



## Author Spotlight with

# Leah Pileggi

**How did you first learn about James Oscar Baker, the character on which Jake Oliver Evans in *Prisoner 88* is based? What made you want to write a book about his story?**

I think the universe wanted me to meet James! In June of 2007, while on a business trip with my husband in Boise, Idaho, I had a couple of hours to explore. Having never been to Idaho before, I checked a local newspaper for guidance. It advertised a tour of The Old Idaho Penitentiary, a historic site since the 1970s that had been built a hundred years before. I love old architecture, so off I went.

I parked in a dirt lot in the blazing sun. When I entered The Old Pen (as it's known today), a tour had just left. I caught up with them outside, which is inside the sandstone walls of the penitentiary. Some of the dozen or so structures remain intact, frozen in time, while others have begun to crumble. We fifteen or so slowly wilting tourists heard that prisoners were given dynamite to blast rock in the hills nearby to build those sandstone walls. A couple folks left the tour in search of air conditioning. We learned that the inmates did the laundry and grew crops, and the whole place was self-sufficient up through the Depression. A few more people fled the heat. By the time the tour was almost over, only a couple of us sun-baked souls remained. That's when the docent said, "The youngest prisoner ever housed here was ten years old. His name was James Oscar Baker." Well, I just had to read that book.

It turned out that there wasn't a book about James Oscar. There wasn't much information at all. They knew when he had been there and why, but that was it. It was my book to write. What kid wouldn't want to know how a ten-year-old survived prison? Before there was air conditioning or even electricity!

**Jake's voice is so strong and intriguing—readers will be hard-pressed to feel anything but love and empathy for him. How difficult was it to write this character? Were there any struggles you came across in constructing the dialogue between Jake and the other characters in the book?**

This will probably sound a little odd, okay maybe a lot odd, but it's almost as though Jake told his own story. There were days when I reread what I had written the day before and thought, "Wow,

where did that come from?" I was immersed in that time in history and especially all things related to the Old Pen, and then Jake just lived his story through me. Even his speech pattern seemed familiar. I could almost hear him.

I'm not really sure where the other characters came from, but it was never a struggle to have them interact with Jake.

**How did you conduct the research for *Prisoner 88*? How did you decide what aspects of the book would be strictly based on fact and what aspects would be a product of your imagination?**

The Idaho Historical Society was monumental in assisting my research (since I live in Pennsylvania). When I first inquired about James Oscar Baker, a historian had just been hired to sort through all of the boxes of papers and documents that had been stored at The Old Pen for years. The historian found James Oscar's intake record right away. (Although hundreds of prisoners had been incarcerated there before him, James Oscar really was prisoner #88. They'd only recently started assigning numbers.) I searched newspapers on microfilm and found not only articles about James Oscar but about Chinese prisoners playing a "Chinese banjo." The historian found letters and the trial transcripts. What we *didn't* find was documentation of day-to-day life inside the penitentiary. That's when Jake's story was born.

At the beginning of *Prisoner 88*, Jake is the same height as James Oscar. The altercation that led to the shooting in the saloon in which Jake picks up a gun and shoots a man is based on various accounts of what actually happened. And Jake is released after serving the same amount of time as James Oscar. But unlike Jake, James Oscar had many siblings and both parents. This story was really just inspired by the fact that a ten-year-old boy had actually served time in the penitentiary.

My research included contacting hog farmers, a music professor who knew what a Chinese banjo was, and a researcher who had documented the prisoners' use of dynamite to build the walls of The Old Pen. A retired Idaho judge helped to interpret the legal documents for me. I read about Mormon prisoners, researched Stephen Foster songs, and learned about the food that would have been served to the prisoners at that time.

One last thing. In the 1960s, there really was a prison cat.

**While *Prisoner 88* is your first published book, you've written poems and articles for children's magazines and publications, and you studied children's literature at Chatham University in Pittsburgh. What is it about writing for children in particular that interests you? Have you ever written, or would you ever consider writing, anything for adults?**

My grade school in rural Pennsylvania did not have a library. I loved to read as a kid, but there wasn't much to choose from. After my daughter was born in 1988, we spent loads of time in libraries and bookstores (in toasty Austin, Texas, in the summer), and I amassed children's books because, well, I just wanted them!

I started writing a journal after my grandmother died in 1993. I realized that I never really knew

her, her hopes and dreams and struggles before I was born, and it was too late to ask her. I wanted to make sure my daughter would know who I really was. Eventually story ideas started showing up in my journal. It was as though they had been stuffed into my head for a very long time. Today, I probably have either the outline, title, story synopsis, pages of notes, or full manuscripts of 100 children's books, from no-word picture books to YA novels. (Incidentally, a few years ago, I found a short story that my grandmother had written. Nobody knew it, but she wanted to be a writer!)

I actually have an adult history book coming out this fall. It's called *How to Design a World-Class Engineering College: A History of Engineering at Carnegie Mellon University*. This book contains a lot of old photos beginning in 1900, and I had a blast digging through the archives.

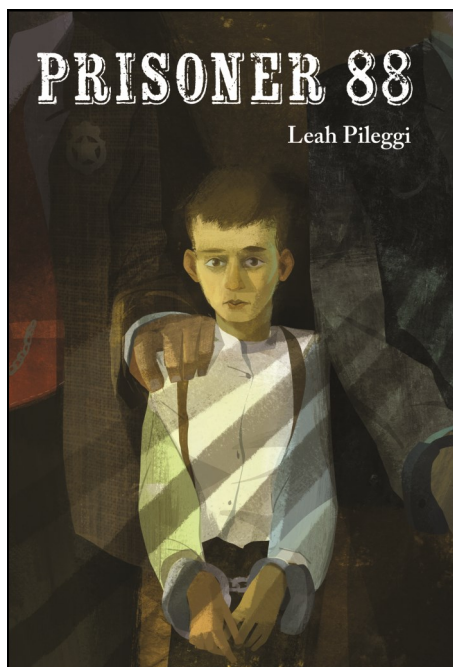
**It's clear that you are inspired by and interested in history—*Prisoner 88* is a piece of historical fiction. Have you ever thought of writing a work of nonfiction, perhaps about an historical event?**

Although I don't have a children's nonfiction book in the works right now, I would absolutely consider writing the true story of a true event for kids. History isn't a list of dates and facts; it's stories of real people who just happened to live before today. My goal would be to write non-boring nonfiction.

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**By Leah Pileggi**

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978-1-58089-560-6, HC, \$16.95  
978-1-60734-534-3, E-book, \$9.99  
Ages 11–14

What if you were ten years old and thrown into prison with hardened criminals? That's just what happens to Jake Oliver Evans. Inspired by a true account of a prisoner in the Idaho Territorial Penitentiary in 1885, Jake's story is as affecting as it is shocking.

Convicted of manslaughter and sentenced to five years, Jake is taken under the wing of a young guard and the kindly warden, as well as a few fellow prisoners. He is taught to read and given a job tending hogs at a nearby farm. In prison, Jake finds a home he has never had in a place most people are desperate to leave. But when he has to make a choice about right and wrong during an explosive escape attempt, Jake jeopardizes his friendships and his security.

Debut novelist Leah Pileggi introduces a strong yet vulnerable character in an exciting and harrowing story of a child growing up on his own in America's Old West.

*“You will love Jake and wish you could know him forever. Leah Pileggi is a wonder.”*

*—Naomi Shihab Nye, author of Habibi, winner of the Jane Addams Children's Book Award*