



AN INTERVIEW WITH
ROXANE ORGILL

AUTHOR OF
FOOTWORK
The Story of Fred and Adele Astaire

Why a book for children on Fred Astaire and his sister?

Of course, most children aren't going to know who Fred Astaire was, much less his sister, Adele. What drew me to Fred Astaire was seeing him dance in movies like *Top Hat*, *Follow the Fleet*, and *Swing Time*. I couldn't take my eyes off his feet. On second and third viewing of his films with Ginger Rogers, Judy Garland, and Cyd Charisse, I was riveted by other things: his lightness, how he made his large hands look graceful, the way even his legs seemed so precisely placed in midair. Later I came to love the way he sang, in the same rhythmically acute way he moved his feet.

But that doesn't answer the question of why I would write about Fred Astaire for children. The reason is simply that his story inspired me. Here was a boy who was less than his sister in age, looks, and ability. He was funny-looking; she was adorable. He got applause; she got raves. Fred was onstage simply because he was "along for the ride," as the book says. And who received the most attention? It was Adele who got the basket passed across the footlights with a puppy inside, not Fred. Any child with an older sibling of even modest talents can identify with Fred.

What's neat is how Fred and Adele resolved this conflict and became a team, with each sibling doing his or her part to make the act great. And then how Fred was able to take his part and make it even bigger and more astounding once Adele quit dancing and he was on his own.

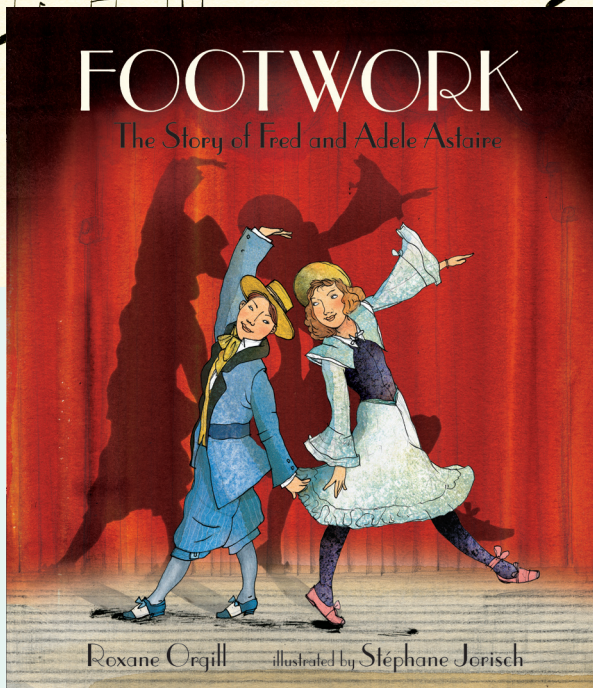
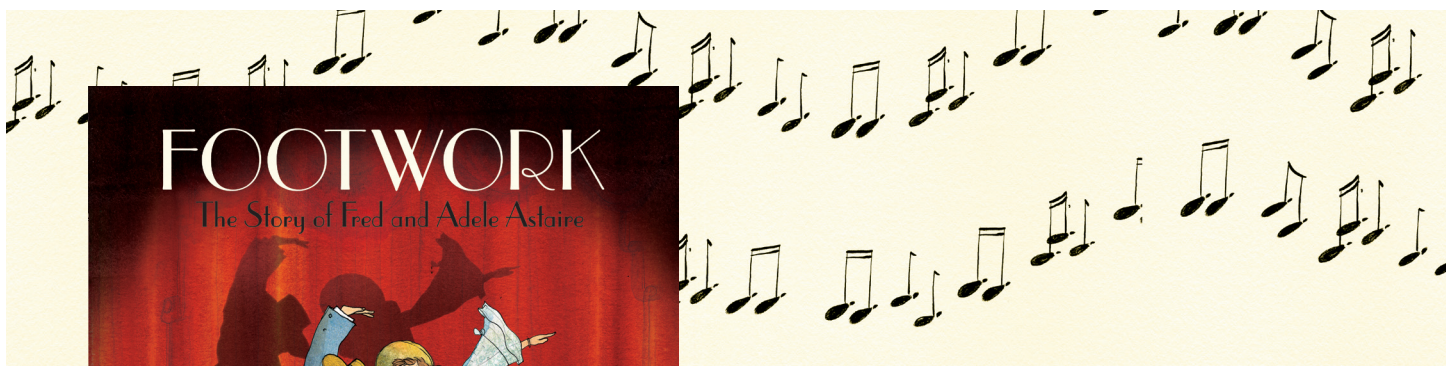
What about Fred Astaire drew you to him, besides his sheer talent?

I was drawn to his personality, and in particular to his attitude toward his work. The epigraph I used in the book says it best: "Hard work is great fun"—those were Fred's words. Also: "It takes time to make something memorable." He was a perfectionist who made people around him (including Adele) crazily impatient, but he would not allow a musical number to go onstage or before a camera until it was exactly right.



What would you like kids to take away from this book?

First of all, if readers went out and rented Fred Astaire's movies and got swept away by his artistry and sense of humor, I'd be happy. I'd love for children who dance to find a friend in Fred or Adele. And I'd love for boys who dance to feel joyful and inspired, and for boys who think about maybe dancing someday to stop thinking and put on a pair of tap shoes or ballet slippers—or throw off their shoes—and dance!



In researching and writing this book, what did you find most surprising?

Many things. That Fred and Adele were fun-loving and silly, while their mother, the parent who was with them the most, seems to have been quite severe. That Fred could get over Adele's leaving the act and make a whole new career for himself in a new industry: motion pictures. That a skinny, balding guy with big ears could become a movie idol and a heartthrob!

What was the hardest task in researching the book?

Finding out which railroad would have run the train whose whistle Fred heard while lying in his bed in the Highwood section of Weehawken, New Jersey, circa 1910.

Is there a way in which you use your experience as a music critic in your writing for children?

I'd say that music informs all my books. Music may be the subject, as in my biography of Mahalia Jackson. Or music may be in the writing, the very sound of the words, as in my book for very young children, *Go-Go Baby!* *Footwork* is not about a musician, strictly speaking, but Fred Astaire was very musical, and there was plenty of music in his dancing. And in films and on records, he was a charming singer.



As for the experience of working as a music critic, well, a critic has to be able to put music into words, to make people hear the music while reading the review. I like doing that. It's a major part of writing a biography of a musician or of musical people like the Astaires.

A music critic also has to listen acutely, which is what writers do all the time, especially as they read aloud to themselves what they've written. The words have to sound right.

Finishing a book can sometimes be a letdown as you let go of your subject and close the files. Do you have any regrets or wishes regarding *Footwork*?

I wish I'd seen Fred and Adele together onstage. I'd like to climb into a time-travel machine. I'd be greedy and ask the machine to take me to two places so I could see them as youngsters in the *Wedding Cake Act* and also as young adults doing the *Oompah Trot* and singing, "It's the whichness of the whatness and the whereness of the who . . ."

