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JACQUELINE DECKER



Creature Comforts

STORY BY LINDA KRAMER
ARTWORK COURTESY JACQUELINE DECKER
PHOTOGRAPHY BY STACY BASS

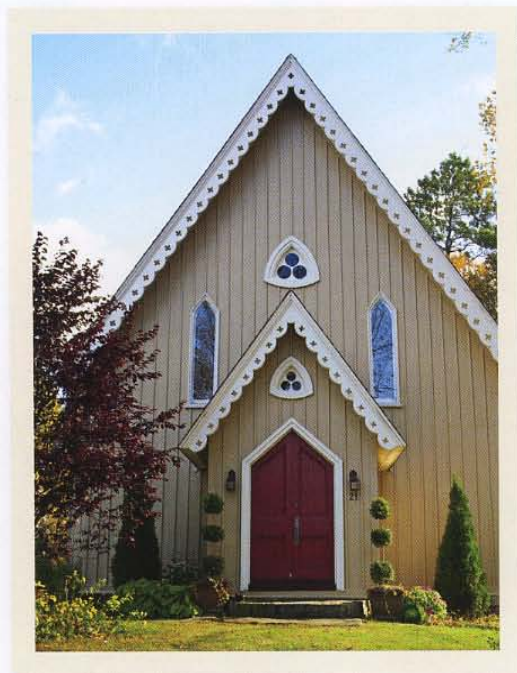


Once upon a time, Jacqueline Decker's days were filled with fanciful animals living in the backyard of her imagination. An only child, she spent her time constructing toad homes, taming squirrels, and designing outfits for rodents, unaware that this world of dramatic creatures would be resurrected years later as the basis for her career as a children's book illustrator. Jackie's illustrations provide a peek into her childhood world where, encouraged by parents and a grandmother who cherished imagination, education, and hard work, her desire to become an artist was shaped.

Captivatingly sweet and disarmingly innocent, Jacqueline's storybook creatures have been her companions since childhood. She once inhabited their world; now they live in hers, including a busy bee, who stops to converse with an earthworm, and a soft-eyed brown bear crowned with Jackie's favorite roses.

Her mother was the believer who knew absolutely that toads understood English. Her father stressed the importance of “doing windows,” which was his way of teaching responsibility, a lesson Jackie applied as she entered the illustration world and worked assiduously to develop and cultivate her unfolding career. Her grandmother, who lived in a house with secret passages, regaled Jackie with stories of her girlhood, and made weekly trips to Waterbury, Connecticut, always returning with a book, including the Little Bear series, which, Jackie says “still influences my work today, as do the illustrations of Maurice Sendak.” Jackie also spent hours in the world of Beatrix Potter, following the exploits of Peter Rabbit and Squirrel Nutkin, and Potter became the ultimate benchmark against which Jackie would measure her work, aspiring to create through her own illustrations this same type of intimate glimpse into a fanciful animal world.

At first, Jackie applied her talents in the corporate world, and for more than ten years, she designed and produced award-winning software, on-line games, and videos for the children’s



Jacqueline (opposite) not only returns to her childhood in her work, she now lives in the church she attended as a young girl. During its transformation into her storybook home, its pews became door trim, the fireplace mantle, and kitchen cabinets, with other old churches and an old schoolhouse providing additional architectural elements.

tension and a smooth transition to producing her own brand. Her internet licensing business, Jacqueline Decker Designs, will launch this spring. Basically, licensing involves leasing out artwork based on specific core images that can be applied to products in a variety of ways. To that end, Jackie has created a whimsical product line of illustrated images that combines her love of animals, insects, botanical elements, and decorative patterns that mirror her childhood imaginings.

One series is based on the four seasons, playfully represented by a spring rabbit, a summer pig, a fall fox, and a winter

market. As an executive producer for Vivendi Universal Games and VP of Production for Left Brains Games, Inc., she worked with high profile clients, including Mattel, Fisher-Price, and Universal Studios.

Driven by the desire to be at home with her son, Graham—now in second grade and at her side through every book and deadline; he even has his own art table next to hers—Jackie jumped into the licensing world. Her past success in imparting information to others through visual means allowed for a natural ex-





bear. Her themed collections include Halloween, Get Well, Cowgirl, and Rustic. Her instructional website shows how the images can be coordinated and applied to products such as paper goods, giftware, textiles, décor, collectibles, clothing, china, kitchenware, and whatever else one can imagine. The licensing market allows Jackie to steer her own creative course. “My brand is about my home and work,” she says. “One drives the other, as my work is the product of the environment I live in. The line between the two is fuzzy. One cannot exist without

the other, and both tell a story.”

Indeed, Jackie’s imagination is as much apparent in her home as it is in the work she creates there. In the quiet village of Litchfield, Connecticut, sits the historic Trinity Episcopal Church. Built in 1865, it ceased to function as a church in 1989, when the membership had dwindled to fifteen. Bats and squirrels took over for the next seven years, but in 1996, Jackie bought the church she attended as a child with the vision of making it her home. At first, it was one big room that looked to



the altar. With the help of her father, an architect, she designed a 2,300-square-foot two-bedroom residence that cleverly maintained the integrity of the original structure.

The home is a study in salvage and preservation. The stairwell railing is from an old schoolhouse, the fireplace mantle, kitchen cabinets, and door trim were crafted from church pews left behind, and the exterior cloverleaf design is carefully duplicated on the interior, where the worn, original beams look down from a thirty-two-foot high ceiling that Jackie painted herself!

The space where the parish priest once donned his robes before Sunday service is now the back porch, and the faux-painted kitchen, where the original altar stood, is hugged by vintage bead board and cupboards detailed with antique glass from another old church. The second floor is accessed through the dining room by a stairway that leads to the master bedroom—originally part of the altar space. The small choir loft, rotted when Jackie bought the church, has been converted, by way of a catwalk, into an office. Many remnants and abandoned relics

"I love living in the same village where I grew up and in the church I attended as a child with my family. My childhood is never far away."

from the church remained and were recycled as decorative touches. A bishop's red velvet chair, a lighted bible stand, hymn book holders, and the original hymnals, left behind and found on the floor stacked in tumbling piles, are combined with a curator's eye to create extraordinary rooms that make daily living magical. Some of the home's decorative motifs, such as the clover-leaf trim, the hand-painted kitchen tiles, and the stained glass windows, become elements in her illustrations.

By 1999, the home was shaping up both as a structure and as a personal statement, and Jackie, with fiancé Mike, a sales manager for a wine import and distribution company, moved in. A few months later, they were married in what had become the living room. When the conversion was done, the Bishop came from the Hartford archdiocese to deconsecrate the church through a prayer ritual that declared it no longer a holy space. Jackie burned sage in all the rooms to dispel the leftover spirits that could still be heard making noises that sounded like change dropping, perhaps in the offering plate.

"I love living in the same village where I grew up and in the church I attended as a child with my family," Jackie reflects. "My



Jacqueline's son, *Graham* (opposite), has pursued his own projects alongside his mother since she left the corporate world to work at home. Her home's religious roots are resurrected in the stained glass window filtering light above her desk.

childhood is never far away. It's waiting just under a pine bough or behind a stone wall. I still visit my old hideouts under trees and atop boulders to conjure up my childhood imagination and capture it through illustration." Jackie often returns to her first love, book illustration. She recently finished *Froggy Went a-Courtin'*, one in a new book series from the Smithsonian Institution celebrating our country's musical heritage.

As for future projects, she is busy working on a group of plant, vegetable, and bug images and creating shoes, hats, and furniture for a new insect world while she works out the details of the characters' lives for a possible children's book series. For Jackie, this connection to her storybook imagination and childhood village is a constant influence on her art. A hunt through her flower gardens may be reflected in the bleeding hearts and branches of birch that frame a baby rabbit. A brown bear may wear a crown of her favorite roses, and images of her great-grandmother's quilts, glass jars, and teacups turn up as decorations for a mole's house. We select the lens through which we see reality, and art is the means Jackie has chosen to make sense of her reality—Jackie's once-upon-a-time world has become her life. ☺

