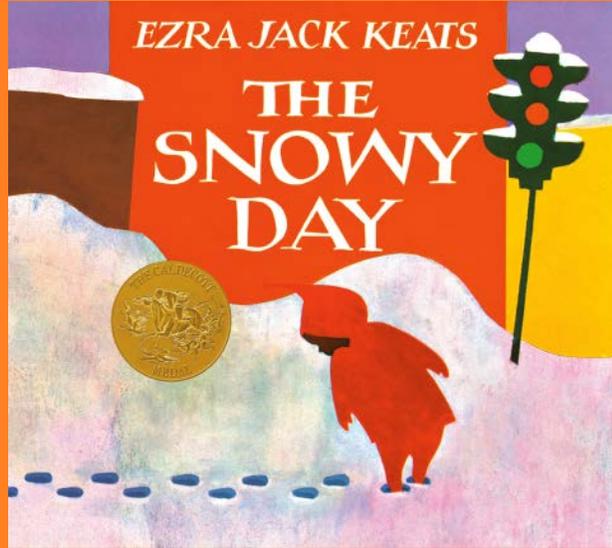


# Ezra Jack Keats

A Life Creating Books for Children



Ezra at his easel; and his most famous picture book

Ezra Jack Keats was an award-winning author and illustrator of books for children. He is best known for *The Snowy Day*, about a little boy playing in the snow.

Many of Ezra's stories are about a group of friends growing up in the city. The neighborhood they live in looks like the streets where Ezra grew up in Brooklyn, New York.





## Ezra's Youth

Ezra Jack Keats was born in 1916, to Jewish parents who had emigrated from Poland. Benjamin and Augusta Katz named their son Jacob Ezra, and he was known as Jack. He had an older brother named Willie and a sister named Mae.

Even when he was very young, Ezra loved to draw and paint. He drew all over the kitchen table and on wood he found in the street. When he was 8 years old, Ezra was paid 25 cents to paint a sign for a local store. His father thought he might be a sign painter when he grew up, but Ezra was more interested in painting pictures. In junior high, he won a medal for drawing, which he treasured his whole life. He won a national student contest in high school with an oil painting of out-of-work men around a fire.



From top left: Ezra's father, mother, sister and brother, and baby Ezra; and Ezra, at 13



The artist at 16; and his painting "Shantytown"

## Hard Times

This was during the Great Depression, in the 1930s, a time when many people were out of work in America and around the world. Even with Benjamin's job as a waiter, the Katz family was very poor. Ezra's mother, Gussie, was proud of his talent, but his father wanted him to choose a more practical career. Benjamin worried that Ezra would never be able to make a living as an artist. Even so, Benjamin brought home paints for Ezra, pretending that starving artists had traded them for food.

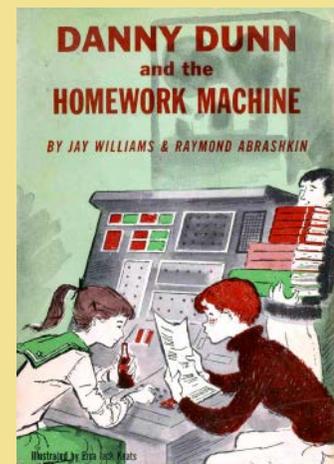
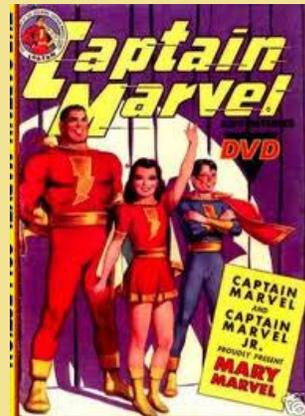
Days before Ezra's high school graduation, in 1935, his father died suddenly of a heart attack. Ezra found cut-out newspaper articles about his awards in his father's wallet. He discovered that Benjamin had secretly rooted for him, after all.

## Ezra's Early Career

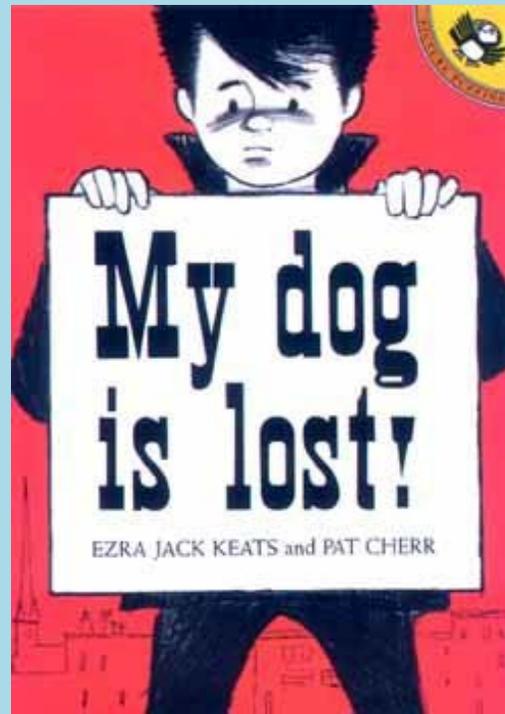
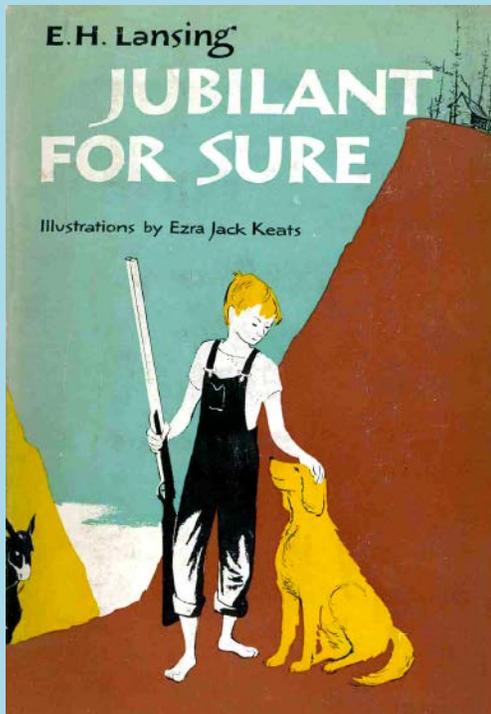
After Benjamin's death, Ezra had to go to work to help support his mother. In 1937 Ezra found a job painting murals for the Works Progress Administration, one of the programs created by the federal government to put people to work during the Depression. Later he got a job drawing the backgrounds for Captain Marvel comics. The Depression ended after World War II began in Europe in 1939. America joined the fight in 1941. When Ezra went into the Army, in 1943, his artistic training was put use designing camouflage patterns for uniforms and equipment.

The war ended in 1945, and Ezra came back to New York to look for work. Ezra had faced antisemitism—prejudice against Jews—all his life. He knew he was more likely to be hired if his name sounded “more American.” In 1947 he changed his name legally, from Jacob Ezra Katz to Ezra Jack Keats.

Ezra had dreamed of studying painting in France, where so much great art had been created. He spent half of 1947 in France, painting and traveling. When he returned, Ezra began working as a commercial artist and teaching classes in illustration. Back then, illustrations were widely used on the covers of books and magazines, the way photographs are today. Ezra's work appeared in advertisements, national magazines and newspapers, and popular books.



From top: Ezra in uniform, and at work;  
a Marvel comic book, and a popular  
book illustrated by Ezra



The first children's book illustrated by Ezra; and the first book he co-wrote and illustrated

## A Life in Children's Books

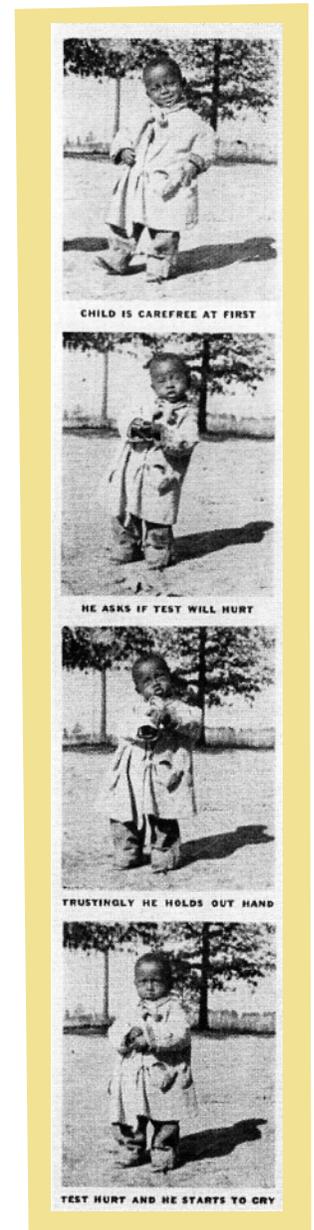
One day, a publisher spotted a book cover by Ezra in a store window. She liked his work so much she asked him to illustrate children's books for her company. His first book, *Jubilant for Sure*, was published in 1954. Since the story was set in the Kentucky hill country, Ezra took a trip to the Smoky Mountains to sketch so his illustrations would look realistic. Afterward, he was hired to illustrate many children's books. Without meaning to, Ezra had found his new career.

In 1960 Ezra co-wrote a children's book, *My Dog Is Lost!*, which tells the story of Juanito, a boy who had just moved to New York City from Puerto Rico. Searching for his lost dog, he meets children from Chinatown, Harlem and Little Italy. From the start, Ezra wrote about a diverse group of children.



## The Snowy Day

Two years later, Ezra wrote and illustrated his own book. *The Snowy Day* featured a young African-American boy named Peter. Ezra based the character of Peter on a series of photos he had cut out of *Life* magazine in the early 1940s. Ezra had noticed that the main characters in the books he illustrated were always white. That didn't seem fair to other children, who deserved to see characters in books that looked like them. He decided that Peter would be the hero of his story because "he should have been there all along." *The Snowy Day* was awarded the Caldecott Medal in 1963. It was the greatest honor given for picture books at the time.



Top, bottom: Scenes from *The Snowy Day*.  
 Right: An early inspiration for Peter, from *Life* magazine.

## The Children of Keats's Neighborhood

For *The Snowy Day*, Ezra created beautiful collages with patterned wallpaper, fabric, stamps, ink, oilcloth and more. He used his skills with color, drawing and painting to make all his stories come alive.

Most of Ezra's books feature Peter and his friends having fun, having problems and having adventures. The children are bright and active, and their families warm and caring, even though they live in a rough and run-down neighborhood. These "neighborhood books" include *Whistle for Willie*, *Goggles!* and *Regards to the Man in the Moon*. Ezra also loved animals and produced funny, colorful books about them. All told, he wrote 22 picture books and illustrated more than 85 books for children.



Top row: Scenes from *Goggles!*, *Pet Show!*  
Bottom row: Scenes from *Regards to the Man in the Moon*, *Whistle for Willie*, *Hi, Cat!*

## Honors Great & Small

Winning the Caldecott prize for *The Snowy Day* made Ezra famous. Many of his books received awards, such as *Goggles!*, a Caldecott Honor Book. In 1965 he was the first artist invited to design a set of greeting cards for UNICEF, the esteemed children's health and human rights organization. In the 1970s, he appeared on the celebrated children's show "Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood" four times! A public school in Brooklyn, a library reading room in Ohio and a roller-skating rink in Japan were all named in his honor. Portland, Oregon, declared an Ezra Jack Keats Day, and Ezra rode in the parade!

Over the years, Ezra traveled around the country to visit schools and teach children about illustration. He believed that a love of reading and art helped him survive growing up, and he wanted to offer younger children the same opportunity. Even after he died in 1983, at the age of 67, Ezra was still being honored. A statue of Peter and his dog, Willie, stands in Brooklyn's Prospect Park, and in the summer children gather around the figures to listen to stories. It is a fitting tribute to a master artist and his wonderful books.

From top: Ezra visiting a class, and being honored with a parade; a statue of Peter and Willie in Prospect Park, Brooklyn; Ezra accepting the Caldecott Medal, and with a poster he designed for UNICEF

