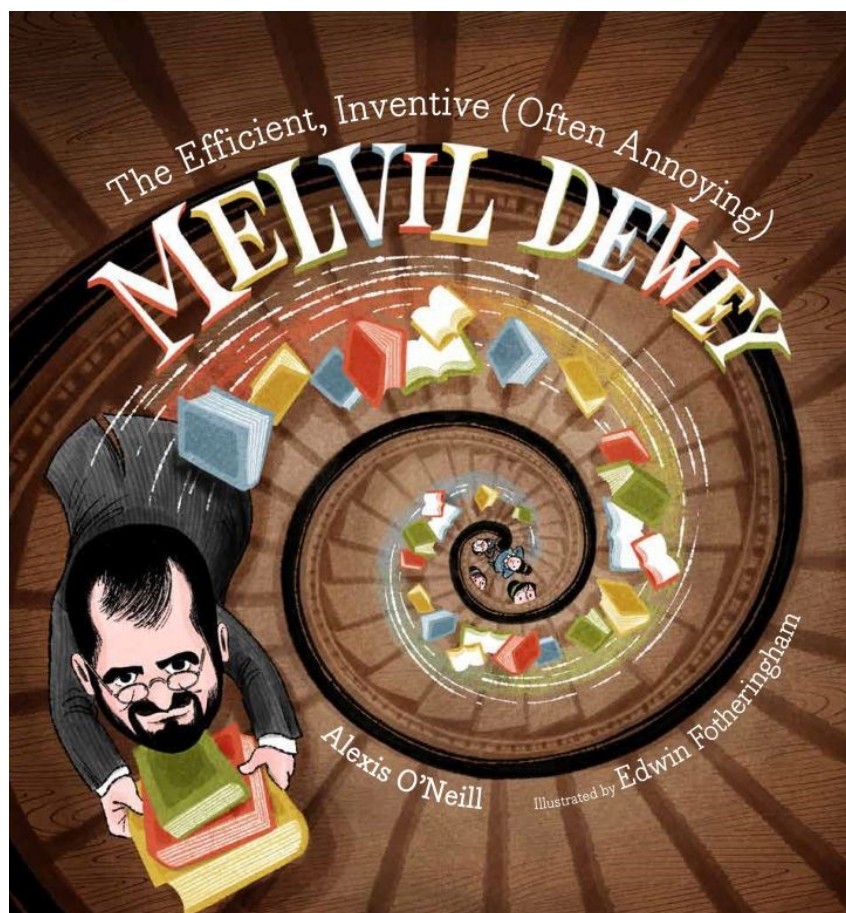


Because You Asked . . .

Questions & Answers About
The Efficient, Inventive (Often Annoying)
Melvil Dewey



How did you get the idea for writing about Melvil Dewey?

A librarian friend sent me a goofy video made to teach kids the Dewey Decimal Classification system (DDC). I realized that I knew nothing about the guy who invented it. (I wish I had saved the link to that video!)

What do you think is the “kid connection” to Dewey?

Kids usually learn about the DDC in elementary school. I thought they would get a kick out of knowing about Dewey’s love of simplified spelling (sort of an ancestor of texting), an artifact of his obsession with efficiency. I was surprised that he invented the double-color blue/red editing pencil! Kids may have seen their teachers using one. And I thought they would enjoy learning how math and a love of organizing things solved a big problem in libraries— helping people find books efficiently so they could read about whatever they wanted, or needed, to know.

Did you have a personal connection to Dewey?

I was surprised to learn Dewey grew up in Adams Center, NY. I used to live in central New York, and my friend’s uncle, an expert carpenter who lived in Adams Center, made two cherry tables for me that I still use.

Why did you decide to write a book about Dewey?

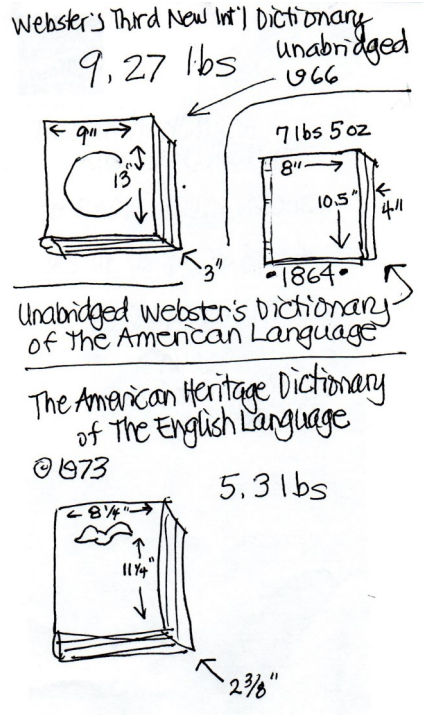
I love organizing things, so I was fascinated that he was obsessed with efficiency from a very young age. Also, I could not find a picture book biography for young readers about Dewey – only informational books about his decimal system. Since kids learn about the DDC in elementary school, I thought they'd appreciate knowing more about the man behind all that organizing.

What's the big deal about Dewey?

Well, the biggest deal (besides the good things he did for libraries) is that he was not a very nice person. The main text of my book is about his drive to educate immigrants and rural communities through public libraries. In the back matter, however, I address his legacy as a racist and harasser who lost his positions and reputation because of it.

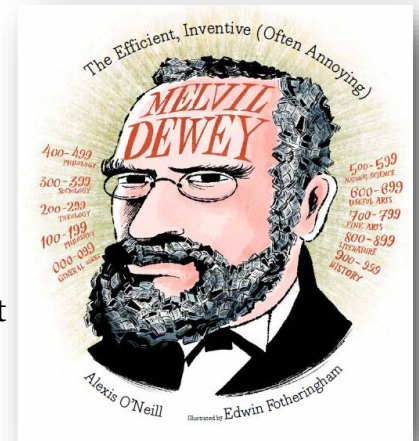
Was there any part of the research that befuddled you?

It wasn't enough to know that when Dewey was a kid, he walked ten miles from Adams Center to Watertown, NY to buy the 1864 *Unabridged Webster's Dictionary of the American Language* with his chore money. I wanted to know its exact dimensions and weight, even though I didn't mention that in the book. After a very long search I finally got my answer from the Special Collections Research Center at Syracuse University Libraries (my alma mater!) which has a copy and sent me the measurements and weight. (Did I mention how much I LOVE librarians?)



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

Yes! I wrote my first draft in April 2010 and workshopped several drafts. I gave up in 2015 when I saw an announcement that a well-known author received a contract for a Dewey picture book. Discouraged, I put my manuscript away for a year. But I revived, submitted my manuscript, and sold it in 2017. The other book never came out.



What do you hope young readers will take away from learning about Melvil Dewey?

One is that the things that interest you as a kid often keep interesting you into adulthood. Another is that a passion to do good in the world (as Dewey did in wanting people to be able to easily access an education through books in public libraries) is a good thing. And another is that, actions that hurt people have consequences.

What do you think of Edwin Fotheringham's illustrations?

His illustrations are terrific! He captured Dewey's energy and speed. I especially get a kick out of his visual inventiveness -- such as having books form Dewey's hair and beard on the title page, depicting him as a seemingly unstoppable train, and representing his two-sidedness as almost a comedy/tragedy mask. And the cover, showing Dewey running up a spiral staircase, expresses his tightly-wound personality perfectly.

To arrange for school visits, workshops or other appearances, contact: Alexis O'Neill
Alexis@alexisoneill.com * www.alexisoneill.com
805-581-1906