

Milton Meltzer, Prolific Author, Dies at 94

By [Dennis Hevesi](#)

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Milton Meltzer, a historian and prolific author of nonfiction books for young people who helped start a movement away from the arid textbook style of the past, died Saturday at his home in Manhattan. He was 94.

The cause was esophageal cancer, his daughter Jane Assimacopoulos said.

“Meltzer was one of the first in a new wave of nonfiction writers who brought lively and passionate writing, grounded in original source material, to middle-grade students and young adults, without talking down to them,” Lisa Von Drasek, the children’s librarian at the Bank Street College of Education in New York and an expert in the field, said in an interview on Wednesday.

“In the old days, it was those dry volumes with their buckram covers, crowded gray type and no reproductions that kids had to use for school assignments,” Ms. Drasek added.

In 2001, Mr. Meltzer, who wrote nearly 100 books for children, received the American Library Association’s Laura Ingalls Wilder Medal for his contribution to children’s literature. Five of his works were National Book Award finalists.

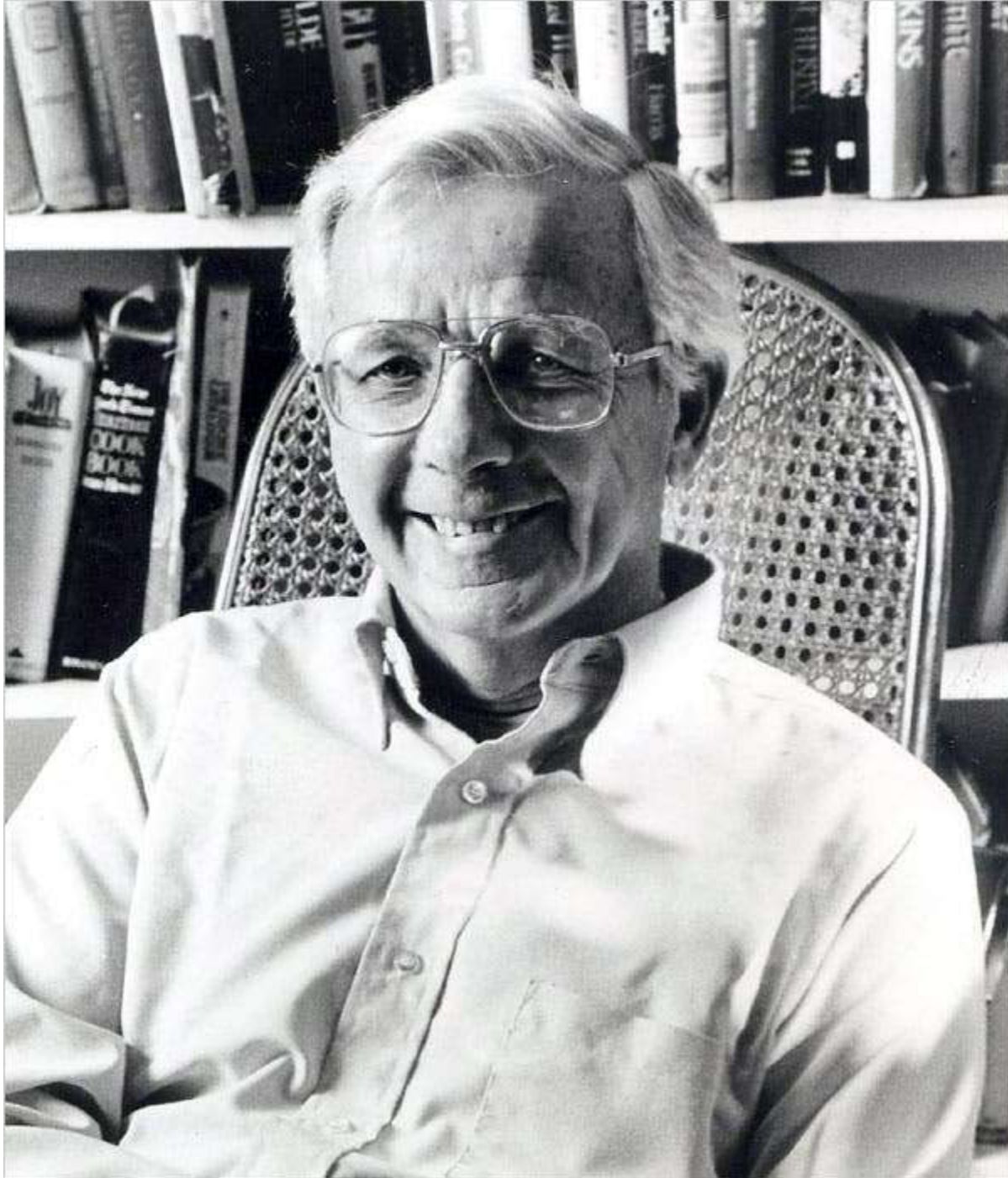
Mr. Meltzer was a self-trained historian. The fact that he never graduated from college (he quit school during the Depression to help support his family) proved no barrier to his vast and varied writing. In fact, it was an impetus. Much of his work is infused with a call for social justice.

In vivid, concise prose, Mr. Meltzer wrote about slavery, witch hunts, the immigrant experience, the Depression, the Holocaust, the civil rights era and the labor movement, among many other subjects.

In 1968, when he published “Bread and Roses: The Struggle of American Labor, 1865-1915,” (Knopf), The New York Times’s labor reporter at the time, A. H. Raskin, wrote in a review, “Mr. Meltzer’s pages, prickly with eyewitness accounts of unionism’s birth pains in the sweatshops, the factories, the railroads and the mines, are a goad to revitalized activity in defense of industrial democracy and higher economic standards for those who remain on the outskirts of American affluence.”

Mr. Meltzer also wrote about piracy, ancient Egypt, the Seminole War, the Mexican-American War, the cotton gin, how the railroad changed the world and the impact of horses on history. In “The Amazing Potato” (HarperCollins, 1992), he chronicled its influence through the centuries.

Mr. Meltzer also wrote biographies of, among others, Ferdinand Magellan, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, Frederick Douglass, Theodore Roosevelt, Edgar Allan Poe, Mark Twain, Henry David Thoreau, Carl Sandburg, John Steinbeck, Albert Einstein and Betty Friedan.



Milton Meltzer in 1996. Credit... Worcester Telegram & Gazette

In books like “In Their Own Words: A History of the American Negro” and “The Jewish Americans: A History in Their Own Words” (Crowell, 1965 and 1982), Mr. Meltzer gave his young readers insight into the role of ordinary people in the making of history.

Born in Worcester, Mass., on May 8, 1915, Mr. Meltzer was one of three sons of Benjamin and Mary Meltzer. His parents, immigrants from Austria-Hungary, were semiliterate. His mother was a seamstress and his father washed windows.

Milton was the only son who finished high school. He went to Columbia University in 1932, paying his way by working in the dining hall and selling shoes in a store. But he dropped out after his father died of cancer. He then went to work as a writer for the Work Projects Administration, which provided jobs for millions of people during the Depression.

Mr. Meltzer married Hildy Balinky in 1941; she died last year. Besides his daughter Jane, he is survived by another daughter, Amy Meltzer; his brother Marshall; and two grandsons.