

# • Meet the Author •

## Maryann Cocca-Leffler

Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com)).



Maryann Cocca-Leffler grew up in the Boston area where she received a BFA in illustration from the Massachusetts College of Art. Since then, she has written and/or illustrated over forty-five books for children including *Bus Route to Boston* and *Clams All Year*. Her book *Bravey Soup* has also been made into a play. Her book *Mr. Tanen's Ties* won several state reading awards which motivated her to write two more titles: *Mr. Tanen's Tie Trouble* and *Mr. Tanen's Ties Rule!* Maryann lives and works in New Hampshire with her husband, Eric, and their daughters, Janine and Kristin, who have inspired many books over the years.

**I believe that you got the idea for *Jack's Talent* from a student. Can you tell us more about the inspiration for this book?**

**M C-L:** I got the idea for *Jack's Talent* while visiting an elementary school. After drawing for the students, one little boy raised his hand and commented that I was a very talented artist. Then he quietly said, "I don't have any talents." I told him everyone has a talent. Soon the conversation turned to talents and before I knew it every child had their hand up, wanting to tell me about their own special talent ... soccer ... spelling ... piano ... and the idea for *Jack's Talent* was born!

**Often, the main character in a children's book is like the author in some way. Is Jack at all like you? Or did you always know about your special talent? Tell us more about yourself as a child.**

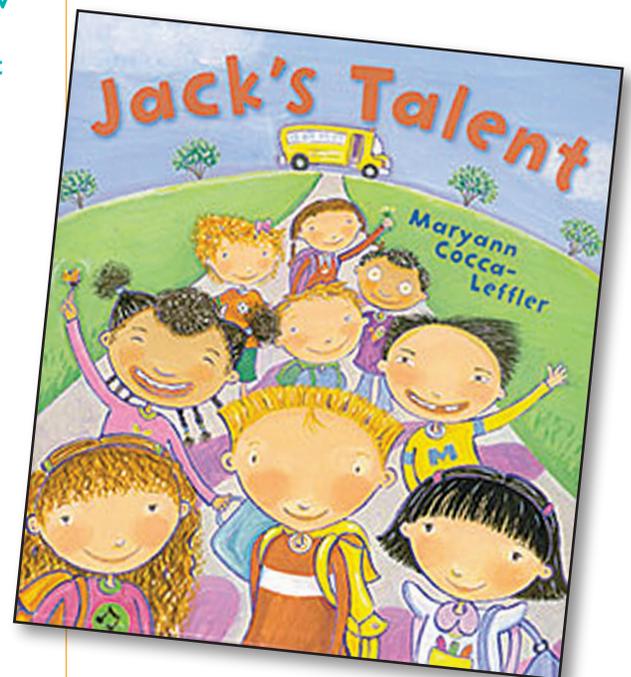
**M C-L:** Jack is more like my oldest daughter Janine (now twenty-two). She always had an amazing memory. When she was young she would surprise the teachers at school by remembering everyone's birthday. Me? I can't remember what I ate yesterday. Unlike Jack, my own talent was evident early on; the talent to draw pictures. By fourth

grade I knew I wanted to be an artist when I grew up ... and here I am.

Jack represents many children including my own children who struggled to find their very own special strengths. Sometimes talents are hidden and are waiting to be discovered, such as Jack's talent for remembering things.

**How did you decide which talents the other kids in the class would have? It's an interesting mix!**

**M C-L:** Children are so diverse and so are their talents. Some children are athletic, some are creative, and some have a natural talent such as singing. Some



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are curious like Olivia the bug catcher or a patient teacher like Victoria the dog trainer. I tried to represent a variety of talents within the limits of the book. Hopefully the examples in my book will serve as a springboard for discussion to help a child discover something about themselves and their own talents. My main goal for this book is to encourage children to feel good about themselves, gain confidence, and celebrate their talent—no matter what it is. Every child *does* have a talent even if it is something as simple as hopping on one foot!

**You are not only a talented author but also an illustrator. Did you begin your work in children's books by illustrating, writing, or both? Tell us more about your creative journey in children's books.**

**M C-L:** I started out in the children's book industry as an illustrator, over twenty-five years ago, after graduating from art school. I illustrated my very first book *Thanksgiving at the Tappletons* at age twenty-two. Soon after, I married and had my first daughter. Being a mother prompted me to think about my own childhood growing up in a close Italian family. These memories brought out the writer in me and resulted in many books, including *Bus Route to Boston* which is based on my childhood. I was also very inspired by my two young daughters who always gave me great ideas for books (though, I have to admit, now, at ages sixteen and twenty-two, they are getting boring!). I

continue to create and challenge myself; for example, my first pop-up book (2009).

**When you conceive a new picture book story, do you think of it first in words or in pictures? How does it develop and take shape? Tell us a little bit about your general development process and how it happened for *Jack's Talent*.**

**M C-L:** It really depends on the book. *Jack's Talent* began as most of my books, with a seed of an idea. Soon it blossoms into a story. I do think in pictures, so I make a rough "dummy" (a small book with pencil sketches that I combine with my story). I send this dummy to an editor to try to "sell" my book. This book sold to the first publisher I sent it to. (Most of the time though, I'll get many rejections before I find the right publisher.) Then my real work begins: fine-tuning the manuscript and dummy, developing the characters, doing the sketches and finally the paintings. It took me about six months to create the illustrations. When my job is done, the book is printed and shipped, and hopefully enjoyed by children everywhere.

**Do you work from photos of children or live models for a book like *Jack's Talent* or do the characters spring to life from your visual imagination?**

**M C-L:** The characters in *Jack's Talent* are definitely from my imagination—they are stylized and a bit funky. The best part of making a book is creating the

characters by giving them life and a personality. As I paint, I make up stories in my head . . . I ask myself, "Where are they from? What do they like to do? What's their favorite color?" Sometimes characteristics of real people sneak into my paintings, such as with the character Kristin in the book. She is based on my daughter Kristin who does have long curly hair, has a talent for singing, and loves country music. Francesca (the soccer player) reminds me of my niece Francesca. She loves to be fancy sometimes, hence the pink hair bow but is very athletic and keeps up with her three brothers. By the way, the names of all the children in the story are nieces and nephews. Jack is my youngest nephew and does sort of look like Jack in the book. And that naughty dog digging up the flowers? That's my dog Bianca!

**How can readers learn more about you and your books?**

**M C-L:** Please visit my Web site: [www.maryanncoccaeffler.com](http://www.maryanncoccaeffler.com). And, don't forget to download the free activity sheets. Have fun!

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*Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is an author as well as a career library media specialist and member of the Maine Association of School Libraries Executive Board. She is the author of seven picture books, most recently R is for Research (UpstartBooks, 2008) and many professional books and articles. Visit [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com) or e-mail Toni at [tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com](mailto:tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com).*