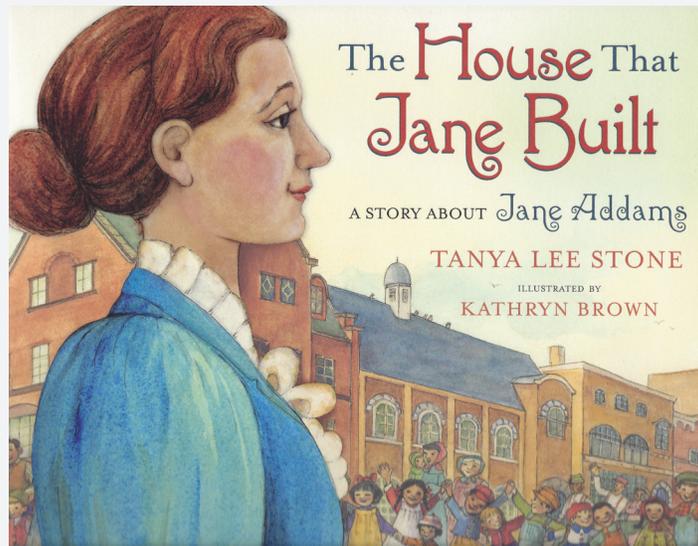


## First Opinion: Widening the Circle

Stone, Tanya Lee. *The House That Jane Built: A Story about Jane Addams*. New York: Henry Holt, 2015. Print.

Petra Munro Hendry



*The House That Jane Built: A Story about Jane Addams*, written by Tanya Lee Stone and illustrated by Kathryn Brown, is another compelling contribution to Stone's collection of works that chronicle the lives of women who have pushed boundaries. Her books have received numerous accolades including the ALA Robert F. Sibert Award, the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators Golden Kite Award, Bank Street's Flora Steiglitz Straus Award, and the Jane Addams Children's Book, Boston Globe-Horn Book, and National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) Orbis Pictus honors. In her award-winning 2013 book, *Who Says Women Can't Be Doctors?*, Stone challenged the commonly held belief that women are not smart enough to be doctors. In *The House That Jane Built*, Stone challenges not only the belief that women of privilege cannot be committed to social justice, but also the belief that women can be institution builders with lasting significance.

Given the profound contributions of Jane Addams as a pioneer American settlement activist/reformer, social worker, pragmatist philosopher, pacifist, and the first woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, this book is a long overdue contribution documenting one of America's most significant women. As a prominent reformer of the Progressive Era committed to racial, gender, and social equity, Jane Addams's life story can provide inspiration to

young readers to visualize themselves as active agents in shaping the unfinished project of American democracy.

*The House That Jane Built* begins in 1889 when Jane Addams, described as a “wealthy, young woman,” moves into Hull House in Chicago, Illinois, a house that was “smack in the middle of one of the filthiest, poorest parts of town” (unpaged). Why, Stone asks, “would a wealthy young woman do this when she could have lived anywhere” (unpaged)? The framing of Jane’s story as a choice between wealth and poverty, while a bit simplistic, is a call for readers to examine their privilege. It provides the reader (and those reading it with them), a unique opportunity to discuss issues of class and white privilege, and to unpack stereotypes of rich/poor, urban/suburban, and immigrant/native. Given today’s increasing income inequality and xenophobia in contemporary America, quite reminiscent of the late nineteenth century, Stone’s prominent positioning of Jane as someone who recognized that “not everyone lived like her family did” (unpaged) provides the readers in this book a profound opportunity to reflect on their own social positioning, and to situate historically current social problems in relation to the story and the times of Jane Addams.

Given that *The House That Jane Built* begins when Jane is twenty-nine years old, the book might have benefitted from more historical contextualization of Jane’s life. Born on September 6, 1860, in Cedarville, Illinois, Jane Addams was the youngest of six children. Her father was a local miller and political leader who would later serve as a state senator and fight in the Civil War. Shortly after Jane’s second birthday, her mother died. Her father then remarried, and his new wife brought with her two stepchildren. In 1877, Jane entered the Rockford Female Seminary. She excelled in her studies and, upon her graduation, was named class valedictorian. Jane wanted to continue her studies in order to become a doctor, but her father’s death the year of her graduation plummeted her into an existential crisis that lasted nearly ten years. *The House That Jane Built* glosses over these years in order to focus on Jane’s experience at London’s Toynbee Hall, where “the idea was to have rich and poor people live together in the same community and learn from each other. Instead of simply serving soup, for example, people could take cooking classes” (unpaged). This epiphany “that people must learn from each other” was in total contradiction to the dominant social ideology of “philanthropy and charity” characterized by paternalism (unpaged). Jane, although financially rich, believed that she could learn much from her neighbors. They were not poor, dirty immigrants living in the worst neighborhoods in the city; rather, they were hard-working, gifted families with beautiful stories to share with those who would listen.

Stone’s text chronicles the ways in which Jane trusted her neighbors to teach her about their needs. Jane responded to the community by establishing a nursery, dispensary, kindergarten, playground, gymnasium, and cooperative housing for young working women. As an experiment in group living, Hull House attracted male and female reformers dedicated to social service. Jane always insisted that she learned as much from the neighborhood’s residents as she

taught them. As a result, Hull House grew into thirteen buildings, including a gymnasium, coffee house, theater, music school, community kitchen, and an art gallery. As Stone concludes, “today, every community center in America, in large part, has Jane Addams to thank” (unpaged). The beautifully illustrated picture on the last page, with throngs of happy children and mothers at Hull House in the early 1920’s, while uplifting, betrays the ongoing, continuous struggles that Jane Addams, as well as other community activists, faced during one of the most repressive eras of American history, the Red Scare, when nationalist and xenophobic sentiments were extremely strong (Munro 40). When Hull House provided a safe house for immigrants accused of radical and un-American thinking in the 1920’s, Jane Addams was targeted by the federal government as America’s “most dangerous woman” (40). While Stone mentions this in her Author’s Note at the end of the book, I believe not including this in the book itself is a missed opportunity for readers to directly engage in the complex nature of social activism. Standing up for social justice and speaking out against popular opinion takes courage and conviction. Jane Addams embodied a commitment to widening the circle, to making American democracy more inclusive, and she was not afraid to speak out on behalf of the working class, immigrants, children, prostitutes, Jews, African Americans, and others whose stories were marginalized.

Jane Addams was one of the most distinguished of the first generation of college-educated women, who rejected marriage and motherhood in favor of a lifetime commitment to the poor and to social reform. Her commitment to sharing her life with women, and choosing them as her life partners, highlights another act of courage that, while not addressed in this book, provides an opportunity for readers to discuss the range of life choices they will have to make in choosing to “fix the world” (Stone unpaged). And while the house that Jane built exists today only as a museum, it still tells the story of a radical experiment in philanthropy, political action, and social science research that became a model for settlement work among the poor.

### Works Cited

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### About the Author

**Petra Munro Hendry** is the St. Bernard Chapter of the LSU Alumni Association Endowed Professor in the College of Education. Since 1991, she has been at Louisiana State University (LSU), where she teaches courses in curriculum theory, curriculum history, oral history methodology, and gender studies. She is the codirector of the Curriculum Theory Project (CTP) at

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