, and boom! It was as if he were talking to me. I knew kids would love the story of this amazing social advocate.

Why did you choose the picture book format to tell Riis's story?

In his stereopticon shows. Riis told stories about the people who lived in the tenements while showing life-sized photographs of them. He later put his words and images together in a book called *How the Other Half Lives* and it became a bestseller. A picture book mirrors his way of combining words and images.

What's the big deal about Riis's photographs?

Until 1887, nothing could be photographed inside buildings or in low light. But the invention of flash powder changed everything. Now Riis could photograph inside tenement buildings to show the squalor there. Later, Riis became known as the father of photojournalism—telling stories through pictures.

How did you do the research for this book?

I read tons of secondary sources, but two main primary sources were most important to me: Riis's autobiography, *The Making of an American* where I could almost hear his voice as I read each chapter, and his amazing photographs. I can never get enough of looking at them.

Did you do many revisions of this story before your final version?

I did about 16 revisions — some major changes, others just tweaks. But I did the revisions quickly and had a contract for the book within a year.

How important was it for you to consult experts on this book?

I depended on the generosity and keen eye of Bonnie Yochelson, a Riis expert, to make sure of the accuracy of my text. She had catalogued all of Riis's photographs in association with the Museum of the City of New York and the Library Congress in *Jacob A. Riis: Revealing New York's Other Half—A Complete Catalogue of his Photographs*.

What was the hardest, or most challenging, part of writing, or researching, your book?

As always, deciding what to leave out was the most challenging part of writing about Riis -- such as his complicated courtship of Elisabeth, his horrendous treatment in police station shelters, or his close friendship with Theodore Roosevelt.

What do you hope young readers will take away from learning about Jacob Riis?

I hope that they see how he worked hard to improve the lives of children and their families living in the tenements. I also hope that they see how persistent he was in having his voice heard. It took years for reform to happen, but he didn't give up!

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