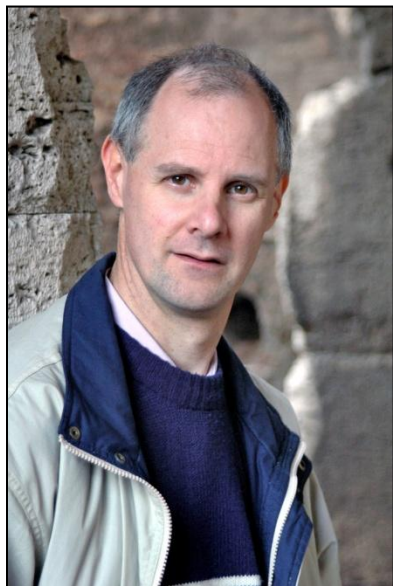




*A conversation with author*  
**Alan Schroeder**



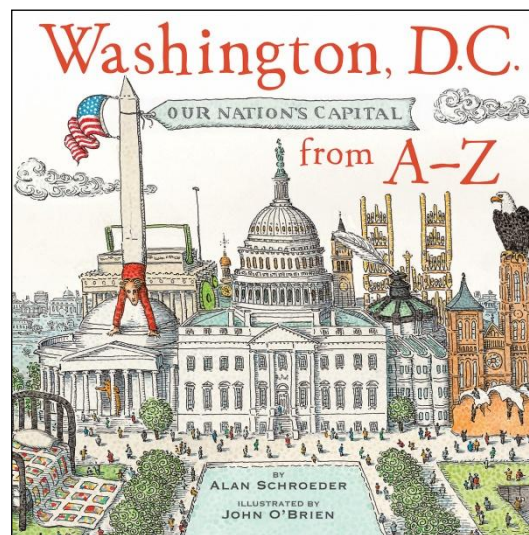
*Alan Schroeder talks about his new book  
**Washington, D.C.: Our Nation's Capital  
from A-Z.***

Humorous cartoons accompany this offbeat guide to the District of Columbia. It is filled with intriguing details about important landmarks and the people who have come to the capital to run the nation's business, celebrate, protest, live in the thick of it all, or just visit. From the aluminum tip of the towering Washington Monument to the marble bathtubs in the Capitol Building's basement, this book offers a top to bottom look at Washington, D.C., and its eclectic history. The book's endpapers feature a map of the District.

**Alan, please tell us about *Washington, D.C.: Our Nation's Capital from A-Z.***

This book was one I hadn't planned to write. During my research for *Abe Lincoln: His Wit and Wisdom from A-Z*, I came across numerous references to the White House—interesting tidbits that I hadn't known about. The more I read about the White House and its history, the more intrigued I became, so I decided to write an ABC book about it. Not about its occupants, but about the house itself, the physical structure. It turned out well, and I sent it to my editor, Mary Cash, at Holiday House. She liked the book, but she told me that H.H. had already done a book on the White House and they didn't want to do another, at least not right away.

I was disappointed, of course—all that research and work!—but then she said that what Holiday House would really like to see was an ABC book about Washington, D.C. That seemed an interesting idea, but I knew from the start that I didn't want to write a book solely about D.C.'s monuments and museums. I wanted to write about much more than that: the city's history, for instance, its people, its weather, its nicknames—the obscure things that most people don't know about. And I think I was able to do that. One of my goals is to surprise readers, even people who live in D.C. There's a tremendous amount of history there that isn't well known.



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**Similar to *Abe Lincoln: His Wit and Wisdom from A–Z* and *Ben Franklin: His Wit and Wisdom from A–Z*, this book focuses on an important part of U.S. history. Tell us about your research process.**

I had been to D.C. before and had vivid memories of the city—but memories are no substitute for hard research. I researched this book the same way I did *Ben Franklin* and *Abe Lincoln*—with lots and lots of reading. Thousands of pages of it. And some of it was very dry material. Reading about sewers or mosquito abatement or bond issues might be of interest to some people, but I found it rather dull. *Ben Franklin*, by contrast, was a joy. But in the end, I came up with more than enough material to fill an ABC book. Too much, in fact. In the end, a number of interesting facts and quotes had to be cut. There was simply no room for them. I've recently finished writing an ABC book about New York City, and again, I had the same problem. Too much great material!

**The book is set up in alphabetical order, with several facts about Washington, D.C., attributed to each letter. Which letters were the hardest to attribute facts with?**

Each of the ABC books has presented its own challenge. But one constant has remained: the letter X. What on earth do you do with the letter X? You can cheat, of course—X is for Tax, X is for Excellent—but that's no fun. One of my great joys with the D.C. book was discovering two wonderful X entries very late in the process, after the illustrator had begun his work—the X-1 and X-15 rockets at the Smithsonian. Q is also a hard letter to work with, as is Y. But the bigger challenge is less obvious. Just because you find something to match a letter, do you necessarily have anything to say about it?

**Which facts were most interesting or surprising to you?**

I didn't know much about D.C.'s early history, so that was eye-opening for me. The compromises, the arguments—the fact that so many people didn't want the capital to be on the Potomac at all. And the finances—wow. Financing the federal city was extremely difficult, and more than once everything seemed on the verge of falling apart. We take Washington, D.C., for granted, but in 1795, it was far from a done deal. It also surprised me to learn that the exterior of the National Cathedral is covered with gargoyles and grotesques. How unexpected! Who came up with the idea for that?

On a more discouraging note, it surprises me that only one woman, Rosa Parks, has ever lain in state in the Rotunda of the Capitol. Time and again, women have played a critical role in this nation's history, yet our country seems unable, or unwilling, to give them their full due, even in death.

One final thing I'll mention that took me by surprise: while researching the letter Z, I came across Zoo, of course, and I learned that Smokey Bear lived in the National Zoo for 26 years. In fact, he was so popular that, in 1964, the U.S. Postal Service gave him his own zip code. I knew instantly that I wanted to include that in my book.

**The book includes a lot of quotes from presidents, politicians, and other important figures. Which quote is your favorite?**

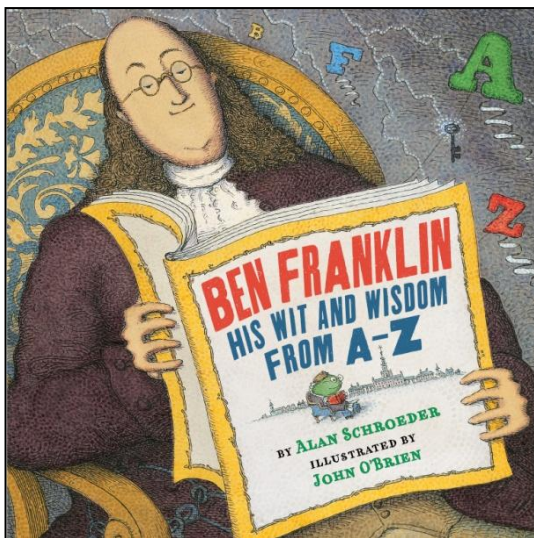
Coming up with quotes is one of the most enjoyable parts of writing these books—and also one of the most frustrating. I say that because so many quotes aren't attributed—or, rather, aren't attributed well. I included, for instance, a quote by Barack Obama—a terrific quote that I didn't want to lose. But tracking down the source of the quote was very, very difficult. A research librarian spent the better part of a week trying to verify it.

Of all the quotes in the book, there are two I especially like. The first is John F. Kennedy's dry observation that "Washington is a city of Southern efficiency and Northern charm." I'm not sure that young readers will immediately grasp his meaning, but adults will, and I told my editor that I felt strongly about keeping it in. I also like a quote by Shirley Chisholm: "I don't measure America by its achievement but by its potential." That's an important thing for us to remember. Democracy isn't something that's set in stone; it's a process—a process of improvement. And that can take a long time—centuries, in fact, and we experience many setbacks along the way. But if we keep in mind our potential—what we have been and are capable of as a country—that helps guide us forward. It gives us strength.

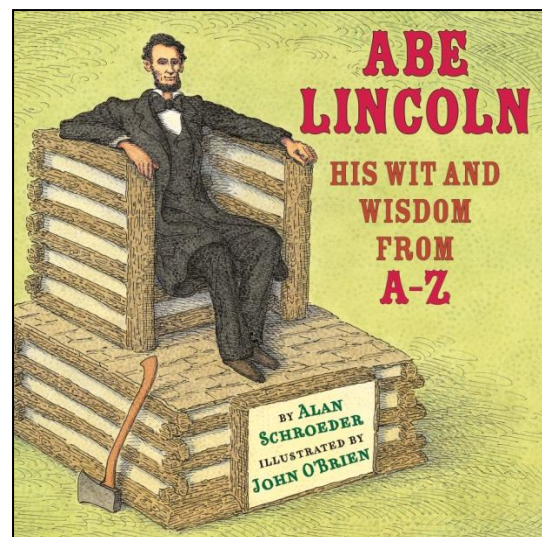
## About the Author

**Alan Schroeder** is the author of acclaimed books such as *Ragtime Tumpie*, which was an ALA Notable Children's Book, a Booklist Children's Editors' Choice, and a Parents' Choice Award winner; *Smoky Mountain Rose*, winner of the Bluegrass Award; and *Minty*; an ALA Notable Children's Book and a *TIME* Magazine Best Children's Book of the Year. He lives in Alameda, California.

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