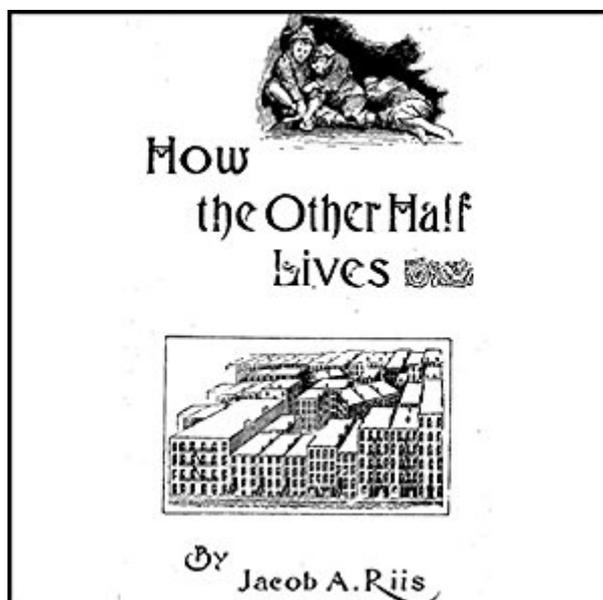


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# How The Other Half Lives



## Synopsis

How the Other Half Lives occupies a premier place on a small list of American books—along with Uncle Tom's Cabin, The Jungle, Silent Spring, The Feminine Mystique, and Unsafe at Any Speed—that changed public opinion, influenced public policy, and left an indelible mark on history. The text of this Norton Critical Edition is based on the 1901 Scribner edition and includes all 47 of Riis's unforgettable photographs, along with 2 maps. It is accompanied by Hasia Diner's insightful introduction and detailed explanatory annotations. An unusually rich "Contexts" section includes autobiographical writings by Riis, observations of "the other half" by Riis contemporaries, including William T. Elsing, Thomas Byrnes, William Dean Howells, Lillian W. Betts, John Spargo, and Lillian Wald, and contemporary evaluations of Riis and his seminal book by, among others, Warren P. Adams, Joseph B. Gilder, Margaret Burton, and Theodore Roosevelt. From the many hundreds of books and articles published on Riis and How the Other Half Lives, Hasia Diner has selected nineteen interpretations of the central aspects of author and work. Among these are Jacob Prager on Riis as immigrant and crusader; Louise Ware on Riis the police reporter, reformer, and "useful citizen"; Roy Lubove on the Progressive Movement and tenement reform; Richard Tuerk on Riis and the Jews; Maren Strange on American social documentary photography; Katrina Irving on immigrant mothers; and Timothy J. Gilfoyle on "street culture" and immigrant children. A Chronology of Riis's life and work and a Selected Bibliography are also included. 49 illustrations; 2 maps --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

## 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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