



Cam Jansen and the First Chapter Book Revolution

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Children's interests keep changing. That's good news for writers. Publishers can't just reprint old titles, and because they must find new ways to grab the attention of today's readers, doors open for new books – our books. Thirty years ago the time was right for Cam Jansen, Patricia Reilly Giff's Polk Street series, and the many other "first chapter" series that followed, books with stories divided into chapters despite very spare texts. The changes in readers' needs and tastes which led to those books were very reluctantly recognized within the publishing industry. Editors in the late 1970s didn't know what to make of the first "first chapter" books. And beginning in 1980 when those early books were first published some reviewers didn't know what to make of the either .

I wrote the first book in the series, *Cam Jansen and the Mystery of the Stolen Diamonds*, in 1977, just after the birth of my eldest son Michael. With a baby at home, I took a child care leave from my job as a math teacher and my wife Renee returned to work. You can see in the first Cam mystery the direct connection between the story and my happy role in child care.

In *Stolen Diamonds*, Cam and her best friend Eric Shelton are in a shopping mall looking after Eric's baby brother Howie when a jewelry store alarm sounds. A man runs out of the store and people chase after him. Then two old women followed by a young couple also leave the store. The couple has a baby with them. The running man is easily caught but he doesn't have the stolen diamonds. What happened to the diamonds? Something "clicks" for Cam Jansen, the girl with the amazing photographic memory. Cam and Eric had all sorts of baby things to provide for Howie's needs, but the young couple left the jewelry store with just a baby and a rattle. Where were the baby's bottle, disposable diapers, pacifier, baby wipes, and creams? Sure enough, the running man was an accomplice, a decoy and the baby wasn't a baby at all, just a doll wrapped in a baby's blanket. The stolen diamonds were hidden in the rattle.

I wrote the text of that first Cam for emerging readers, children who read slowly, puzzling out one word at a time. The manuscript was almost all plot. The first editor who saw it, a woman I had worked with on other books, quickly rejected it. "Where's the description?" she asked. "Where's the characterization? You obviously don't know how to write for the age group." She and the several other editors who didn't want Cam divided young readers into two groups. First were those just learning to read. *Frog and Toad* and *The Cat in the Hat* and other easy-to-reads were for them. Next were the children who were "real readers" and they had the Boxcar Children, Betsy and Tacey, and Ramona books. There was almost nothing for children who had difficulty taking the relatively big step from Frog to Ramona. I wrote Cam for them.

It's not just the reading level that makes Cams and other "First Chapter" books accessible to beginning readers. It's the pace of the stories. And the Cams are mysteries, so hopefully while children are reading them, they are not only puzzling out the words. They are paying attention to what they're reading, always alert for clues in the hope they can solve the mystery before Cam does.

In 1978, the first Cam manuscript wasn't finding a home, and with a one-year old baby and plans to buy a house, I asked my agent for some advice. In our 15 months together, she had sold just one of my manuscripts, *You Think It's Fun To Be Clown!* I had great hopes for Cam, but she didn't. She told me to go back to teaching math. That's when I decided to drop my agent

and try to sell Cam on my own. The next week I sent Cam to Viking Press and thanks to editor Deborah Brodie and the editor-in-chief of Viking Children's Books, Linda Zuckerman, Cam found a home. But at the time she wasn't Cam! She wasn't a girl named Jennifer Jansen and nicknamed Cam, short for "The Camera." She was a boy named Robert Barris, nicknamed Kodak, "after the famous camera company."

I had only written the one mystery, then called ***Kodak and the Mystery of the Stolen Diamonds***. In Viking's acceptance, there was talk of launching a series, exciting news for a young writer hoping for some steady work. In 1980 another series was scheduled by Viking, Einstein Anderson by Seymour Simon, a terrific series about a boy who used science to solve mysteries. Our editors wanted me to make my books as different as I could from Seymour's, so for that and other reasons I was asked me to change Kodak from a boy to a girl. That was easily done and in the process my now-female main character broke some stereotypes common in books for young readers. Here was a girl who was inquisitive, assertive, somewhat impulsive, and determined, traits at the time most often associated in children's literature with male characters.

Viking also insisted I get permission from Kodak to use that nickname for the girl with the photographic memory. I wrote to the company's president but permission was denied, so I needed a new nickname. I considered many camera-centered substitutes including "Film", "Flash", and "Click." I finally settled on "The Camera" which I shortened to "Cam."

I was also asked me to make the books younger, to fit more easily into the easy-to-read format. I didn't do that, and I'm glad. Without that change, Cam along with Polk Street became early soldiers in the "First Chapter Book" revolution. Later, of course, in spring 1996, ***Young Cam Jansen and the Missing Cookie*** and ***Young Cam Jansen and the Dinosaur Game*** were published, the beginning of the easy-to-read Young Cam Jansen series.

Of the many adventures Cam and I have shared, the most exciting for me came in spring 1983. My son Michael was a first grader and had learned to read but still had not experienced the joy of reading. He had a good collection of picture books and every night as part of his bedtime routine he chose a book and I read it to him. But now that Michael could read, I changed the rules. Now I would choose the book. My plan was to start a story too long for one night's reading and end with "we'll continue this tomorrow." My hope was Michael would be unwilling to wait and would read ahead. My strategy failed with the first two books. Michael was happy to hear those stories in installments. But then I started to read ***Cam Jansen and the Mystery of the Television Dog***. I read the first chapter. Cam, Eric, and Eric's twin sisters Donna and Diane are waiting on a long line outside a bookstore to meet Poochie, the famous star of the television program ***Hero Dog***. With her paw and a stamp pad, the dog would be signing her autobiography, ***The Poochie Story***. A long blue car drives up. A uniformed driver gets out, opens the door, and out comes a dog. "It's Poochie! It's Poochie," people in the line shout. The dog looks straight ahead and with her tail pointing up enters the bookstore. Cam wants to remember Poochie, so she looks directly at the dog, blinks her eyes, and says, "Click!"

"Well, that's it," I told Michael. "That's the end of the first chapter. I'll read the next chapter tomorrow night."

"But I want to know what happens."

"We'll find out tomorrow night."

"But I want to know now!"

Michael asked permission to stay up a little longer and read the next chapter himself and I, of course, said he could. Later my wife asked me if Michael was asleep. I told her I was sure he was, that I had finished reading to him more than a half hour earlier. Then I went up to check.

Michael was still reading.

"Please, Dad," he pleaded. "I'm up to chapter six. Let me keep reading."

That night he finished the book. He was so excited. He telephoned his grandparents and told them he had read a chapter book. I was more excited than Michael. My son had experienced the joy of reading and it was with my book!