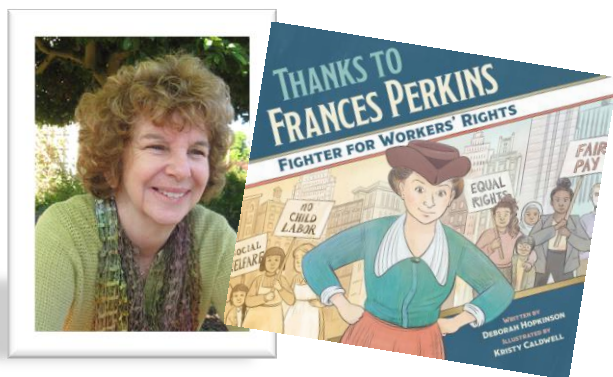


AUTHOR SPOTLIGHT



Deborah Hopkinson on *Thanks to Frances Perkins*

ABOUT THE BOOK

How many years will it be until you turn sixty-two? What year will that be? Once you've read *Thanks to Frances Perkins*, you'll know why these are important questions—and why you may want to thank Frances Perkins.

After Frances Perkins witnessed the Triangle Waist Factory fire in 1911, she was forever changed. While some activists pressed factory owners for change, Frances decided to work to bring about new laws that would force employers to treat people better and make workplaces safer. When she became Secretary of Labor in Franklin Delano Roosevelt's administration—the first woman cabinet member—Frances had the opportunity to make real her bold vision of a country where no one was left out. As a result of the Social Security program that she created, we have built a society where we help one another.

Q: What inspired you to write *Thanks to Frances Perkins*? When did you first learn about Frances Perkins?

A: I first learned about Frances Perkins years ago while researching the Triangle Waist Company fire. I've always been struck by the way that event fueled her determination to reform working conditions in factories.

It transformed her life—and ultimately the lives of generations of Americans. So when Margaret Quinlin and Kathy Landwehr at Peachtree mentioned that Frances Perkins would make an excellent subject for a picture book, I was delighted—she was already on my list.

Q: What part of the process is most exciting for you, researching or creative writing? Why?

A: That's an easy one: I love research and often find it difficult not to put every fascinating tidbit I discover into a picture book.

Q: What is your research process like?

A: I try to rely on primary sources as much as possible. Many of the details for *Thanks to Frances Perkins* came from Frances's 1946 book *The Roosevelt I Knew*, the excellent resources of the Frances Perkins Center, the Social Security website, and her speeches and talks.

Q: Did you learn anything interesting or surprising about Frances's life that you didn't get to include in the book?

A: Rather than a biography, this book focuses on Frances's contributions as a public servant and seeks to introduce young readers to the concepts of financial literacy and the Social Security Act. So there are many aspects of Frances Perkins's personal life that weren't touched on, including her husband's mental illness and her intimate relationship with Mary Harriman Rumsey.

Q: Are you drawn to specific events or people when brainstorming new stories about historical figures?

A: Actually, it's both. I love fascinating stories behind past events and how experiences shaped people's lives. I try to show that history is a web of interconnections, rather than a linear timeline of dates, presidents, and wars.

The tragic sight of young women plunging to their deaths after being locked in the factory during the Triangle fire in 1911 was a tipping point for shocked

Americans. The event lifted the veil on unfair practices, like locking factory doors so workers could not get out. There were marches and rallies, an outpouring of grief and outrage, and a demand for lasting change. It was a tipping point we can perhaps understand more deeply now, in the spring and summer of 2020, as we try to come together as a nation to confront the horrific murder of George Floyd and the dire need to make lasting change to end racial violence and institutionalized racism.

On April 2, 1911, Frances Perkins attended a memorial rally where she heard Rose Schneiderman speak. It's worth repeating some of Rose's historic speech:

The strong hand of the law beats us back, when we rise, into the conditions that make life unbearable. I can't talk fellowship to you who are gathered here. Too much blood has been spilled. I know from my experience it is up to the working people to save themselves. The only way they can save themselves is by a strong working-class movement.

Q: Frances had some pivotal experiences in her youth that inspired her to fight for workers' rights. Did any childhood experiences help set you on your career path?

A: As a child, I felt apart from kids that were good at sports and more at ease socially. I've wanted to be a writer since the fourth grade. I remember feeling like I was missing out on something. The history textbooks were in dry, summary form. I wanted to know more about women in history and what life had been like for ordinary people.

Q: Frances would store her ideas on small slips of paper in her desk drawer until she compiled them in one long list of her bold ideas for change. Do you store away ideas for future projects like Frances did?

A: Absolutely! I don't use small slips of paper, but I do keep lists on my computer of possible ideas and people. I'm drawn to anniversaries because I think it helps young readers begin to build historical context and a sense of when and how people lived in the past. This August is the 85th anniversary of the passage of the Social Security Act.

Q: What do you enjoy most about seeing your work come to life through illustrations? How did you react when you first saw Kristy Caldwell's artistic interpretation of the story?

A: I love Kristy's amazing illustrations and exuberant design. They are vibrant and exciting, and capture a sense of history while feeling contemporary, appealing, and accessible. It's not an easy story or historical context to illustrate, but Kristy takes us right into the tenement neighborhoods of the turn of the century and effortlessly captures Frances at work in factories and in the halls of power. I especially love the final scene, when we glimpse people of today. She's a genius!

Q: This book introduces complicated subjects like Social Security and events such as the Triangle Waist Factory fire. Is it challenging to adapt these kinds of topics for picture books?

A: Yes, it is. Perhaps the most difficult part for me is to try to find ways to present complex and difficult topics in ways that will inspire young readers to want to learn more and dig deeper. Most of all, I want them to feel that their own story is important. They may not have heard of Frances Perkins before, but reading about lesser known people of the past who still made a difference helps to remind us that we all play a part in history.

Q: If you could travel to any time period, where would you go and who would you meet?

A: That's always a difficult question and my answer varies. Sometimes I want to go to Victorian England and meet Charles Dickens. Other times, I'd love to stand over Abigail Adams's shoulder as she's writing to John Adams in 1776 asking him to "remember the ladies," or be present at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 and meet Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Right now, I think I would have liked to be in the audience with Frances Perkins as she listened to Rose Schneiderman.

Q: How would you encourage young readers to serve others and think of "generations far into the future?"

A: That's a great question. I do think reading about history helps us realize that other people before us also confronted great challenges. And I would encourage young readers to learn about the past, read about the present, and be inspired by their own communities and

young activists like Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai and many others, to imagine the future.

Q: *What lessons can young readers learn from Frances's example, and what do you hope they'll take away from this book?*

A: I hope *Thanks to Frances Perkins* helps young readers build empathy and compassion, and they will use their minds and hearts to serve others, just as she did.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Deborah Hopkinson is the award-winning author of numerous critically acclaimed picture and chapter books, including *Keep On! The Story of Matthew Henson, Co-discoverer of the North Pole*; *Sweet Land of Liberty*; *Under the Quilt of Night*; and *Shutting Out the Sky: Life in the Tenements of New York 1880-1924*. She lives in Oregon.

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