

## Robert Quackenbush, Creator of Animal Detective Stories, Dies at 91

His many characters included Detective Mole, Sherlock Chick and Miss Mallard, a crime-solving duck who got her own television series.

By Alex Vadukul  
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Robert Quackenbush, a prolific children's book author who conceived of the beloved character Henry the Duck, as well as detective animals like Detective Mole and Miss Mallard, died on May 17 at his home in Manhattan. He was 91.

His wife, Margery Quackenbush, said the cause was leukemia.

Over 60 years Mr. Quackenbush created his own distinct children's literary universe. He worked on some 200 titles and wrote and illustrated bedtime staples like "Henry's Awful Mistake" and "Too Many Lollipops." His stories about Miss Mallard, an inquisitive duck who solves crimes around the world in plots that resemble Agatha Christie capers, were adapted into an animated television series in 2000.

He also conceived of sleuthing critters like Sheriff Sally Gopher and Sherlock Chick, who starts his investigations immediately after hatching from an egg (he emerges holding a magnifying glass) and discovering that his farm's feed bin is missing its corn (a gang of crows stole it). For his work on Detective Mole, who wears a trench coat and houndstooth deerstalker hat, he received an Edgar Allan Poe Award for best juvenile mystery in 1982.

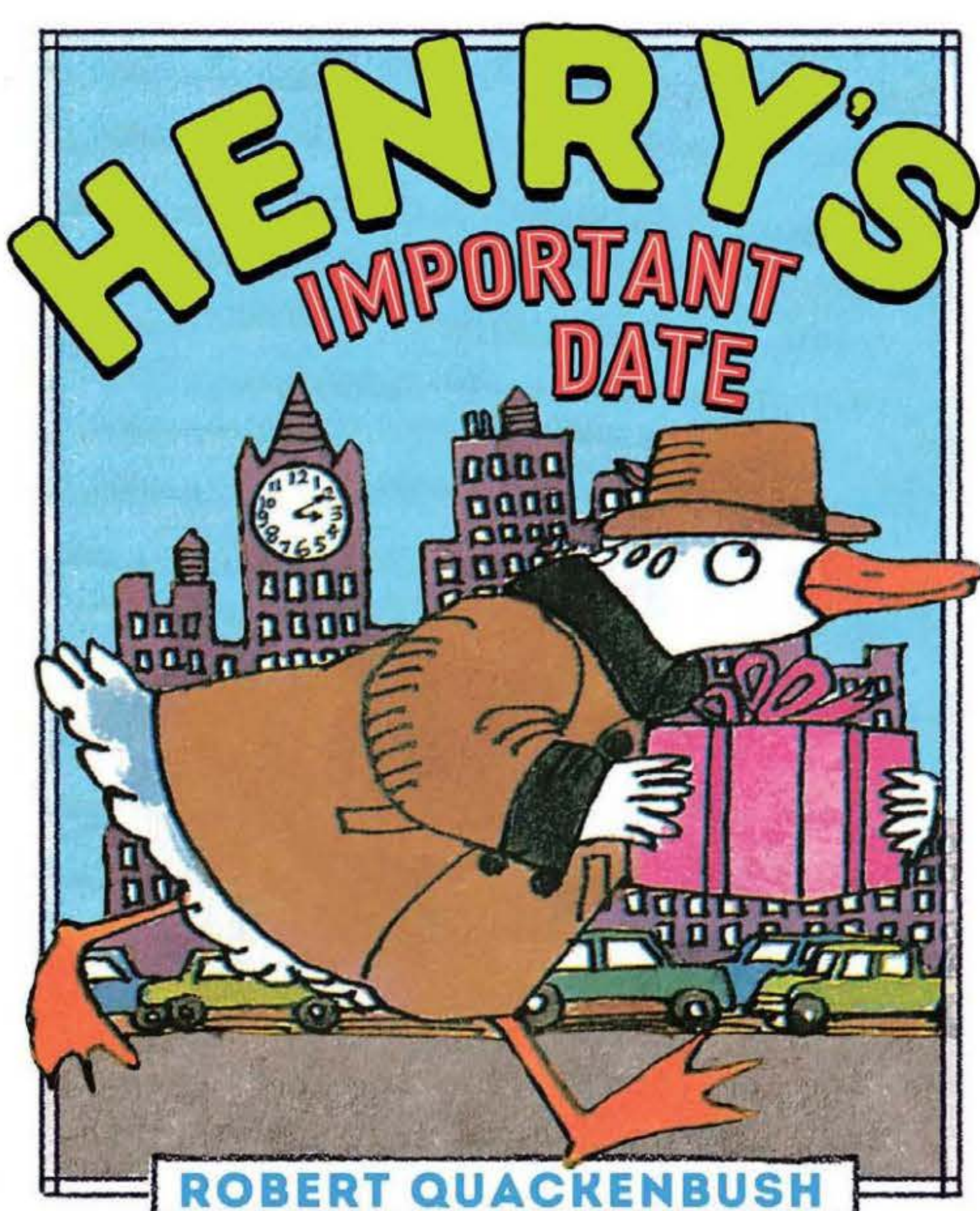
"Mysteries are so important for children because they want to know why they're here and what's going on between Mommy and Daddy," Mr. Quackenbush said in a 2020 video interview. "They are the first detectives."

Mr. Quackenbush's colorful children's stories often took inspiration from his own life as a parent and a New Yorker who lived on East 79th Street in Manhattan for more than 50 years.

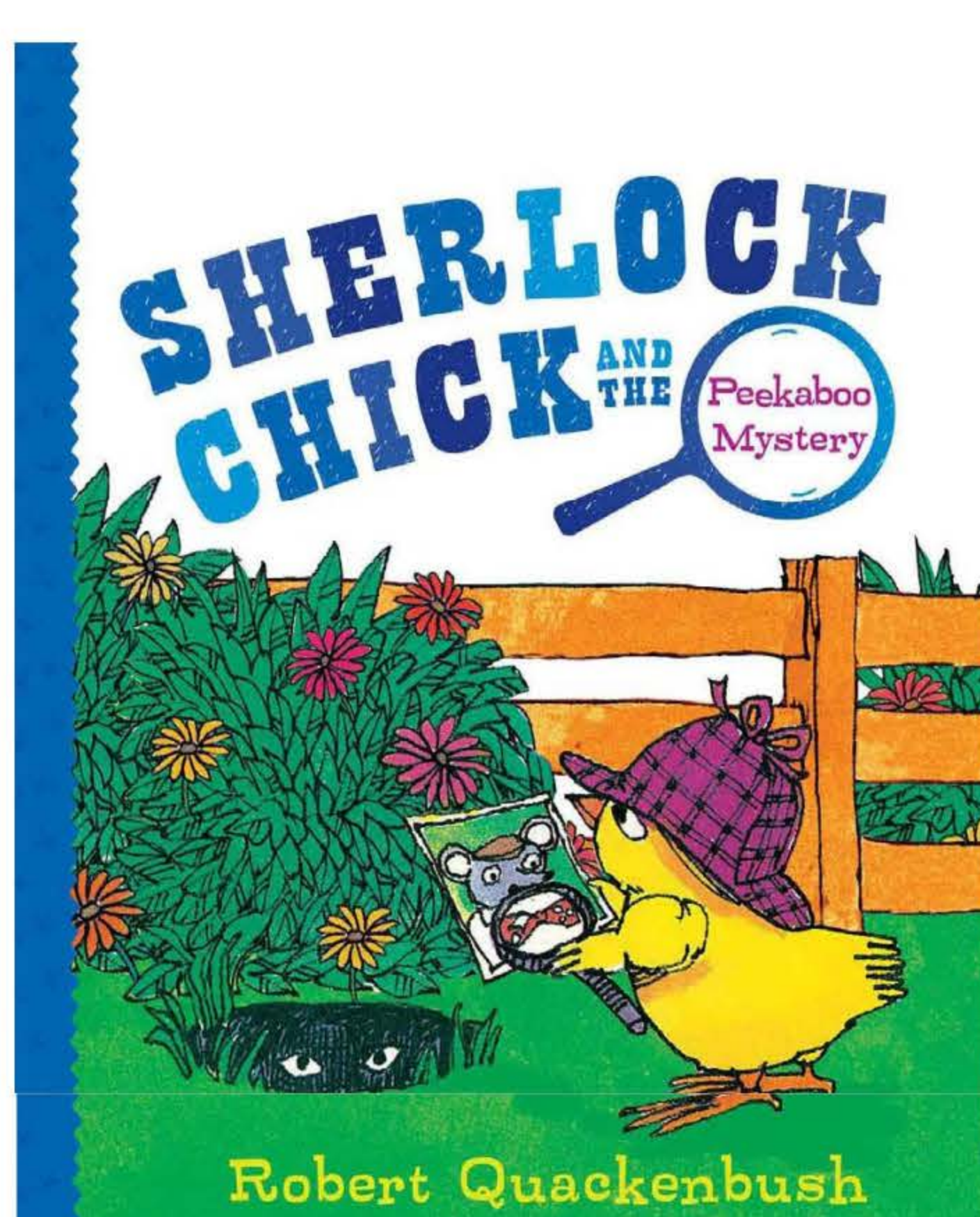
As he watched his son, Piet, grow up in the 1980s, he wrote the Piet Potter series, about a boy detective who solves crimes in a high-rise apartment building on the Upper East Side. His wife, a former fashion designer he met in the city in the 1970s, was an inspiration for Miss Mallard; just like her, Miss Mallard (whose first name, like hers, is Margery) wears a stylish brim hat.

One of Mr. Quackenbush's best-known characters, Henry the Duck, who constantly stumbles into misadventure, spends the duration of one book scrambling across town trying to hail a taxi to make it to his friend's birthday party on time. (Upon arriving, he learns that the party isn't until the next day.)

When Mr. Quackenbush conceived Henry the Duck in the 1970s, it also marked the discovery of his voice as a children's author.



One of Mr. Quackenbush's best-known characters, Henry the Duck, spends the duration of one book scrambling across town trying to get to his friend's birthday party on time. Simon & Schuster



Many of Mr. Quackenbush's most beloved characters were detectives. His Sherlock Chick started his investigations immediately after hatching from an egg and discovering that his farm's feed bin was missing its corn. Simon & Schuster

He had been working as a creative director for Scandinavian Airlines, but he yearned to pursue his own art and illustration work professionally. He landed some freelance side work illustrating children's books and quickly took to it. By the time his son was born in 1974, he was illustrating children's stories full time; with the creation of Henry the Duck, he started writing and illustrating his own books.

As he told it, he began writing the stories to help his son through a difficult family rite of passage: being ridiculed for having Quackenbush as a last name.

"There's a lot of fun that's been made about the name, especially when I was in the Army," Mr. Quackenbush said in the 2020 interview. "They called me 'Quack.' When my son was born, I thought, 'I don't want him to go through what I've been through with the Quackenbush thing.' I invented a duck character called Henry the Duck and dedicated the book to him."

"Every book I did was dedicated to my son," he added. "After that, nobody made fun of him and his last name."

Robert Mead Quackenbush was born on July 23, 1929, in Los Angeles and grew up in Phoenix. His father, Roy, was an engineer. His mother, Virginia (Arbogast) Quackenbush, was a secretary. Robert's ancestors were Dutch settlers who arrived in New York in the 1600s; he liked telling people that they had probably been duck farmers.

When Robert was 9, his father died in a car accident a few days before Christmas. The two had quarreled over something trivial before his father left for a business trip. He was found in his car with gifts for Robert and his two siblings.

"In those days they didn't tell children why someone died," Margery Quackenbush said. "He wasn't told how his father died at the time, and he had questions as a boy. Because they had that silly fight, he thought that he had something to do with it. It haunted him growing up."

As a young man, Mr. Quackenbush worked with a therapist to heal his trauma. He went on to develop a lifelong interest in children's therapy and the mental health field.

In 1956, he graduated from the ArtCenter College of Design in Pasadena, Calif., with a bachelor's degree in fine art. He then moved to New York, where he married Margery Clouser in 1971.

His early creations included Pete Pack Rat and Doctor Quack. He also produced a series of illustrated biographies for young adults about historical figures like Charles Darwin and Alexander Graham Bell.

Mr. Quackenbush in an undated photo. He became a licensed psychoanalyst in his 60s.  
Geert Snoeijer, via Simon & Schuster



In addition to his wife, he is survived by his son and two grandchildren.

In his 60s, Mr. Quackenbush studied social work at Fordham University, where he earned a master's degree before becoming a licensed psychoanalyst, focusing on working with children. He met with his young patients at his studio on East 78th Street, just a few blocks from his apartment, where he also held after-school painting lessons and taught workshops for adults about the craft of writing children's books.

In 2018, Simon & Schuster began reissuing a series of Mr. Quackenbush's best-known Miss Mallard titles, including "Gondola to Danger" and "Dogsled to Dread." They were later released as a boxed set.

Mr. Quackenbush was in his late 70s when his first grandchild, Aidan, was born. As his grandson grew up, he found a bright new source of creative inspiration.

"He was really inspired by him," his wife said. "They were always making up new stories together."

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