

A New Look at Jackie O: Children's Book Author

Ronni Diamondstein

by PJ McIlvaine

Ronni Diamondstein is a children's book author, journalist, award-winning photographer, and retired school library media and teacher. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *WAG Magazine*, *Inside Chappaqua magazine*, *U.S.A. Trade Today*, *Window on the Netherlands*, *EuroHolland Magazine*, and *Women's News*. Her debut picture book, *Jackie and the Books She Loved* (Sky Pony, November 2023) with art by Bats Langley, is an evocative and whimsical biography of Jackie Bouvier Kennedy, one of our nation's most famous and beloved First Ladies. Ronni lives in Chappaqua, New York with her toy poodle, Maggie Mae, a celebrity in her own right with whom Ronni gladly shares the spotlight.

PJ McILVAINE: There have been numerous books about the life of First Lady Jackie Bouvier Kennedy, widow of President John F. Kennedy. But where did the impetus/inspiration come from for focusing on her love of books? What did you admire about her or find fascinating? Did you ever meet her? Did you have to get permission of any kind from her surviving family for the project?

RONNI DIAMONDSTEIN: I was eight years old when John F. Kennedy was inaugurated. I remember Jackie, especially how she led the country in mourning her husband. I was always interested in her style and admired her for becoming a book editor. After she passed away, I had an idea for a novel about her and started researching her and talking to people who knew her. When I talked to Margot Datz, the illustrator of Carly Simon's children's books that Jackie edited, she suggested I write a children's book. I first wrote a long chapter book

that got no traction and then about five years ago I thought a book about how reading and writing were a thread through her life would make an engaging story about this inspiring First Lady.

"Sea Joy," a poem Jackie wrote when she was 10 years old, is included in the story and I needed permission from her daughter Ambassador Caroline Kennedy. I thought it would take a long time to hear from her, but within two days I did. That she was happy to give me permission brought tears to my eyes, and I knew then that I was meant to write this book.

PM: Jackie O, as she was also known after her marriage to Aristotle Onassis, a rich Greek-Argentine shipping tycoon, started working as a book editor a few months after his death. Most people assumed she was a wealthy widow of leisure who didn't need to work, but that wasn't exactly the case. Is there anything you learned during your research that surprised you about Jackie? What did you enjoy most about the book, the research, or the writing phase? Did you consider her a controversial figure?

RD: I wouldn't say I was surprised by anything when I was researching the book, but I was happy to see that Jackie went back to work to be productive. I learned that she didn't expect special privileges because of who she was. She always put the author first. They were the stars and she stayed in the background. I have to say that I enjoyed the research very much—I'm a librarian!—and the writing can be painful but in the end when everything comes together it's very rewarding.



Photo credit: Randi Childs Photography

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You asked if I consider Jackie a controversial figure, but I never saw her as one. Some people questioned how she could be an editor but if they only knew what a voracious and well-read reader she was, they wouldn't question that at all.

PM: As First Lady, Jackie was gracious, kind, and dignified, even in the face of unfathomable tragedy. How did being First Lady and all that job entails (and it is a job) help in the transition to being a gainfully employed book editor?

RD: As I said Jackie was very well-read which is a great qualification to edit books. As the First Lady she created the *White House Guidebook*, which she also edited. When her husband, then-Senator Kennedy was running for President she wrote a weekly newspaper column, *Campaign Wife*. And she helped her husband do research for his Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Profiles in Courage*.

PM: As an editor, Jackie worked on over a hundred books. Which book was she most proud of? How easy was she to work with?

RD: I have no idea which book Jackie was most proud of, but I do know the first book she edited, *Remember the Ladies: Women in America 1750-1815* was about women, and she edited books by many female authors and addressed women's contributions to history.

Jackie once said, "What I like about being an editor is that it expands your knowledge and heightens your discrimination. Each book takes you down another path. Hopefully, some of them move people and some of them do some good."

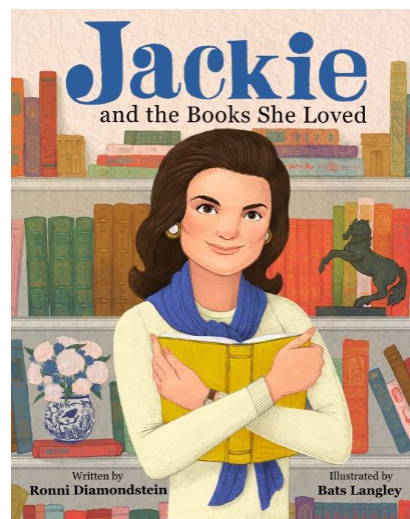
Jackie made her authors feel special. She thought there was nothing more important than books and she revered the creators. Peter Sís, the author of *The Three Golden Keys*, one of the last books Jackie worked on, told me that she never got enough credit as a muse and book editor. She was a dedicated career woman.

Jackie edited nearly 100 books and has left behind

an impressive legacy of books.

PM: How do you think Jackie would like to be remembered? What's her enduring legacy? How can her life inspire young readers?

RD: I believe that Jackie knew her place in history. However, as I said, she left behind an impressive legacy of books, but I think she was probably most proud of her children, Caroline and John Jr, and would want to be remembered as a good mother. She once said, "If you bungle raising your children, I don't think whatever else you do matters very much." Some people might take issue with that, but you could tell how she encouraged her children to read, and that being a good mother was her priority.



I hope that young readers will be inspired to read and write. This book is about how important reading and books were to her and how they can shape someone's life. Even though it is written for ages 4-8, I believe older children and adults will appreciate the story. Jackie once said, "There are many ways to enlarge your child's world. Love of books is the best of all." It's something I spent my whole career doing as a school library media specialist.

PM: Have you always wanted to be a writer? What was the first thing you ever wrote? What was your favorite author as a child?

RD: I have been writing for as long as I can remember, so I suppose I always wanted to be a writer. I wrote poems as a child, wrote and illustrated stories, and I won an essay contest in Hebrew School when I was eight years old. I always found writing opportunities for myself. When I was in college, I took a children's literature course and for my final project, I wrote and illustrated a picture book. I don't think I had a favorite author as a child. I loved books and read a lot. I want to recommend a book that I love that I think adults as well as children should read by William Steig, *Dominic*. And probably I would put him in the category as one of my very favorite authors. I loved every book he wrote.

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PM: From the first draft to publication, how long did the book take? How many drafts did you write? Did you outline it? Did anything about the process surprise you? Did you have any input into the illustrations?

RD: If you don't count the twenty-five years of researching and reading about Jackie, I would say four years since I got the idea for the picture book, *Jackie and the Books She Loved* and then signed a contract. I wrote dozens of drafts. I didn't really outline it per se, but I mapped out the story. I worked very well with my editor Nicole Frail and was happy to have a say in the choice of the illustrator, Bats Langley. And I had a lot of input for the illustrations and reviewed them regularly. I have quite an extensive collection of books about Jackie and the Kennedys with great photographs that I shared with Bats. For example, the horse statue on the cover is just like the statue Jackie had on her piano in her New York apartment. It was a marvelous collaboration!

PM: You're also the proud owner of Maggie Mae, a famous dog reporter. How did that happen? Do you sometimes feel that your dog is more famous than you? (Yes, I have my own pampered pooch).

RD: As many of my great ideas come, I thought of the idea of a column while walking Maggie Mae. In 2013, I pitched the idea of Maggie Mae Pup Reporter to the publisher of *Inside Chappaqua* magazine Grace Bennett whom I was writing for, and she thought it was worth a try. Maggie Mae had a column for many years and has written some guest essays more recently. Two of her favorite interviews were with author Jean Craighead George who lived in our town, and an exotic pet veterinarian where she came face to face with a parrot. Maggie Mae has a page on my website and a blog. More people know Maggie Mae's name than they know mine and I am more than fine with that!

PM: You have an agent now, but what were the query trenches like? How long did it take you to find an agent?

RD: For several years I queried agents I knew personally and had no luck. However, I can thank social media and a fundraiser. My agents are Lary Rosenblatt and Barbara Stewart of 22MediaWorks. Many years ago, I met Barbara at a breast cancer fundraiser in Chappaqua and we became Facebook friends. I didn't know at the time that 22MediaWorks repped authors. In February 2021, Barbara posted about a book that was coming out by an author they represented. I contacted her, sent several manuscripts, had a conference call with Larry and Barbara, and signed with them within a week.

PM: What are you currently working on? Do you have a pet project?

RD: I am working on both fiction and nonfiction picture books now in addition to the articles I write for a local magazine. I love working on picture book biographies. I like interviewing people and enjoy discovering what makes people tick and then being able to tell their story in a unique way. The research process is so rewarding. And I can't tell you how many people have said I should write stories about my dog Maggie Mae, the Pup Reporter, so you might call that my "pet project!"

PM: In addition to writing, you're also an avid photographer. Of all the photos you've taken, which one was the most difficult or challenging? Which photo are you most proud of or showed you something that you hadn't expected? Have you considered blending your love of photography and writing?

RD: *Heavenly Leaves*, a prize winner in 2006 is very special to me, as is *Gedney Geese* that won the Westchester Women's Club Beaux Arts Finale First Prize. I love the tranquility of *Gedney Goose* which

Little Jackie Bouvier learned to read at an early age. She kept her books in a pair of bookcases that her mother had given her for Christmas. She started a library of her own—with many about ballet!—and filled the shelves in no time.



Sometimes when Jackie was supposed to be napping she would spend time in the guest room, where the grown-up books were kept, and sit on the window sill reading.

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you can find on the homepage of my website: ronnidiamondstein.com

And I love my flower and nature photographs a lot, especially peonies. But I must admit that the photos I take of Maggie Mae are my very favorites!

I do have some ideas about blending my love of photography with writing and friends have suggested I do that.

PM: In the past, you've been heavily involved with the children's Chappaqua Book Festival. How did that come about?

RD: The Chappaqua Children's Book Festival was started in 2013 by Dawn Greenberg. As a school librarian, it was the perfect thing for me to get involved with. I handled author relations and became a board member for several years. Even after I left the board, I still helped with social media. One year, I moderated a panel of authors. Since I live in Chappaqua and was so involved I was thrilled to be invited.

PM: Which Vice-President of the United States did you interview?

RD: I interviewed Vice President Walter Mondale in the Netherlands for a very small business newsletter.

PM: Since I'm also known as a brownie baker/maven, do you have a go-to recipe you can share?

RD: My recipe for brownies is a secret, but a good one to try is the recipe in *The Silver Palate Cookbook*.

Silver Palate Brownies

Ingredients:

1/2 pound (2 sticks) sweet butter

4 ounces unsweetened chocolate

4 eggs

2 cups granulated sugar

1/2 cup unbleached all-purpose flour

1 teaspoon vanilla extract

2/3 cup shelled walnuts, coarsely chopped

Directions:

Preheat oven to 350 degrees F. Grease and flour a 9 x 12 inch baking pan.

Melt butter and chocolate in the top part of a double boiler over boiling water. When melted, set aside to cool to room temperature.

Meanwhile, beat eggs and sugar until thick and lemon-colored; add vanilla. Fold chocolate mixture into eggs and sugar. Mix thoroughly.

Sift flour and fold gently into batter, mixing just until blended. Fold in walnuts.

Pour into the prepared pan. Bake for 25 minutes, or until center is just set. Do not overbake.

Allow brownies to cool in pan for 30 minutes before cutting into bars.

Makes 28 large brownies.

The Silver Palate Cookbook, Julee Rosso & Sheila Lukins, Workman Publishing Company, 1982