Social reformer Jacob Riis made it impossible for Americans to look the other way; now this inspiring biography restores his greatness. Drawing on previously unexamined diaries and letters, The Other Half marvelously re-creates the moving story of Jacob Riis, the legendary Progressive reformer and muckraking photographer. Born in 1849 in rural Denmark, Riis immigrated to America in 1870 following a devastating romantic breakup. Penniless and starving, Riis stumbled into journalism, eventually becoming a charismatic police reporter for the New York Tribune, where he befriended Theodore Roosevelt and witnessed firsthand the appalling tenement conditions of late nineteenth-century New York. His resulting exposé, How the Other Half Lives, was the first major American muckraking book. It brought Americans in touch with their lost humanity, establishing a precedent for Ida Tarbell, Lincoln Steffens, Jane Addams, and Upton Sinclair. Described by Roosevelt as the ideal American, Riis died in 1914, mourned by millions, a celebrated hero. Tom Buk-Swienty's long-awaited biography, a superb evocation of the muckraking era, is a compelling work, designed with 55 haunting images from Riis's own photographic oeuvre. 55 photographs.
York City politician. Indeed, the two became life-long friends and partners in the Progressive-era campaign to reform urban poverty.

Author and journalist Tom Buk-Swienty provides a much needed and updated biography of this once well-known crusading "social" photographer. A fellow Dane, the author currently resides in Ribe, the small Danish city in which Riis himself was born and grew to manhood. Fittingly, Buk-Swienty begins his biography in this quaint medieval town, exploring how its timeless village life and mores shaped the man Riis was later to become. In this setting, too, he examines the principal reason why Riis immigrated to America: to escape a failed romance with the woman of his dreams.

In the US, Riis struggled to earn a living. He worked a variety of odd jobs, lived in homeless shelters, and even reached a point of near starvation. Buk-Swienty highlights how this precarious existence led Riis to a lifetime of social activism on behalf of his fellow poor and marginalized immigrants in late nineteenth-century New York City. The turning-point in Riis's life came in 1870, when he landed a job as a low-paid journalist at one of the city's daily newspapers. Riis went on to earn a name for himself (and a handsome salary) as a police reporter for the New York Tribune. He even married the woman who had spurned his earlier romantic overtures!

Nevertheless, Riis spent much of his free time exploring the new medium of photography and how it could be used for the "social uplift" of the million or so immigrants who crowded New York City's dilapidated and overcrowded tenements. Armed with the newly developed "flash" unit, Riis was able to penetrate the darkest corners of New York City's wretched slums, especially that of Mulberry Street, and thus chronicle the lives of the urban poor. In the late 1880s, Riis began his famous "magic lantern" slide shows to horrified middle-class audiences, who in turn demanded sweeping urban renewal from complacent politicians. Beginning in 1890, moreover, Riis wrote a series of books, replete with powerful photographs, depicting "how the other half" of America lives. These created a decades-long "fire storm" of urban renewal and reform across America. This notoriety also transformed the crusading photo-journalist into an instant celebrity. Nevertheless, Riis never lost sight of his ultimate "American Dream": the dramatic improvement in the daily lives, working conditions, and living standards of America's urban poor. In fact, Riis fell ill from heart complications while on the lecture circuit and died shortly thereafter at only age 65. Tom Buk-Swienty's biography, complete with some of Riis's most famous photographs, is a fitting tribute to this selfless and tireless social activist, who, in the words of Theodore Roosevelt, was truly the "ideal American."

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