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Tenement: Immigrant Life On The Lower East Side



Synopsis

Life on the Lower East Side was bustling. Immigrants from many European countries had come to make a better life for themselves and their families in the United States. But the wages they earned were so low that they could afford only the most basic accommodations—tenements. Unfortunately, there were few laws protecting the residents of tenements, and landlords took advantage of this by allowing the buildings to become cramped and squalid. There was little the tenants could do; their only other choice was the street. Though most immigrants struggled in these buildings, many overcame a difficult start and saw generations after them move on to better apartments, homes, and lives. Raymond Bial reveals the first, challenging step in this process as he leads us on a tour of the sights and sounds of the Lower East Side, guiding us through the dark hallways, staircases, and rooms of the tenements.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

As the title suggests, Bial (*The Underground Railroad*) focuses this illuminating photoessay on the immigrants who settled on Manhattan's Lower East Side from the early 1800s to the 1930s. Rather than finding the fabled land of opportunity, many lived in poverty in rundown tenement flats plagued by poor ventilation, little light and inadequate sanitation. Through period photos as well as his own color shots (many taken at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum), the author describes and depicts typical cramped apartments. These two-room flats sometimes served as both living quarters (for a dozen or more people, often newly arrived relatives or paying boarders) and family

"sweatshops." Bial touches on the sobering particulars: with no running water to allow residents to bathe or launder clothes properly, diseases were rampant, and so many babies died that tenements were known as "infant slaughterhouses." Historic photos, including many famous works by the reformer Jacob Riis, make the plight of these families startlingly real. Bial's conclusion, that most immigrants (or their children or grandchildren) eventually prospered, closes the volume on a positive note. Ages 8-12. Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Grade 4-8-Spacious layouts, with clearly reproduced black-and-white archival photographs-from Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* and the author's beautifully composed, stunning color pictures, many taken at the Lower East Side Tenement Museum-show a community that has been home to thousands of immigrants past and present. The finely written, spare text, with quotes from such people as reformer Riis and author Sydney Taylor, tells of people crammed into small, dark flats, seeking fresh air on fire escapes and rooftops, lacking adequate sanitation, "protected" by rarely enforced housing regulations, and laboring long hours at home or in factory sweatshops. Bial's detailed descriptions transport readers back into the cramped quarters and crowded streets and alleys of late-19th- and early 20th-century New York, but this could be any city with a large immigrant population. The material complements and expands on that in Russell Freedman's *Immigrant Kids* (Puffin, 1995). Although the lack of chapters or an index makes the book first and foremost a work to browse, read, and savor, its brevity makes it suitable for a classroom read-aloud or report. The pictures are an added bonus for photography students. Diane S. Marton, Arlington County Library, VA Copyright 2002 Cahners Business Information, Inc.

Not in-depth. Pictures okay.

I was hoping for a more in-depth account of the buildings and the people who lived there. Who built them, how were they received by the public? How much did it cost to rent these spaces? This book is sparsely written, with quite a few photos, but it doesn't give a complete understanding of the history, public sentiment, and what happened over time. Do any of the buildings still exist? Do any retain a core of the original design? Etc. It's an OK quick overview, it only takes 30 minutes or so to read and look at the pictures. I'm thinking there are better books, I just haven't pursued it yet.

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