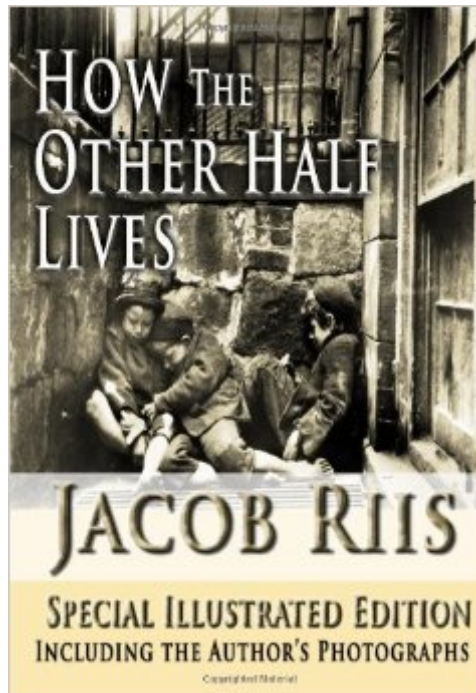


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How The Other Half Lives, Special Illustrated Edition



Synopsis

How the Other Half Lives was a pioneering work of photojournalism by Jacob Riis, documenting the squalid living conditions in New York City slums in the 1880s. It served as a basis for future muckraking journalism by exposing the slums to New York City's upper and middle class. *How The Other Half Lives* quickly became a landmark in the annals of social reform. Riis documented the filth, disease, exploitation, and overcrowding that characterized the experience of more than one million immigrants. He helped push tenement reform to the front of New York's political agenda, and prompted then-Police Commissioner Theodore Roosevelt to close down the police-run poor houses. Roosevelt later called Riis "the most useful citizen of New York". Riis's idea inspired Jack London to write a similar exposé on London's East End, called *People of the Abyss*.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

How did our grandfathers and great-grandfathers (and great-great, I suppose) survive immigration and the slums? What was life like on the Lower East Side of New York? For those of us whose family has only been in the US for a few generations, this is a must-read. Whether Irish, Italian, Jewish, Chinese or Polish, German, Russian, hordes of refugees ended up in New York on the promise of a better life. Reading Riis' book reads like the newspaper in some ways; entrepreneurs lured poor people from Eastern Europe and contracted out their labor in sweat shops in the US. Sound familiar? But what is not so familiar are the living conditions in the tenements, dark, unventilated cages in blocks of buildings that rented for a surprising high rent to people who died by the thousands in the unsanitary conditions. Farm animals had it better. Why was rent so high? Supply and demand. Cheaper rent was to be had in Brooklyn and the outlying (as yet

unincorporated) boroughs, but the WORK was in Manhattan, where you could get by as a tailor, a seamstress, a peddler or in some illegitimate activity. The conditions will make you cry; the story of foundling babies (abandoned newborns) is astonishing. A cradle was put outside a Catholic Church and instead of a baby each night, racks of babies appeared. The Church had to establish foundling hospitals run by nuns, who persuaded the unwed or impoverished mothers to nurse the baby they gave up, plus another baby (women can usually nurse two, though these malnourished women must have been hard-pressed.) The child mortality rate, especially in the "back tenements" or buildings built on to the back of others (dark and airless) was incredible.

"The business of housing the poor, if it is to amount to anything, must be business, as it was business with our fathers to put them where they are. As charity, pastime, or fad, it will miserably fail, always and everywhere" (p. 201). Jacob A. Riis, in his book, *How the Other Half Lives*, vividly describes the human condition of the tenements of New York during the late 1800's. The author provides not only a physical description of the tenement buildings but delves deeper into the people who live there and why they don't leave the pits of filth and despair. Jacob Riis, presents a compelling account of the intricate business of managing the slums of New York and maintaining the status quo among the hundreds of thousands of immigrants who came to America to seek a new and prosperous life. After arriving they found they were trapped in a life of high rents and low wages with little hope for improvement of their circumstances. What little help was available seemed to be in the form of charity that couldn't sustain the prideful immigrants desire to succeed in this country. The reader is taken on a tour of the slums and introduced to the groups of immigrants nationality by nationality and given a full account of the author's stereotypical ideas about their good and bad points. Of the Italian Riis says he only spends time indoors when it's raining or he is sick. When the sun shines the entire population seeks the streets carrying on all facets of life (p. 47). He further says the Italian is a born gambler (p 44) and learns slowly, if at all (p. 42) so that his job of working the ash carts is simply suited for him. On the positive side Riis says the Italian is as honest as he is hot-headed (p. 45).

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