

# The Making of *Jack Kent*:

## *The Wit, Whimsy, and Wisdom of a Comic Storyteller*



**Paul V. Allen**  
**Independent researcher and author**

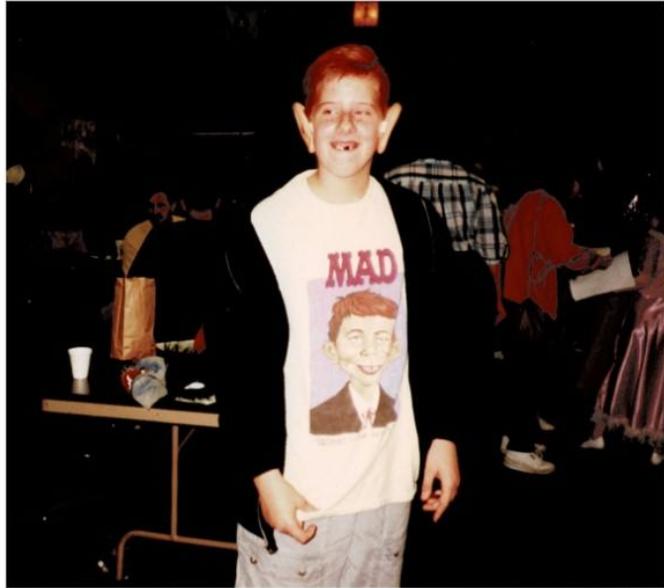
### **Intro**

Thank you to Jack and Susan for inviting me to speak to the King William Association tonight. They've been so generous and helpful through this whole process, and I'm so happy we have this chance to get together.

I'm in town because I gave a talk yesterday at the annual conference of the Popular Culture Association about Jack Kent. And my first thought was to give that same talk to you. But then I realized that lecturing about Jack Kent in the presence of the person who knows more about him than anyone else in the world felt a bit intimidating. Also, I want you to read my book about Jack when it comes out, so I don't want to give too much away!

So instead I'd like to tell you about my path to writing Jack Kent's biography, some of the interesting detours that happened along the way, and what exactly goes into writing a book like this.

## About Me

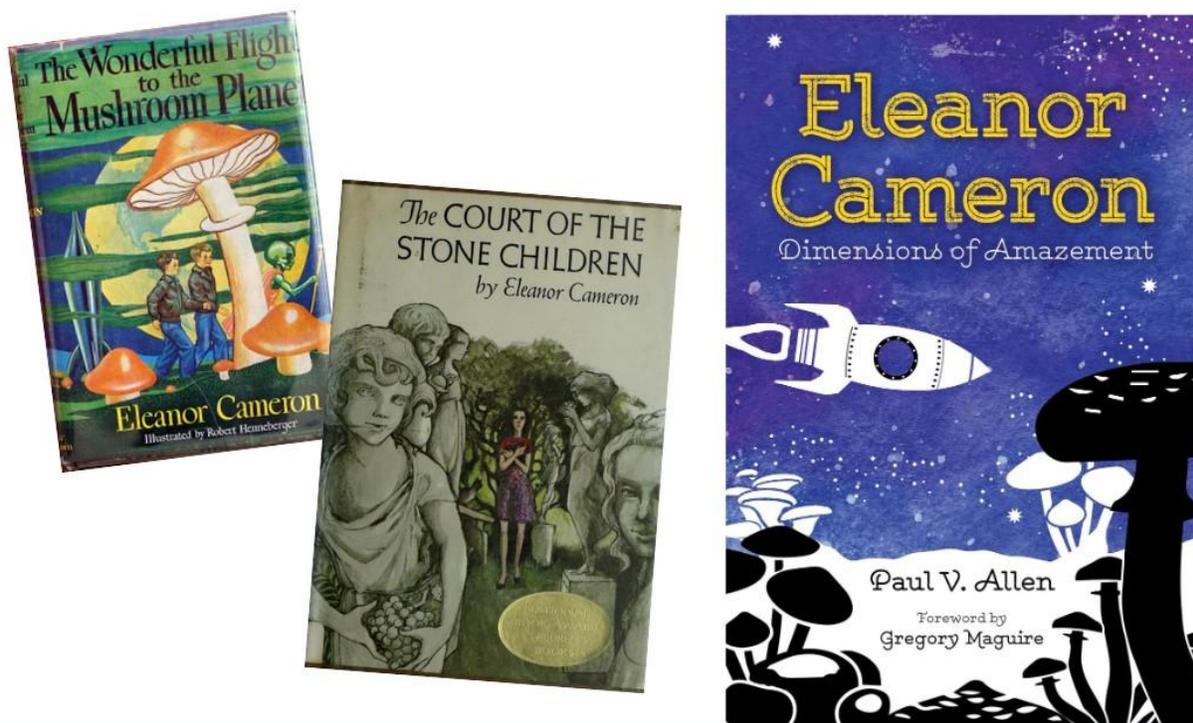


First I'd like to tell you a bit about my background.

Since I was a kid I've loved to read, write, and draw. And that has informed a lot of my hobbies and goals. If you'd asked me when I was 11 I'd have said I was going to take over Peanuts from Charles Schulz when he died. At age 13 my ambition was to be editor-in-chief of *Mad Magazine*. In high school, my goal was to write and draw comic books. In college I hoped to write children's books.

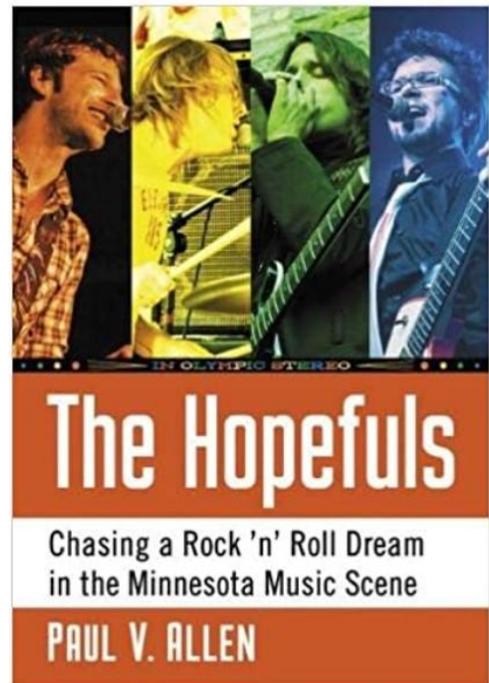
But I didn't do any of those things. Instead I became a teacher, and so for the past 20 years I've worked in various capacities in both middle and elementary schools.

## My Writing Career Thus Far



In 2013 I became curious about the author of one of my favorite childhood books, *The Wonderful Flight to the Mushroom Planet*. Through a series of serendipitous events, my investigation into the life and work of Eleanor Cameron turned into writing her biography. Despite my lack of credentials, I was lucky enough to have that published by University Press of Mississippi.

I loved the process of researching, interviewing, writing, and publishing so much that it became what I usually describe as a "very time-consuming hobby."



My next book was about a group of musicians in Minneapolis - where I lived for 17 years - who I saw play live many times. They looked like they were on cusp of mainstream national success, but then things just sort of fell apart. Part of my work in researching was finding out why. Working on this book was an education in the pitfalls of writing about living people.

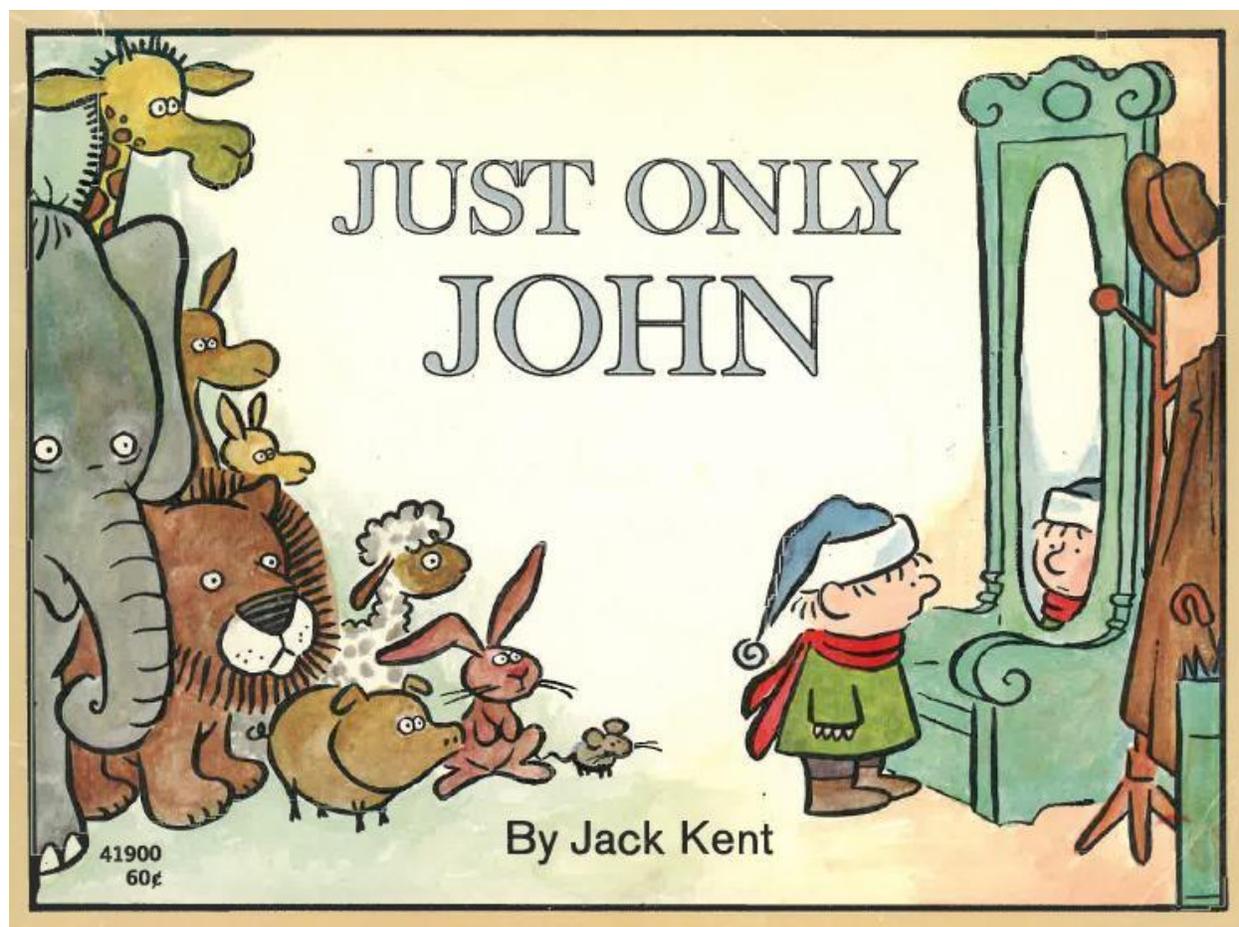
My next project was an extensive history of Dr. Seuss's Beginner Books line of early readers. It arose from my work in early literacy, my own childhood experience with Beginner Books, and my experience reading them with my own sons. I really enjoyed writing the book, but it was an education in the pitfalls of writing about an author with a very draconian estate. That book was also published by University Press of Mississippi.



After I finished work on that book - around 2019 - I decided to take a break, partly because I really needed one, and partly because I didn't have any idea of who or what I wanted to write about next.

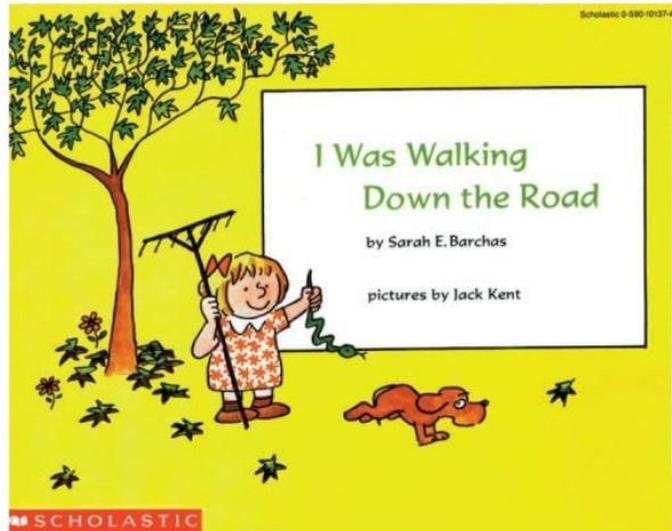
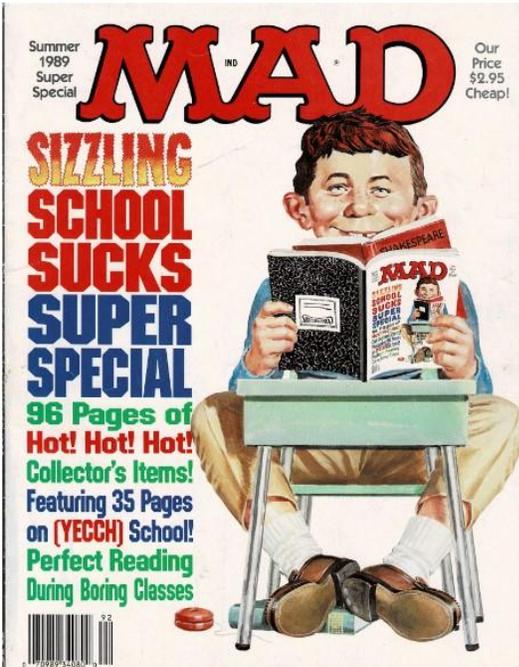
## Researching Jack's Story

My path to writing about Jack Kent began in December 2019. I'd taken a day trip to a nearby small town with my wife and parents. We were in a small-town thrift shop and I gravitated toward the children's books. There was a book called *Just Only John*.

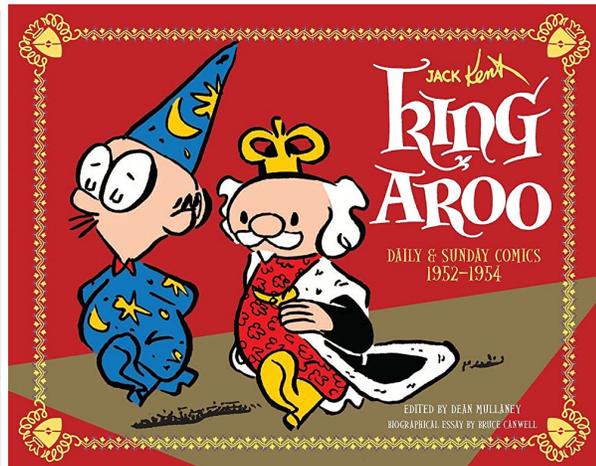
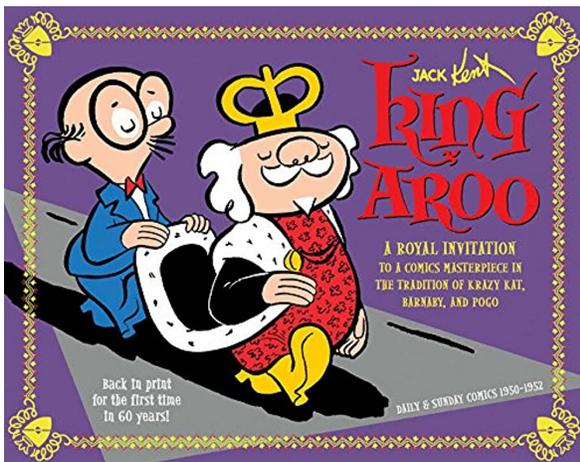


As I flipped through it was the illustrations that struck me first - they were solid and cute and engaging. I bought it for 1 dollar. When I got home and read it I was very pleased that not only were the illustrations but the story itself was clever and wise. It's a special thing to get all of these things in the same book.

The name Jack Kent rang a distant bell of remembrance. I took to Google, and I realized that I had seen Jack's work before. When I was 12 I bought a Mad Magazine special and it contained a piece by Jack, "A MAD Look at Sex Education in the Schools." On top of that, I had actually used a book he illustrated - *I Was Walking Down the Road* - as a Reading Recovery teacher.

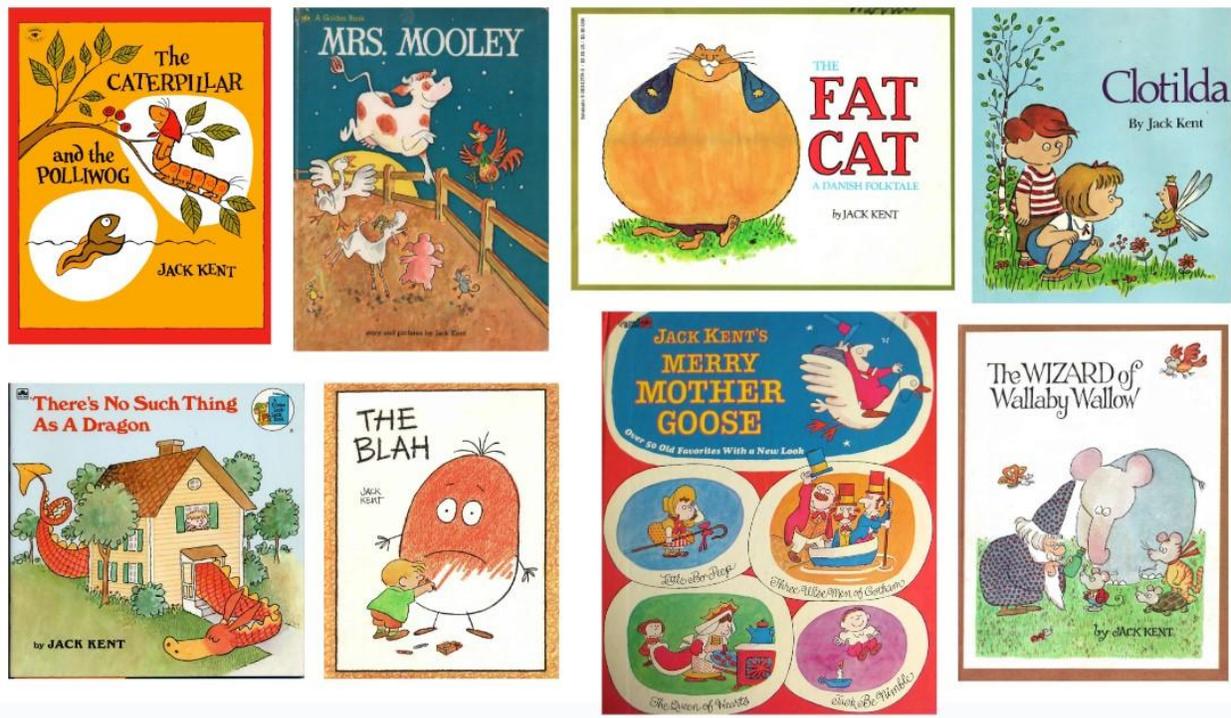


At that point I didn't have any notion of taking on Jack Kent as a research project, but I bought the two *King Aroo* collections from IDW and was fascinated by the two-part biography written by Bruce Canwell.



I found *King Aroo* to be whimsical, absurd, and layered, and by turns it reminded me of *The Far Side* and *The Muppet Show*, Tove Jansson's *Moomins* and Lewis Carroll's *Alice In Wonderland*.

My collectors instinct also took over, and I made it my mission to track down all of Jack's children's books. The fact that most of them are out of print, and some of them pretty difficult to track down, was a challenge I took on gladly. I had great fun scouring eBay and Abebooks and bookshops for treasures.

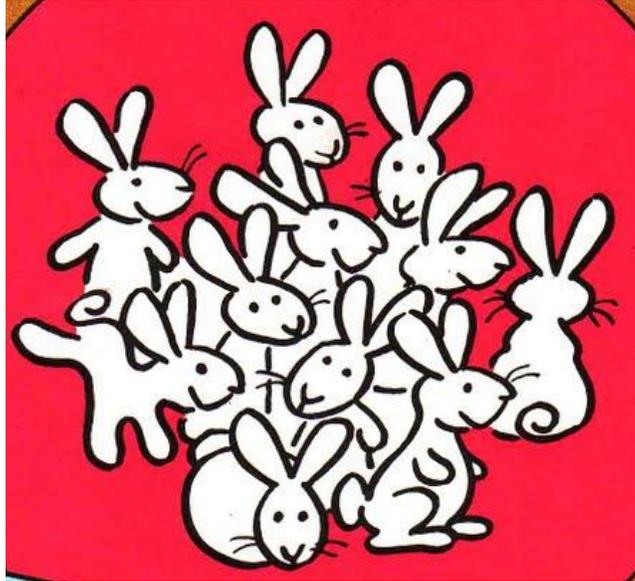


And each successive one of his children's books impressed me by being clever, funny, heartfelt, and thoughtful, often in the same short book.

I was in the middle of all this when COVID hit and everything shut down.

By nature of my teaching position at that time - not having a classroom of my own - I suddenly found myself at home with a lot of time on my hands. That's when things kicked into overdrive and I realized I had started another book.

I started trying to get in touch with Jack Kent, Jr. to get his blessing and ask for his help.



### **Down the Rabbit Hole**

And I started what I call “rabbit hole” research. I pride myself on being extremely thorough in my research, and this can lead me to spend a lot of time on items that are of not a whole lot of consequence. It’s often tedious and frustrating but can also be extremely thrilling and rewarding.

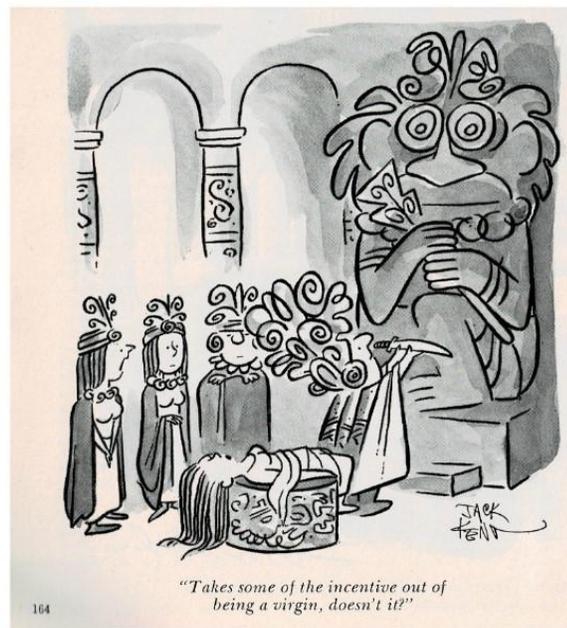
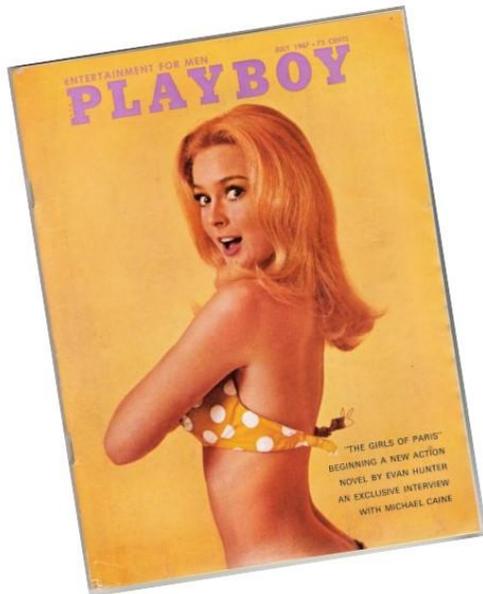
More than any other project I’ve, this one had a lot of rabbit holes. Jack had a lot of work that sort of disappeared into the ether after its first and only appearance, and I took it upon myself to try to rescue that work.

This was especially true of the time period between the end of King Aroo in 1965 and the beginning of Jack’s children’s book career in 1968. During this time Jack did journeyman’s work, producing cards for Hallmark and placing cartoons and stories in magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Playboy*, *Mad Magazine*, and *Humpty Dumpty*.



Except for *Mad*, there's no online archive of any of these, so I had to do a lot of footwork.

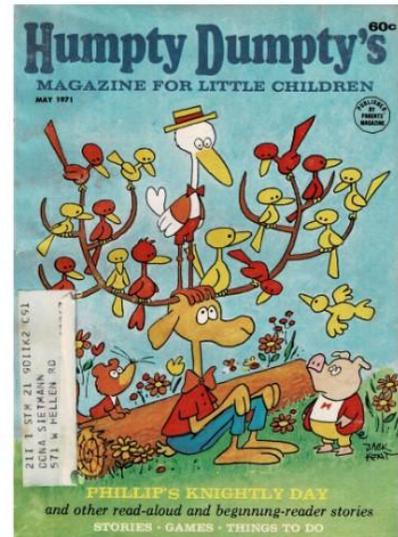
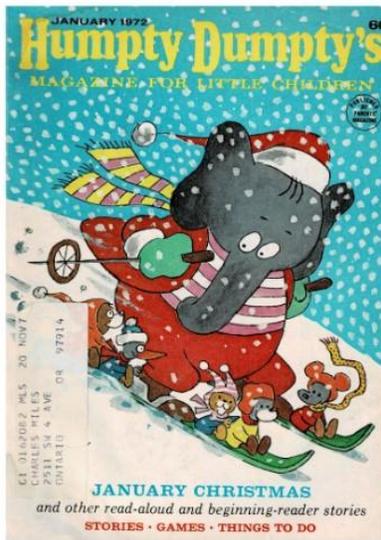
That meant I had no other option but to go through *Playboy's* online archives and look at every page of every single issue from January 1965 through December 1970 to find cartoons Jack had published there. My wife rolled her eyes at me more than once during that process. But I did manage to find two cartoons Jack placed!



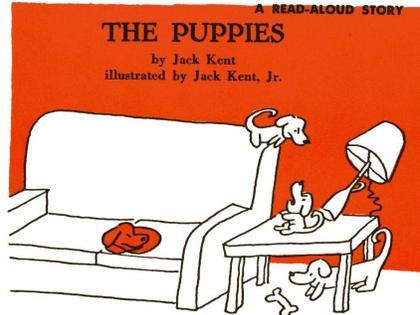
I had to do similar processes for the *Collier's* and *The New Yorker*, but those weren't quite as fun or as successful - neither one turned up any of Jack's work.

My favorite by far, though, was going through *Humpty Dumpty's Magazine for Little Children* to uncover work Jack had published there. This was even more of a challenge, because unlike the other magazines, *Humpty Dumpty's* archive is not digitized. So I took to eBay and started buying lots of the magazine from the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Eventually I was able to locate all of the work he did for the magazine, comprising 4 covers and 17 stories.



Jack actually started working in Humpty Dumpty with a story created and illustrated by Jack Jr., *Puppies*.

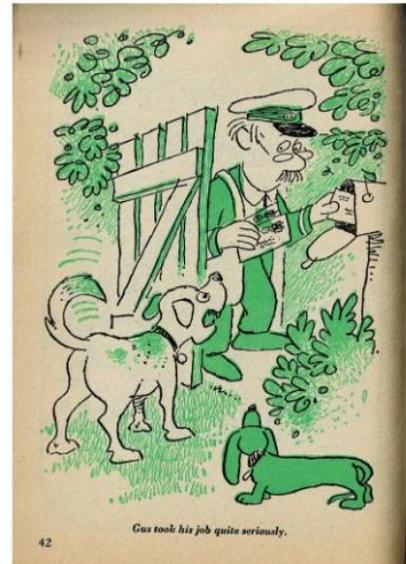
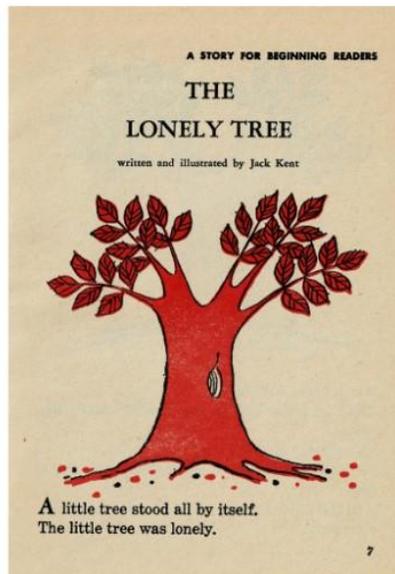
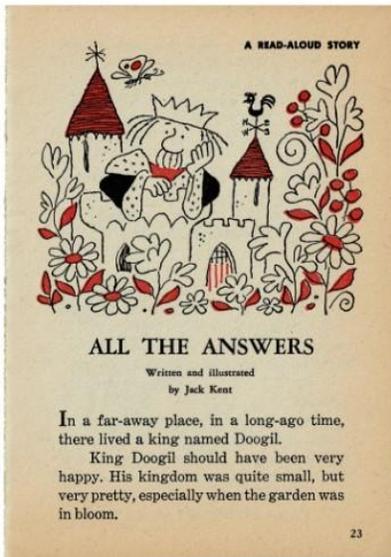


**T**HERE were puppies on the sofa,  
And puppies on the chairs,



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That was the very first work that Jack did expressly for children.



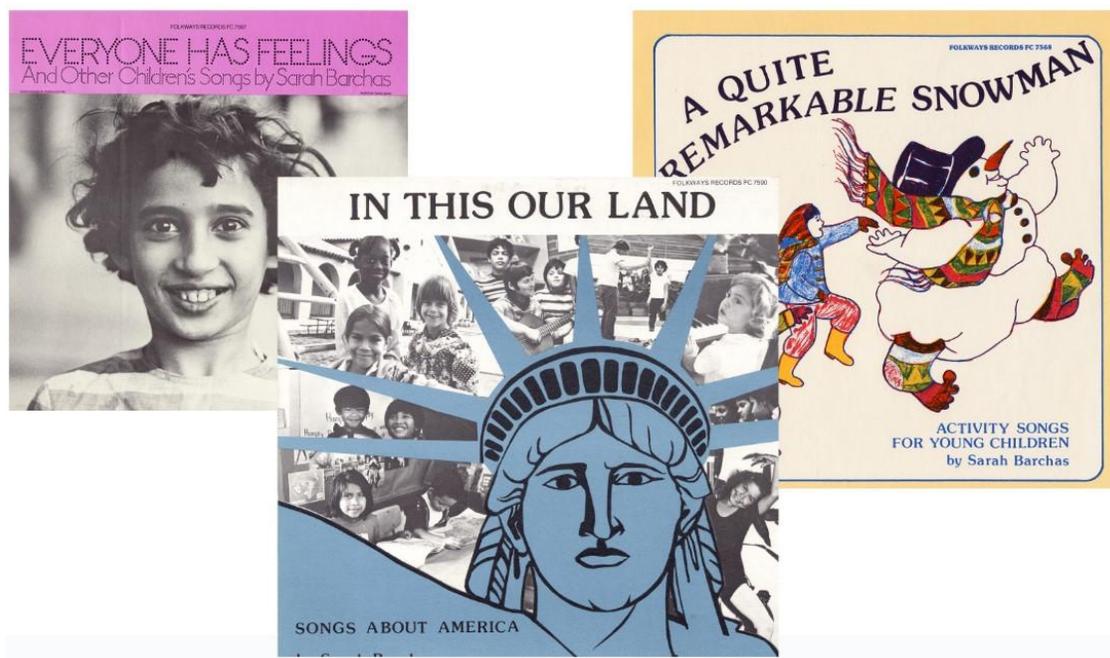
My favorites of his subsequent *Humpty Dumpty* work are “All the Answers,” “The Lonely Tree,” and “The Watchdog.” These stories illuminate different aspects of Jack’s personality and preoccupations. “All the Answers” illustrates his belief that seeking knowledge is more having knowledge. “The Lonely Tree” is about appreciating the beauty of the natural world. And “The Watchdog” is a slice of his own home life, with a punchline.

In all, I think the *Humpty Dumpty* work is a vital missing piece of Jack’s career, and I’m so happy to have been the one to shed more light on it.

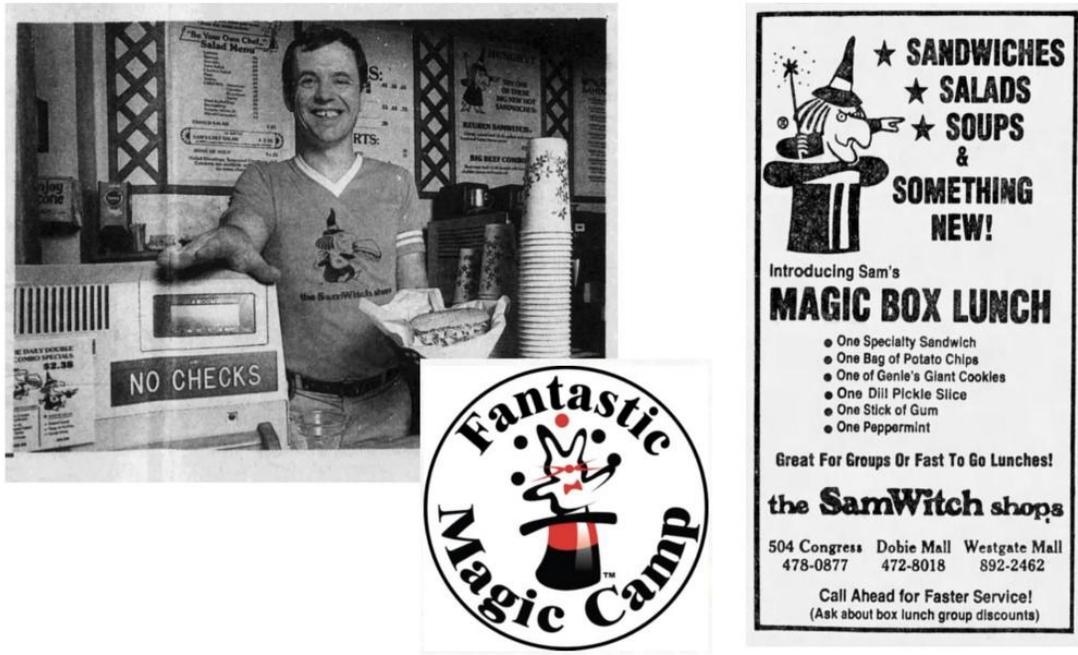
## Interviews

Interviewing is almost always nerve-wracking for me, but they’re my favorite part of the research process. Between April and July of 2020 I had the pleasure of interviewing Sarah Barchas, Craig Bridgman, Kent Cummins, and Jack Kent Jr.

The hard part for me about interviewing is that everyone is so interesting that I can have trouble staying on topic. For instance, in addition to writing two children’s books, Sarah Barahas also recorded children’s albums for the Folkways label.



And Kent Cummins, besides being Jack's nephew, owned a couple of delis that had used a Jack Kent character as a mascot. He's also an accomplished magician with a fascinating life story and list of accomplishments.

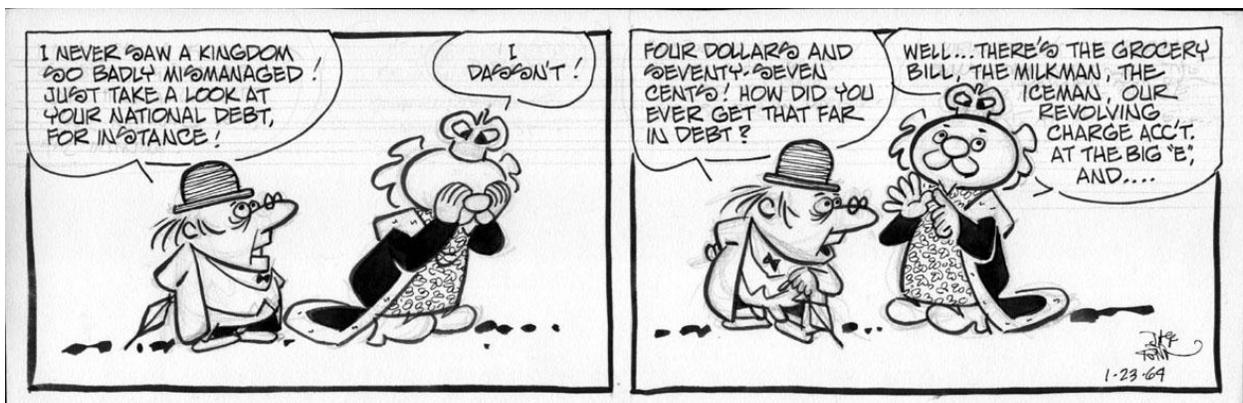


Early in 2021 I got to do a Zoom call with someone a lot of you who live in King William probably know, Naomi Shihab-Nye. It was such a joy to hear her remembrances of and appreciation for Jack both personally and professionally.



## Archival Research

Primary documents are always a big part of my process, and that looks different for every project. In this case, I spent a lot of time in newspaper archives looking for King Aroo comics. Since the IDW collections only cover the first four years of the strip, I had to find the other 11 years worth in the wild. I had help in the form of the San Francisco Academy of Comic Art Collection, located at The Ohio State University's Billy Ireland Cartoon Library and Museum, which had the last three years of the strip.



I also was able to view correspondence between Jack and editor Susan Hirschman through the Greenwillow archives at the University of Oregon.

Those latter two I was able to access remotely from home, but it wasn't until July of 2021 that I got to do archival research in person. The Kerlan Collection at the University of Minnesota was where I did most of my research for my first book, so it felt like a homecoming to go back there and look through their collection of Jack's children's book manuscripts. I'm not a particularly religious person, but there's something almost holy about holding paper that was actually touched by the person you've spent so much time thinking about and writing about. I got to see sketches and unpublished work and the actual artwork for early versions of *Just Only John*.



## Writing



In terms of writing, I did something somewhat unconventional for this book. I started writing it while I was still researching. I began my first draft in late April 2020 and had a finished draft three months later. A lot of that was down to the fact of, again, not really being able to leave the house while at the same time needing a huge mental distraction from what was going on in the world, but that was still very quick.

The book went through several subsequent revisions and reorganizations, but the bulk of the work was finished in that three-month outpouring.

## Publishing

I submitted a proposal to my editor at the University Press of Mississippi in December 2020. A month later I heard back a confirmation of their interest in the project and their desire to put it through the peer review process. This is where two experts in the field read the manuscript and give feedback on a variety of elements.

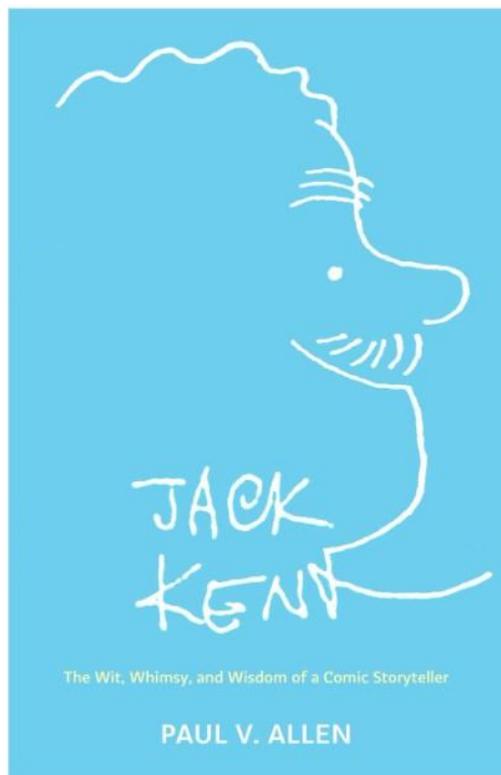


It wasn't until October 2021 that I received the reader reports. They were both generally positive, but with some constructive feedback that led to a radical revision of the second half of the book. I had initially tried to touch on every single children's book Jack wrote, and one particular reader said it was like being taken on a very fast-paced museum tour. So instead, I reorganized by the common themes in Jack's books, and I think that makes for a deeper look into the emotional center of his work.

I finished my revision in November and sent them back to my editor. It's not unusual to have to wait through the various stages of this process, but I was surprised not to hear back from my editor after a month or so.

It wasn't until April 2022 that my editor sent an e-mail asking why I hadn't returned the contract they'd sent back in December. Well, it was because they'd never actually sent it. As I told Jack Jr., it was a misunderstanding worthy of an episode in *King Aroo*.

We got it all smoothed out, and just last month I finished the final steps proofreading and numbering the citations and creating the index. The book is coming out this August, three and a half-years after I started working on it.



**Available  
This August!**

**[www.jackkentcartoonist.com](http://www.jackkentcartoonist.com)**

**[www.paulvallen.com](http://www.paulvallen.com)**

## **Conclusion**

I realize I didn't give you a whole lot about Jack himself. But aside from the reasons I gave in the beginning, it was also a bit selfish on my part. It's rare to have a forum to talk about the process behind writing a book like this, so I hope you'll forgive my indulgence.

I'd like to add that in addition to the joy I got from researching and writing Jack's story, I was also greatly inspired by him. For the first time in over 20 years I have picked back up writing fiction for children. If what I turn out is even half as funny and wise and genuine as Jack's work, I'll be lucky.

Thank you for having me here today.