

# Vicki Grant

WRITER AND PROBLEM SOLVER | BY GILLIAN O'REILLY



Vicki Grant is a problem solver – whether it's tackling an advertising challenge or working on a television script (as she has done in past careers) or rewriting a novel for young readers in her present career.

Since her first book appeared in 2004, Halifax native Vicki Grant has gone on to write eight more books for middle grade and YA readers. Her work has received numerous accolades. Her books are by turns mystery-filled, funny and scary – sometimes all in the same package. In person, she is lively, funny and energetic and she displays the same enjoyment of the quirky that is evident in many of her books.

Grant turned to book writing after years in advertising and television. Writing ads taught her that "there's no magic in coming up

with ideas." She says it was a matter of problem solving: "Figuring out the key to the problem and then figuring out how to dress it up creatively." It also taught her the importance of catching the reader's attention from the outset – "If you don't get them at the headline, you won't get them for the body copy" – and doing so in as few words as possible. It was experience that would prove useful for writing for reluctant readers.

From advertising, she went on to the world of television, writing for two "twon" series and for many preschool shows, including the *Big Cossy Cossy*, *Theodore Tugboat*, *Works and Seaside Park*. She created, wrote and co-produced *Scop and Dottie*, a 65-episode preschool puppet comedy for CBC Playground.

At a particularly frustrating time in her television career, and with the traditionally slow period of January to April looming, she decided to take the time to do something she wanted to try – writing a book for young readers. She wrote it in four months and sent it off.

The result was *The Puppet Wrangler*, a book for young teens, published in 2004 by Orca Book Publishers. Funny and upbeat, it follows the life of Tilly Mercer who has been sent from Nova Scotia to stay with her aunt, a television producer, in Toronto. Hanging around the set of the preschool puppet show, Tilly encounters one of the puppets who not only magically walks and talks, but has a real attitude and an aptitude for making lots of trouble. "A remarkably accomplished first book," read the review in *Canadian Children's Book News*.

Her next book was the acclaimed *Quid Pro Quo* – a mystery featuring Cyril MacIntyre, a 12-year-old reluctant legal expert and detective, dragged into the world of crime through the actions of his argumentative, authority-challenging mother, who is a former street kid turned Halifax lawyer. Clever, funny and even educational (each chapter heading to a legal term complete with definition), *Quid Pro Quo* won the 2006 Arthur Ellis Best Juvenile Crime Award.

In the last six years, Grant has written three books for the Orca Soundings series (teen books for reluctant readers), two for the Orca

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Currents series (middle grade books for reluctant readers), a second book about Cyril MacIntyre titled *Res Judicata* and the YA novel *Not Suitable for Family Viewing*.

What does she like about writing for reluctant readers? She says the books are fun to write and "the high interest/low vocabulary format fits my style. I don't do a lot of descriptive stuff." She adds that it's always nice to write for a series that sells as well as the Orca books do. In addition, the shortness of each book means they are quicker to write and, consequently, she has been able to experiment with different styles – whether it's the open-ended mystery *I.D.*, the creepy thriller *Dead-End Job* or her very topical *Comeback*, where the protagonist's father disappears, leaving his apparently successful investment business in ruins and many clients penniless.

More personally, Grant says her son was not a kid who liked to read, so she knows what a reluctant reader is like and how difficult it can be to engage them without looking as if you are writing down to them. "If someone is addicted to reading, they'll read anything. With the others, it's more of a challenge."

She likes plotting out mysteries – whether it's for the reluctant reader books or for Cyril MacIntyre's adventures. "You have to know the solution first. Then it's like a puzzle and you figure out the mechanics."

Her 2009 title, *Not Suitable for Family Viewing*, was shortlisted for the Canadian Library Association Young Adult Canadian Book Award, named one of the Ontario Library Association's Best Books for Young Adults and nominated for the 2010 Snow Willow Award in Saskatchewan. It's the story of the unhappy daughter of an Oprah-like television star who suddenly discovers that her mother has secrets. That discovery takes her from her home in New York to rural Nova Scotia – a transplant that is almost as shocking to her as the actual secrets she discovers. There is mystery and humour, but

the emotional tone is a bit more serious than her previous books and there is even a little romance.

Writing for the pre-teen and teen reader was something she "fell into," Grant says. Her children were at that age, so it was natural to write for an audience like them. Also, she describes her own teen years and says, "At some level, I think I'm still 14. I am deeply that goofball [I was then]."

Vicki Grant describes the collaborative world of television and advertising this way: "At its best, it's fabulous; at its worst, it's a nightmare." Writing books offered her the chance to get away from that process and "write 'for herself.'" Now, however, she says she would love to write a picture book for preschoolers. She feels she is ready, once again, for the collaborative experience of working with an illustrator and the kind of "play" such a book offers.

Asked if she is a very disciplined writer, Grant quickly responds, "I'm about two degrees more organized than the average chimp." Because of that, she values the rigour imposed by deadlines. She learned in advertising that, rather than wait for the best possible writing to arrive at some unspecified time, "it's better to have a not-great idea on deadline."

She sits down to work every weekday and is pleased if she makes it to 2:00 o'clock. She likes rewrites – tackling what's already on the page and improving it. "It goes back to the advertising thing. Even if the manuscript is not great, it's something to work with. It's not really writing, it's problem solving."

The book she is working on now is being written in the third person, a departure for Grant. She wanted to be able to describe things in ways that a first person born narrator couldn't. "My pet peeve in YA fiction is conversations that don't sound as if they are coming from the mouths of teens."

This new challenge offers a way to widen the scope of her writing and is one she enjoys – a new problem to solve. ☺

GILLIAN O'REILLY IS EDITOR OF CANADIAN CHILDREN'S BOOK NEWS.



#### BOOKS BY VICKI GRANT

*Comeback* (ORCA SOUNDINGS) ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2010

*Not Suitable for Family Viewing* HARPERCOLLINS CANADA, 2009

*Nine Doors* (ORCA CURRENTS) ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2008

*Res Judicata* ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2008

*I.D.* (ORCA SOUNDINGS) ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2007

*Dead-End Job* (ORCA SOUNDINGS) ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2005

*Pig Boy* (ORCA CURRENTS) ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2006

*Quid Pro Quo* ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2006

*The Puppet Wrangler* ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS, 2004