

Finding Ezra Jack Keats

In Search of a Children's Book Icon

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On a mission, I entered the Ezra Jack Keats archives in the de Grummond Children's Literature Collection at the University of Southern Mississippi (USM) in early 2011.

Chosen by the Keats Foundation Executive Director Deborah Pope and the de Grummond Curator Ellen Ruffin to do research for things to include in Viking's fiftieth anniversary edition of Keats' iconic *The Snowy Day*, I searched for items that would be meaningful for an extra eight-page supplement. Soon I found myself yearning to have had the information I was finding when I had taught Keats' books in kindergarten and second grade. So much of his childhood and life presaged the stories he would tell and the art he would create in his picture books. On a deadline, I could not dwell on those treasures. I determined to come back and write a biography for those who still teach and read his classic books.

I returned to de Grummond immediately after I finalized the anniversary project and started with the six archival boxes containing drafts of Keats' unfinished autobiography. Each box contained several drafts of different chapters of his manuscript with the final one on top, dated 1982.

Since his death came in May 1983, I concluded that it was still a work in progress. He told his own stories as he must have told them as a raconteur at a dinner party. Frequently, one story led to another until the chronology got lost. He rearranged and deleted items from one draft to another as writers will do, so I read each draft to be sure I didn't miss a nugget. In one set, he gave all his people fictitious names, but he gave up on that. These drafts gave me a nice framework for starting.

This autobiography, sketches and original art, and memorabilia that ranged from his childhood through his successful career



A watercolor produced during a year in Paris when Jack was adrift after World War II. Ezra Jack Keats Papers, DG0001, Box 141, Folder 16, de Grummond Children's Literature Collection, Special Collections, The University of Southern Mississippi Libraries. Used by permission.

as children's book author and illustrator filled approximately one-hundred-eighty archival boxes. Items ranged from the sentimental to the comical. There were baby shoes, lifelong newspaper clippings, original art, and his friend's gift of Caldecott underwear.

Two large file folder boxes of correspondence held material including a letter from the author Langston Hughes wishing he had grandchildren to whom he could give *The Snowy Day*; a valentine from his current love; business correspondence; responses to Nancy Larrick's criticism in "The All-White World of Children's Books" in *The Saturday Review*; and letters to his niece Bonnie from his dog Jack. The special collections crew at the McCain Library of USM, which houses the de Grummond Collection, saved my chosen work table and kept me supplied with requested material as I put all this information into my computer.

Then I came home to write. This wealth of information needed order, and I began to put it together much like working a jigsaw puzzle. The Keats archives formed the frame and obvious inclusions, but there were omitted sections and tiny missing pieces



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that sent me to additional sources for clarification or completion. Some answers were straight forward and came from logical places. Others were serendipitous and unexpected.

For instance, Keats gave a vivid picture of discovering the Arlington Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library, but the image of the inside was unclear. My husband and I had one free afternoon when we went to New York City for the opening of the Keats exhibit at The Jewish Museum. We took the subway to the library and found that tiny missing piece that fit exactly. My photographer granddaughter, based in Brooklyn, took photographs for the book so readers can see it as well.

At a Society of Children’s Book Writers and Illustrators (SCBWI) conference in Los Angeles, I heard illustrator Bryan Collier begin his keynote by telling about his own childhood when he found Peter, a boy who looked like himself, in the book his mother brought home from the Head Start classes she taught. Probably the two forty-five-minute phone conversations I had with Keats’ lifelong friends, Martin and Lillie Pope, and the friendship I formed with Deborah Pope as she attended the yearly Kaigler Book Festival became my most enjoyable research as they filled in personal recollections. More resource locations, both expected and unusual, are listed in the bibliography and the source notes section of *Becoming Ezra Jack Keats*. &

The Tale of Keats and the Locked Library

Excerpted from Becoming Ezra Jack Keats by Virginia McGee Butler (University Press of Mississippi, 2023); reprinted with permission of the author and publisher.

In his speeches to various groups and in magazine articles, his personal story came to the forefront. He decided that maybe a publisher would be interested in his autobiography.

Herman Gollob, editor at Atheneum Publishers, responded to this suggestion in a letter dated May 17, 1974:

Dear Mr. Keats,

Those autobiographical fragments you gave me the other day were moving, disturbing, and evocative. Could I see more of the manuscript, or could you at least give me a notion of what you see as the general shape of the book?

*Sincerely,
Herman Gollob*

There are no other letters with the editor in his files, but an encouraged Ezra began to write and shared his hope of getting the book published. His autobiography is mentioned in a November 1976 letter from Mrs. Takako Nishinoya, editor at the Kaisei-Sha Publishing Company, “Mrs. Ishitake who has returned from your country had told me that you are now starting for your biography which pleased me very much.”

In a January 2, 1981, letter, Beverly Hall, who took the photographs of him over the years and for his selections in *Night*, reflected on fifteen years of memorabilia, including the most intimate: an x-ray of his ankle. Evidently responding to a request related to the autobiography he was attempting, she stressed this would be the most important work he could do this year and volunteered to contribute if he needed someone else’s opinion of him.

Early chapters of the autobiography were hard to write, bringing memories drawn from eavesdropping on his parents’ arguments, vignettes at family gatherings, and overheard conversations in his community of immigrants.

One night, Ezra began to write an account of a more pleasant but well-remembered incident, relishing every detail of the exciting turning point when he was in junior high school and discovered the Arlington Branch Public Library. He saw himself wandering out of his tenement neighborhood in Brooklyn into other streets with fancy houses and ancient trees and discovering the library at the end of his stroll, nestled in the midst of this elite community with people going in and out. He wanted to see it again to be sure his narrative was right.

Questions from the night’s writing about discovering the library inundated his mind and brought him fully awake early the next morning. “Would that library still be there? Would those same houses and overhanging trees still surround it? Would it still have those special steps inside leading up to the art books? Would the long tables be there where he had spread the books to study technique and teach himself to paint?”

The clock said 4:00 AM, much too early to go in search of answers. Daylight came slowly until, finally, he decided the library must be open. Taking the trek down the familiar street, he passed the houses, a bit more worn and not as elaborate as he remembered, until there it was, shadowed by the old trees: the Arlington Branch of the Brooklyn Public Library. Apparently, Ezra had not waited long enough, for the library remained locked. He banged on the door to get attention until someone inside motioned to him and mouthed, “We’re not open yet.”

Ezra’s lifetime dream started in this red brick building with its stone masonry trim, but so much had changed.

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His children's books had won awards and been published in sixteen languages. He had traveled the world, but now he really must see inside. Would they still have his old beloved art books? Better yet, would his own books be there?

Taking the trip back to see if his memory was accurate, he was in no mood to be denied entrance. When Ezra saw the librarian signal, "We're closed," he only knocked harder. Finally, she opened a crack in the door. Ezra explained that he was writing about the library, and he needed to see inside.

The librarian let him in. As he looked around, he felt like he was fourteen years old again with the same shelves, the same books, and the same electric fans. He recognized the windows with trees pressing against them as if they were reaching out to grab him.

Ezra saw the familiar stairway with its "Reference Room" riser. Walking up softly, he came to the loft room on one side with the long tables where he had spread the big art books that he couldn't take home. How simple it had

seemed to decide that he would become an artist.

Ezra returned to the main floor and crossed to the other side of the library. Another staircase that he didn't remember led to a different loft room. Its riser said, "Children's Room." Maybe by the time he'd discovered the library, he had thought he was too old for these books. Or could it be he had not noticed because no one in his childhood neighborhood knew much about children's books?

Walking up the steps, he thought about his own books. "Would they be there?" He hurried and found the shelves with all his friends—Peter, Louie, Amy, Willie, Clementine, and Archie. Ezra gazed in wonder. He believed his life journey began with the staircase to the art in the reference room and now had circled back to the other staircase with his books featured in the children's room. He was sure the boy Jacob Ezra Katz would have been amazed at the long and winding pathway that had led him to become author Ezra Jack Keats.

Perhaps Ezra hoped that the example of his own journey from poverty to a satisfying and influential career would be inspirational. Whatever his motivation, his premature death left the autobiography unfinished.

From Jacob to Jack, Katz to Keats

The baby born on March 11, 1916, was named Jacob Ezra Katz. That name sometimes brought confusion during his lifetime and afterwards.

My first struggle with what to call the author came long before I wrote *Becoming Ezra Jack Keats*. My article about Keats, "Celebrate Variety," had been accepted by *Highlights for Children*, but editor Kim Griswell had a question.

"Some of the documentation you sent called him 'Ezra' and some called him 'Jack.' Which is it?"

I checked with de Grummond curator Dee Jones, and she showed me Brian Alderson's book *Ezra Jack Keats: Artist and Picture-Book Maker* (Pelican, 1994) that begins, "Ezra Jack Keats, always called Jack."

Jeannine Laughlin-Porter, who had been the Kaigler Book Festival director the year Keats won the University of Southern Mississippi's medallion for his body of work, said, "Oh, we always called him Jack."

I thought I had found my answer until Deborah Pope, daughter of Keats' lifelong friends Martin and Lillie, ar-

rived for the next Kaigler Festival. "He was always Ezra," she said.

The issue would raise its head again with my manuscript readers for the University Press of Mississippi, but I had figured out the answer by this time. He had always been called Ezra at home, but he entered school as Jacob Ezra Katz. Schools as institutions used his first given name of Jacob that was quickly shortened to Jack.

As if his first name was not problem enough, he ran into a different difficulty with his last name. After service in the Army during World War II, he returned to Brooklyn from Tampa and pounded the pavement looking for work. Businesses often had signs, "No Jews hired here." He had his name changed to Ezra Jack Keats, in face of that anti-Semitism, to a name with a less Jewish sound.

He would waffle between the two names for the rest of his life with those introduced to him in familial surroundings most often using "Ezra" and those who met him professionally using "Jack." Ultimately, the name he made for himself as Ezra Jack Keats is immediately recognizable in the children's book world and beyond.