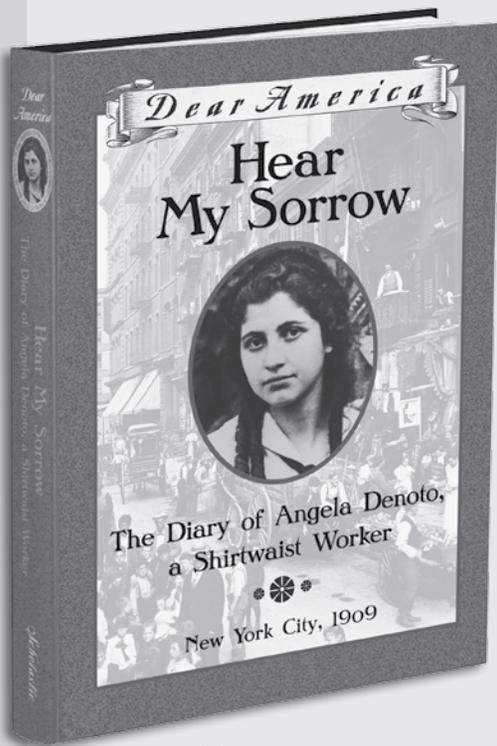


Hear My Sorrow

*The Diary of Angela Denoto, a Shirtwaist Worker,
New York City, 1909*

BY DEBORAH HOPKINSON

Ages 8–14 • 224 pages
978-0-545-31177-9 • \$12.99



TO THE DISCUSSION LEADER

Through Angela Denoto's diary, young readers are welcomed into the family's New York City tenement housing in 1909. Angela and her older sister Luisa are garment workers, working fifty-six hours a week or more in sweatshops where the pay is \$7–\$14 per week. The sisters and their friends get caught up in a strike.

The book's Historical Note describes the strike this way: "The shirtwaist strike of 1909–1910, often called the 'Uprising of the Twenty Thousand,' is one of the most important strikes in United States history. It was the largest strike of women that had ever taken place up to that point, and it demonstrated that women could be a force in America's labor movement."

When the Denotos become desperate for money, Luisa gets a job in the Triangle Waist Company. One day as Angela waits outside the building so she can walk home with her sister, she watches in horror as the factory catches fire. Panic and locked factory doors cause desperate workers to jump to their deaths, while fire fighters struggle in vain to put an end to the disaster.

Angela's diary is a story about living history. It is a story about groups—unions, workers, Italians, and Jews. It is also a story of individuals both fictional and real: Sarah Goldstein, Teresa Denoto, Rose Schneiderman, Isaac and Max Blanck. Mostly, *Hear My Sorrow* is a novel about the power of individuals joining together to help one another.

SUMMARY

"Well, that's that! Soon I'll be a factory girl. I'm glad I'll be able to help...Yes, helping my family is what's most important." These are the words of fourteen-year-old Angela Denoto after she has quit school and decided to go to work. It is 1909 in New York City, and Angela's father is unable to work due to an accident on the job. Mama earns a few dollars making artificial flowers, but money is scarce, and Angela must join her older sister Luisa who works in a shirtwaist factory. Angela begins work as a cleaner, one who trims the threads off the finished garment. Her job requires long hours, and the pay is poor. Her boss, Mr. Klein, is strict and uncaring. When one of the girls runs a sewing machine needle through her finger, Mr. Klein expects her to continue working as if nothing happened. Angela says, "I think Mr. Klein has a heart like a raisin."

At work, Angela meets Sarah Goldstein, an older Jewish girl who helps her get promoted to machine operator. Angela is amazed by her: "Sarah is like no one else I've ever met. She seems on fire inside and wants to fight all the injustices in the world, starting here." Sarah belongs to a newly formed garment workers' union and encourages Angela to join. Luisa cautions Angela, "Don't listen to Sarah Goldstein! The leaders of this union haven't even tried to talk to us. They don't care about Italian girls."

The factory workers go on strike and Sarah signs Angela up for union membership. Angela worries how her parents will react. Surprisingly, her father is supportive and only warns her to be careful. While the factory is closed, Angela becomes

more active in union activities, attending rallies, translating speeches for the Italian girls, and walking the picket lines. She writes, "Sometimes when I look at what I've written in this book, I feel so surprised. Just a few months ago, I was in school. I'd never even heard of a labor union. Now I'm learning about unions, closed shops, open shops, and the rights of workers. I've even spoken in front of rooms full of girls."

Meanwhile, Luisa and her best friend Rosa hire on at the Triangle Waist Company, which is not affected by the strike; and Angela's younger brother Vito quits school and becomes a shoeshine boy. Finally, after more than six weeks, the shop where Angela worked settles the strike, and she is soon back on the job. Some of the workers' demands have been met, and it gives Angela a feeling of accomplishment. "No one thought women and girls could strike. But we proved that we can."

Late in winter, Angela and her little sister Teresa become ill with colds. After a few days' rest, Angela returns to work, but Teresa, who has always been frail, contracts pneumonia and dies. The whole family is grief-stricken. Angela thinks Luisa blames her for their sister's death. If Angela had gone back to work earlier, Teresa would be strong and well.

The success of the women's strike inspires the men's cloakmakers' union to do the same. Their strike continues for two months, and they end up with better benefits than the shirtwaist workers. With the end of the strike, things return to normal. Angela begins to worry about her

SUMMARY—CONTINUED

future, especially when she learns that Sarah plans to attend night school. Angela writes, “Sarah is beginning to move on and change, and make something better of her life. But what about me? I’m fifteen now. I’ve been a shirtwaist worker for more than a year. Will I be one all my life?”

Angela’s concerns are eclipsed by a terrible tragedy. On March 25, 1911, a fire breaks out at the Triangle Waist Company Factory. Angela, rushing to find Luisa, watches in horror as trapped working girls fall or jump from the ninth story where the factory is located. The firemen’s hoses and ladders are unable to reach them, and the fire nets are ineffective in catching them. Angela witnesses a terrified Rosa fall to her death. Returning home to an empty apartment, Angela is convinced Luisa died, too. When her

sister shows up later, bloody, burned, and in shock, Angela is overcome with relief. Luisa feels responsible for Rosa’s death even though with the doors locked, the elevator not operating, and the fire escape broken, there was nothing she could have done to save her friend.

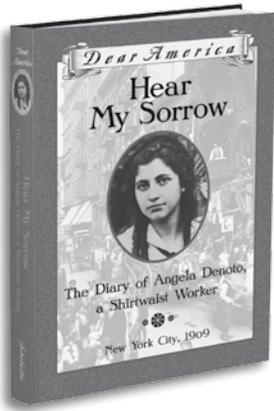
In all, 146 people die in the Triangle Waist Company Factory fire. Seven girls’ bodies are unidentified. A memorial meeting is called to honor those who died, and a funeral parade is planned for burying the unclaimed girls. Angela is proud to be part of this marching crowd, which is said to exceed 100,000. She writes, “Today it felt good to be with other people. I didn’t feel alone. I felt part of something. And somehow, I didn’t feel so hopeless... and I thought that if only we could keep walking together, maybe we could change something.”

THINKING ABOUT THE BOOK

1. How and why did Angela get her diary?
2. Why does Angela feel comfortable writing all her thoughts in her diary?
3. Angela and Luisa are sisters, but they are very different. Explain the differences between the two girls.
4. What is meant by paesani? How do the people in Angela’s building help each other? Do neighbors still look after each other today?
5. How does meeting Sarah Goldstein change Angela?
6. What did Angela and the other shirtwaist workers gain as a result of their strike?
7. Describe the Triangle Waist Company Factory fire. Why did 146 people die?
8. Even though life in New York has been very hard for the Denoto family, why does Mama refuse to go back to Sicily?
9. Why is Angela’s diary called *Hear My Sorrow*?
10. Read the epilogue to see what happened to Angela. Why do you think she chose those names for her three daughters?

STUDENT ACTIVITIES

1. In 1909 things cost a lot less than they do now. Look at the prices for the following items mentioned in Angela’s diary: Rent—\$14 per month, milk—8 cents a quart, shoes—\$2 a pair, umbrella—\$1, gloves—79 cents a pair. What do these things cost today?
2. Angela goes to the fire escape when she wants to be alone to write. Do you have a special place you like to go to write or read? Tell about it.
3. After Teresa dies, Angela wishes she had a photograph of her. She also wishes she had one of herself. Think about photographs you’ve taken or that have been taken of you. Do you have a favorite? If possible, bring it to share with your group. If you were a photographer and could take a picture of anything, what would you choose and why?
4. Angela’s mother makes artificial flowers to sell for ladies’ hats. Try making some flowers using the instructions at http://web.archive.org/web/20051123032540/http://www.symbolworld.org/eLive/mar04/how_to/flowers/flower1.htm
For teachers and discussion leaders: The following website provides excellent additional information on the Triangle Waist Company Factory fire. <http://web.archive.org/web/20051123032540/http://www.ilr.cornell.edu/trianglefire>



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DEBORAH HOPKINSON is the author of such award-winning children's books as *Sweet Clara and the Freedom Quilt*, *Girl Wonder: A Baseball Story in Nine Innings*, *A Band of Angels*, and *Fannie in the Kitchen*. Her nonfiction books, *Shutting Out the Sky* and *Up Before Daybreak*, have garnered much acclaim. Deborah lives in Corvallis, Oregon. Visit her website at www.deborahhopkinson.com.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH HOPKINSON

Did the research you did for your highly praised nonfiction book *Shutting Out the Sky: Life in the Tenements of New York, 1880-1924* help you in creating Angela Denoto's diary?

It was actually the other way around! In the middle of researching *Hear My Sorrow*, I realized I had enough material for a nonfiction book as well. So I asked my editor about doing another book. *Shutting Out the Sky* is the result! As it turned out, even though I wrote the first drafts of both books during a similar time period, *Hear My Sorrow* appeared a year after *Shutting Out the Sky*.

This is your first novel written in the diary format. Did you enjoy working in this format? What special challenges does it present?

I think the hardest part of writing in diary format is to use dialogue well. In novels, we get to "hear" people speak. We can become part of the drama and conflict. I tried as much as possible to do that in *Hear My Sorrow*, but still keep it natural. I was lucky to get very good advice from other writers, such as Susan Campbell Bartoletti, whose *Dear America diary, A Coal Miner's Bride*, is one of my personal favorites in the series.

In doing the research on the shirtwaist strikes and the Triangle Waist Company Factory fire, what was the most interesting thing you discovered?

I learned so much about this! One of the most interesting things was the fact that, over the years, in part because of

Leon Stein's book, people have come to call the factory the Triangle Shirtwaist Company. But it was never referred to that way in any contemporary newspaper accounts. When I queried the excellent library staff at Cornell's Kheel Center, which has a wonderful Triangle website, they were able to confirm the correct name of the factory as the Triangle Waist Company. (And I think they corrected their own website!) I guess the lesson for me here is that you can always discover new things when you take the time to check the details.

If you could use only two or three words to describe your heroine, Angela Denoto, what words would you choose?

I would describe Angela as thoughtful, open, and a keen observer.

Although the Denoto family is close-knit, they often don't seem to communicate. Why doesn't Angela ask her father and mother about their labor activities in Italy? Why do Angela and her sister Luisa seem so distant and uncommunicative?

One fascinating thing about doing this research was the help I got from two professors. Dr. Donna Gabaccia of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, is the author of several books about Italian immigrants. After reading the first draft of *Hear My Sorrow*, Dr. Gabaccia sent me an article by a young professor named Dr. Jennifer Guglielmo, of Smith College. Jennifer has done a lot of work on Italian women in the early labor movements, and she read the

second draft of the book. Through their help I learned so much! They helped me understand how complicated a period this really was. And they helped me imagine the tension that might have existed in an Italian family at the time, had one of the daughters, like Angela, become involved in the strike. At the same time, I got the sense from their work that the open communication between generations that we might see today would have been different.

Between Angela and Luisa, I think we see the strain of Americanization and the differences between Luisa's experience as the eldest child who had to work immediately after coming to New York, and Angela, who is able to learn English.

Is *Hear My Sorrow* more a story about groups—unions, women, Italians, Jews—or individuals like Audenzio, Luisa, Rosa, and Sarah?

Hopefully, it is both. I did all the photo research for *Shutting Out the Sky* myself, and was constantly curious about the individuals in those crowd shots of the markets on the Lower East Side. In one scene in *Hear My Sorrow*, Angela herself spies a photographer and imagines herself writing her own name above her picture. That is, in part, what I wanted to do in this story—show readers the big issues, like the strike and Triangle fire, but also help us see what that experience might have been like for one girl and her family.

AN INTERVIEW WITH DEBORAH HOPKINSON—CONTINUED

Time and again in Angela’s diary, young readers see extended family members and friends helping others less fortunate. Do you think twenty-first century Americans have lost that selflessness?

I don’t entirely think so, but I do believe that with the loss of extended families, many of us are searching for smaller communities where we can live with family and friends and create and work together.

What advice would you offer young readers who dream of becoming successful authors?

Read, read, read, and write, write, write! And most important, don’t give up. I didn’t begin writing until I was grown up with a small child. I wish I had started earlier!

If you could ask youngsters who have read *Hear My Sorrow: The Diary of Angela Denoto, a Shirtwaist Worker* one question, what would that question be?

I think the question I would have young readers ask is, “Since this book is historical fiction, how can I find out what REALLY happened?”

To me the best part of historical fiction is realizing that it is like opening a door into the past. There is so much more to learn, and the more we read and discover, the more we visit museums like the Lower East Side Tenement Museum, or even search on the web to read stories of real people who lived through the Triangle Waist Company Factory fire, the more we begin to understand what this all meant. I once read that since the Triangle fire, one thing has changed

totally—doors in buildings now open outwards. The next time my readers are in a movie theater, store, or big office building, I hope they look at the door, and appreciate that events like the Triangle fire—and the efforts of real girls like Angela—can bring about changes in society.

Discussion Guide written by Richard F. Abrahamson, Ph.D., Professor of Literature for Children and Young Adults, University of Houston and Eleanore S. Tyson, Ed.D., Clinical Associate Professor, University of Houston, Department of Curriculum and Instruction. Houston, Texas.

The Dear America books may be ordered from your local bookstore or usual supplier.

Teachers and librarians may order from Scholastic Inc., 2931 East McCarty Street, P.O. Box 7502, Jefferson City, MO 65102. Call toll-free 1-800-SCHOLASTIC. • Fax orders toll-free to 1-800-560-6815. • Email orders to: EGOPorders@scholastic.com.



www.scholastic.com/teachdearamerica

SCHOLASTIC and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.