

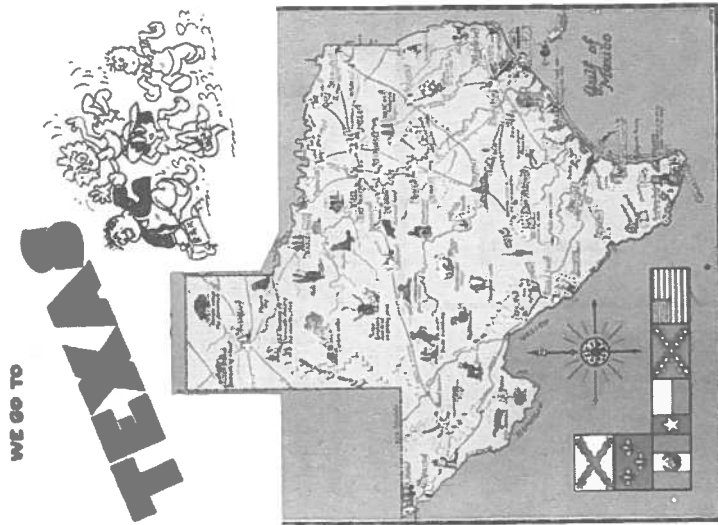


Jack Kent spent most of his life, and all of his days as a cartoonist and author in San Antonio, Texas. His love of the city had effects large and small on his life and career.

### A Crooked Path to Texas

Jack was born in 1920 in Burlington, Iowa, but the family didn't stay there for long. His father was a traveling linoleum salesman. Jack would later make the claim that he had lived in every state in the union before he reached high school.

It wasn't true, but the family was constantly on the move. Instead of leaving his family behind to sell, Ralph Kent would bring them along. In 1925, he was assigned to a territory that included Oklahoma, Arkansas, New Mexico, and Texas. So the family headed southwest. They made Texas their homebase, but still didn't stay in one place for long, mostly bouncing between Houston and San Antonio.



Through all the childhood moves, two constants for Jack were drawing and newspaper comics. He was obsessed with both. He loved comics so much he began writing to the cartoonists, and this turned into correspondences with the likes of Tom McNamara, Milton Caniff, and George Herriman. The latter-creator of the beloved *Krazy Kat*--was his biggest hero, and over the years, the two formed a mentor-mentee relationship.

The Kent family settled in San Antonio permanently in 1937, when Jack was 17. That same year, Jack's work appeared in *L'il Abner's* ongoing reader-submission feature, "Advice fo' Chillun." Jack's "poem" went:

"L'il kids what chews thar nails,  
instead of bread and jelly-  
is apt as not to suffer a lot  
with sharp pains in thar belly."



He signed it "Texas Jack Kent," a sure sign that Jack had fully embraced his new home. Though the family lived in an apartment and had nothing to do with cattle or ranching, he designed and registered his own branding iron with "K" for Kent.

### Becoming a Professional

As a result of the Depression, Jack's father had given up his job as a salesman. He went to work at a downtown San Antonio institution, the Buckhorn Saloon, known for its massive collection of taxidermied animals. Meanwhile, Jack dropped out of high school after his sophomore year to focus on paying work using his artistic talents. He drew caricatures in Alamo plaza, and this led to doing portraits of local businessmen for the *San Antonio*

wasn't a highly functional place. The newspaper only had one subscriber. The kingdom was eternally low on funds, relying on renting out the castle moat to a frog for income. And its residents are constantly misunderstanding everything.

The name of the strip may have been a subconscious tribute to Jack's roots in San Antonio. Perhaps in his readings, Jack had encountered Aroostook County or Aroostook State Park in Maine. The area is home to the Mi'kmaq Nation, who speak Algonquin. In Algonquin, "Aroostook" means "beautiful river."

After returning from the service, Jack used his discharge pay to buy a parcel of land right by the San Antonio river in the historic King William neighborhood. Once he started making money from "King Aroo," he decided to build a house on the land. He designed it himself as a "modernist homage to a Mexican hacienda." So maybe in the back of his mind he realized he'd be building his own little kingdom next to a beautiful river.

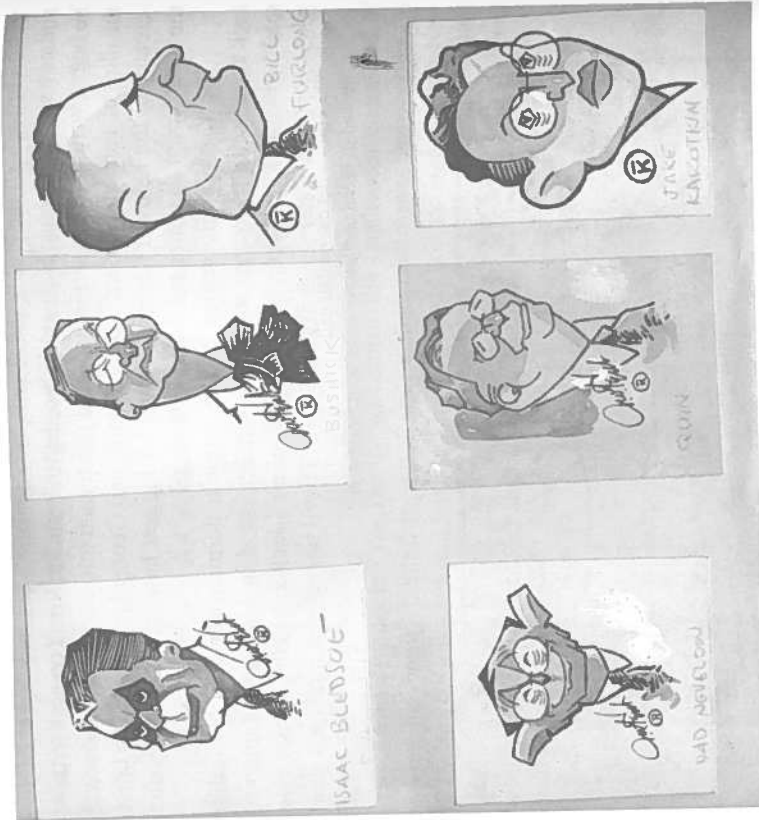


### San Antonio and Jack's Marriages

Buying land and building a house were sure signs that Jack had no interest in living anywhere other than San Antonio. In fact, he'd had it written into his "King Aroo" contract that he not have to leave the city. Though Jack never said, one could assume that his devotion was not only out of love for the city, but out of a disdain for ever having to move again.

That resolve brought challenges. Jack's dedication to San Antonio ruined one marriage and led to another.

"King Aroo" and Jack looked like stars on the rise in the first couple



### Light newspaper.

A couple of years later, Jack moved to Houston to work as an assistant to Elmer Woggon on a syndicated comic strip called "Chief Wahoo." This strip eventually evolved into the much more well-known "Steve Roper and Mike Nomad," but Jack was long gone by then. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Texas Jack quit his job and enlisted in the Army.

### King Aroo

Jack served in the Army for the entirety of World War II. When he returned to San Antonio, he picked back up where he left off, with a goal of landing his own syndicated strip. One of his proposals to the syndicates was highly influenced by San Antonio. Called "Willy Nilly," the strip was set in the Southwest and featured a cast of region-specific animals, including an armadillo, rattlesnake, and a Mexican bird named Don Pilon.

"Willy Nilly" didn't sell, but Jack's next idea did.

"King Aroo" concerned a tiny fairy tale kingdom called Myopia. It

of years of the strip. He got an agent in New York to represent the television rights to the strip, Juliette Bridgman, and the two fell in love. After a short courtship, they married in New York and planned to settle in San Antonio, but this plan quickly fell apart. Juliette didn't want to live outside of New York, and her business interests and personality weren't compatible with domestic life.

So even when a move to New York would probably have been a good career move and would have prolonged Jack's marriage, he didn't budge. He and Juliette divorced after a year.

But this turned out to be only a dark prelude to a brighter development. When "King Aroo" debuted in the *San Antonio Express and News* in 1953, the editor of the newspaper's Sunday magazine went to profile the hometown hero. Her name was June Kilstofte, and she and Jack had an immediate attraction. Jack asked her on a date, she said yes, and they were married less than a year later.

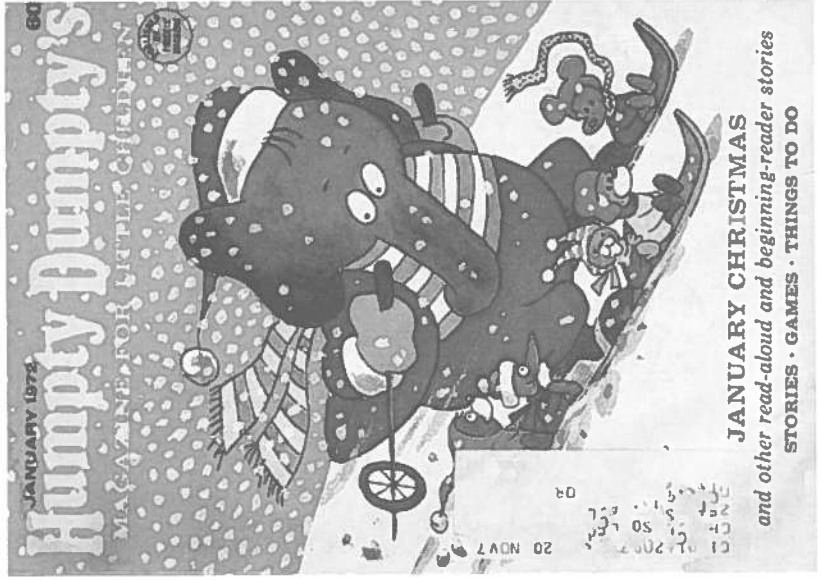
After flirting with the idea of settling down in Mexico--Jack's only betrayal of his adopted hometown--the couple remained in San Antonio for the rest of their lives.



As an aside, here's a fun bit of San Antonio trivia: Jack's best man was Pat Boyette, a local celebrity who worked as a TV news anchorman for KENS, and as a producer of commercials, kids' shows, and talk shows. Boyette would go on to make low-budget films and to work as a comic book artist, where his biggest claim to fame was the co-creation of the Peacemaker for Charlton Comics (now owned by DC and part of the Suicide Squad).

### A Transitional Time

When Jack's original seven-year contract for "King Aroo" ended, McClure Syndicate decided not to renew it. The strip had never grown into the hit that many expected it to, especially compared to contemporaries such as "Peanuts," "Dennis the Menace," and "Beetle Bailey," all strips that also began in 1950. But Jack and his strip found a benefactor in Stanleigh Arnold. Arnold was an editor at the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and offered to run the strip exclusively there.



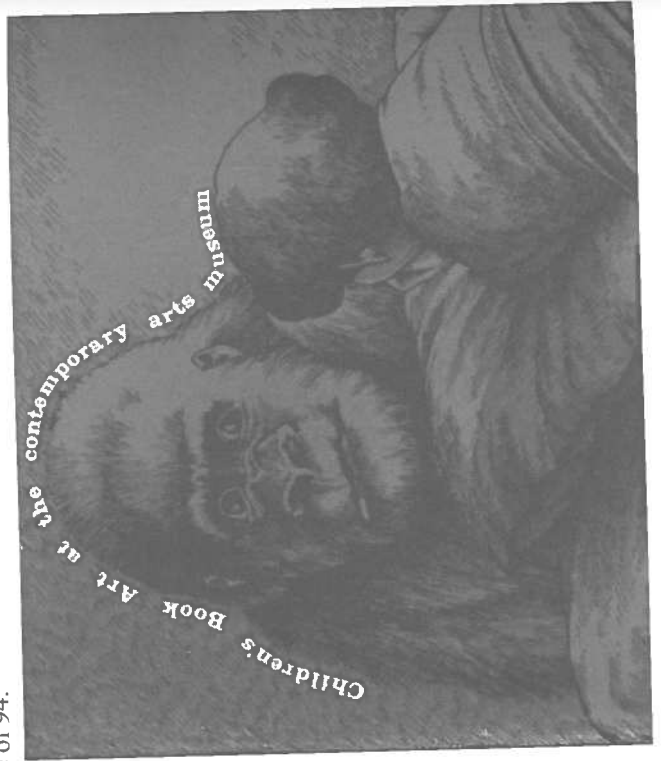
Jack took him up on it, but found his income greatly diminished. He and June both took jobs at the Ferguson Map Company in downtown San Antonio. This situation lasted a few years and through another attempt at syndication, but in 1965, Jack decided to end "King Aroo" and quit his day job. He hoped to start a new comic strip, but had no luck.

But he was successful at getting his comics printed in magazines, and he landed work in the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Playboy*, and *Mad Magazine*. He also worked on greeting cards for Hallmark, and contributed stories to *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine for Little Children*. The latter is what eventually led him into children's books, an area Jack had always had a keen interest in.

### Jack the Children's Author

By becoming a children's author, Jack was continuing a small-but-proud tradition of children's book creators with a San Antonio pedigree.

A pioneer in the area was San Antonio resident Janette Sebring Lowrey. She published her first book in 1938, focused on the holiday story of Los Pastores. Four years later, she published a Little Golden Book that became one of the most beloved children's books of all time, *The Poky Little Puppy*, with illustrations by Gustaf Tenggren. She continued to write children's books--publishing over 20 of them. She died in San Antonio in 1986 at the age of 94.



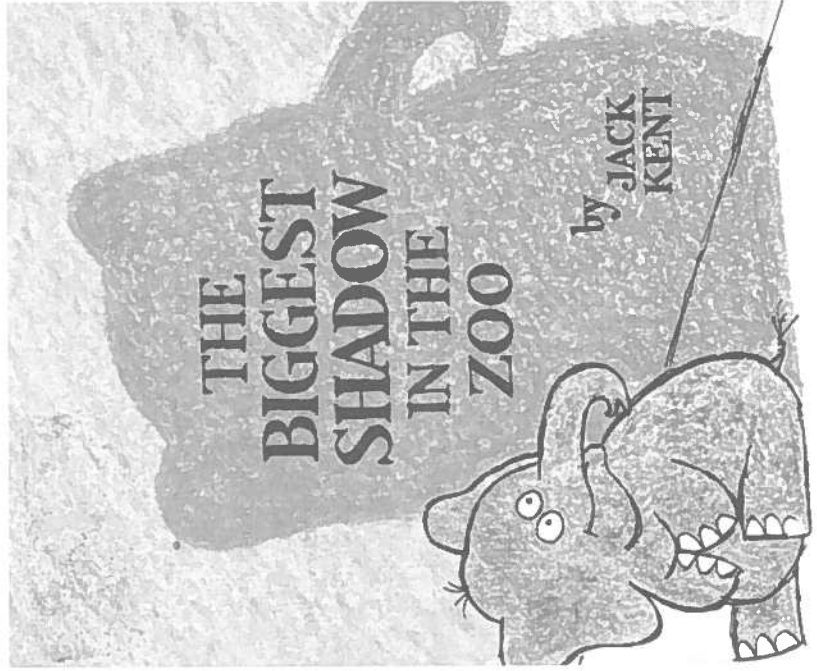
In November 1975, the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston held an exhibit that featured a who's who of children's book authors, including Edward Gorey and Arnold Lobel. Jack had artwork in the show, as did James Marshall, another children's author with San Antonio roots.

Marshall was, at that time, just beginning a rise to fame in children's books. He had grown up on a farm just outside of San Antonio, and attended San Antonio College. He moved east, but on a visit to San Antonio, he had the idea for a book about two hippo friends named George and Martha. The book was published in 1972 and led to a long career for Marshall.

I don't have any evidence on whether Jack and James attended the opening reception for the exhibit, but I'd like to think they did, and met each other, and had a riotously funny conversation.

*Just Only John* was Jack's first children's book, published in 1968. The book was a modest hit, and his career took off from there. He spent the next 17 years making books for kids.

Honestly, there aren't any direct San Antonio references in Jack's children's work.





The closest is a book he published in 1981, *The Biggest Shadow in the Zoo*. The story concerns an elephant named Goober who is very proud of having the biggest shadow in the zoo. In the story, he lives in a habitat surrounded by a moat. One day, his shadow falls into the moat and Goober panics. It's a very Kentian scenario, a character freaking out about something they've completely misunderstood.

At the San Antonio Zoo, the elephant exhibit was surrounded by a 10-foot-deep moat, just like Goober's. And in 1975, just a few years before *The Biggest Shadow in the Zoo* was published, Ziggy the elephant fell into the moat, breaking both tusks and scraping his head. Ziggy was okay, but the story made the news, and likely inspired Jack's story.

### The San Antonio Literary Community

While San Antonio wasn't overtly present in the pages of Jack's books, it did play a role in furthering his book-writing career. As a freelance author with no agent, Jack's distance from New York afforded him freedom and autonomy. But he found his own literary community right at home.

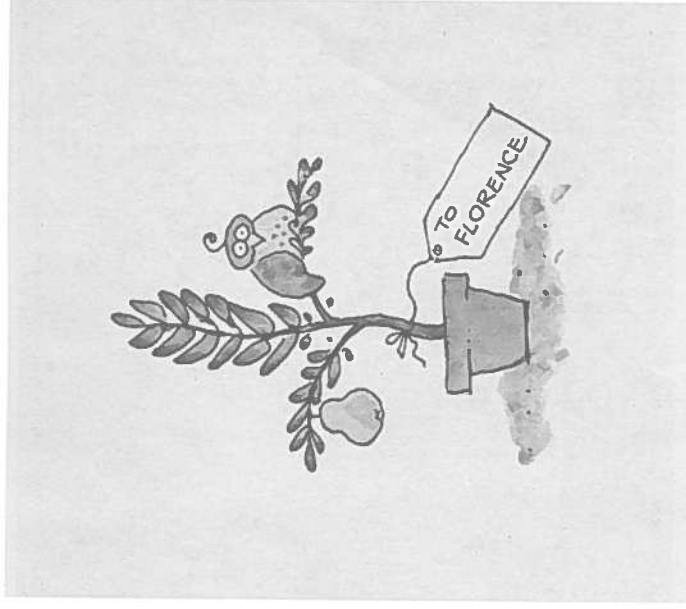
From his teen years on, Jack--an insatiable bibliophile--was a regular at Rosengren's Books, a bookstore renowned not only in San Antonio, but in the country. Willie Morris, editor of *Harper's* labeled it "one of the finest and most admirable bookstores in America." It was a place where bookmakers and booklovers gathered and communed.

The store was established by Frank and Florence Rosengren in Chicago in the late 1920s. When the Depression hit, they relocated the store to downtown San Antonio, where it began a 50-year run. Frank and Florence cultivated relationships with book people local and otherwise, including Robert Frost, Dr. Seuss, Ludwig Bemelmans, Bennett Cerf, and Larry McMurtry.

Florence--who took over the store after her husband retired in 1942--championed Jack's work, always carried his books, and held autograph parties when he had a new book out. Jack was also friends with Frank Jr. (known as Figg) and his wife Camille, and these two took over after Florence retired.

Through Rosengren's, Jack befriended Robert Igo, a poet and an English professor at San Antonio College. The *San Antonio Express* wrote upon his death that "Igo reigned for decades as San Antonio's genial literary uncle, generously mentoring, nurturing and critiquing local writers." Jack was one of those.

Jack dedicated books to all of these people, which illustrates just how important they were to him.



### Conclusion

In the last decade and a half of his life, Jack settled into an idyllic existence in his little kingdom by the San Antonio River. From the heart of the city, Jack worked at a drawing table in his living room looking out on a garden, pecan trees, and a loquat hedge, the river flowing just to his east, and wildlife all around. "It's as if we lived in the country," he wrote. "With a wife like June to share it, Heaven must be something like this."

He died in 1985 at the age of 65 after a long illness. He left behind a treasure trove of comics and books that are clever, funny, heartfelt, and wise about the ways of humankind. In *The Eye of the Story*, Eudora Welty wrote, "The events of a story may have much or little to do with the writer's own life, but the pattern is the nearest thing to a mirror image of his heart and mind." That is very true of Jack Kent.

If you are interested in learning more about Jack, start with the two *King Aroo* volumes published by the Library of American Comics. They contain an excellent, comics-focused biography of Jack. Then, get your hands on my own *Jack Kent: The Wit, Whimsy, and Wisdom of a Comic Storyteller* (2023, University Press of Mississippi).



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