

## Interview with Vicki Grant

Vicki Grant is a local YA author from Halifax, Nova Scotia. She has written 14 books, from *36 Questions that Changed My Mind About You* to *Not Suitable for Family Viewing*. Her middle grade novel, *Quid Pro Quo*, was shortlisted for an Edgar from the Mystery Writers of America and was included as a 'best book' by The New York Public Library, Bank Street College, and The Canadian Children's Book Centre. It won the Arthur Ellis Award for Best Juvenile Crime fiction in Canada (Vicki Grant, 2021). Vicki is also an award-winning television scriptwriter. She has written almost 100 episodes of children's TV. Vicki is passionate about the power of funny and has launched the Funny Pages children's book festival in Halifax.

Katie Kehoe (K): What do you think is the importance of reading positively or reading positive books?

Vicki Grant (V): So, when you say reading positively, you mean reading books with a positive message?

K: A positive message or a happy ending. Or just books that don't put you through too much turmoil.

V: Weirdly, I would say, for anyone who's read my books, I do try to make them kind of realistic. Even with my goofier ones, I try to keep the emotions realistic. Partially because I think that's the only way humor really works and it's the only way real engagement works. So, I don't necessarily embrace "positive reads". To me, that's kind of like kids' TV where everything is tied up neatly, everyone has a lesson learned, and everybody hugs at the end. I think if you're writing for YA, I don't know if that is ultimately positive, because all it would do is keep them in a cocoon where they are then clobbered once they head outside.

One of the roles of fiction is to prepare us for the world. You learn the lesson in the way that you experience what someone else is going through in a safe space. It's not happening to you, but you're being given the opportunity to live it in your head and experience a version of it. It's almost like ... the thing that pilots learn on? A simulator, kind of.

I think that a certain amount of realism is needed, in terms of needing the book to connect. It's good to see a certain amount of realism. That said, I'm quite happy with a nice, tied up ending. As adults, we all know the happy ending is just a dot on the graph. It's ongoing, it's going to go up and down after that.

We also like a certain amount of escapism. But even in escapism, you don't want just blue skies and bunny rabbits, right? You want a little texture and dark and light and all that.

K: That's a good point! It's giving me pause and making me reconsider the idea of positivity because you're right, it's important to have that realism to it and to make sure that kids realize that the world isn't going to adhere to them that way and that everything won't have a happy ending.

V: You know, you've just reminded me of a thought that I've had. I like to think that the books I write are all adventure books. They don't sound like it, but old-school books were always adventure books. And the idea was the reader, the young reader, would relate to the kid who's going to be tested, right? You know, the hero is going to be tested, the hero is going to go through bad things and must find the resilience and the courage and the wisdom or whatever, whatever the particular thing is they need to conquer the situation and move on.

That's why kids love them because it's kind of thrilling, because it's the classic, always the underdog. If you're a kid, you're automatically the underdog. That's also why parents like them. It might not have been outwardly teaching them, but rather showing them **that you get knocked down, you stagger back up and you try again. You go ahead and keep going.**

I'm not consciously thinking about this when I'm writing the book, it's not like this is the model I'm going to follow. But I always want my stories to be about somebody who has faced a challenge and has figured out how to get through the challenge.

K: Right. But maybe that's the positive message, that's the positivity there.

V: Yeah! And I don't do it like a message, I don't want that, but I think that's what I needed as a kid and what I need as an adult. So, as you say, that's the type of positivity that I want as opposed to 'hey there are no problems and everything's nice.'

K: Which of your books would you hope that readers would reach for when they're having a bad day?

V: The one that I think is closest to that is a book that I always really liked of mine and it didn't really go very far. It's called Betsy Wickwire's Dirty Secret. It's about a teenage girl, it starts off with her unexpectedly showing up at her job to take a shift for somebody else and walking in and seeing her best friend and her boyfriend standing far too close to be just friendly. Which is not an unusual premise for a YA book. But what happens to her is this sense that everyone else must have known all along and that she's been a fool and she gets totally knocked off her pedestal.

She was the kid who had everything, you know, the gorgeous boyfriend, she's smart, she's athletic, she's funny, she's everything she's supposed to be. And then she ends up starting a cleaning service with this girl, she's literally cleaning toilets for the summer at people's houses and it's about her coming to terms with what am I without all of those things? I'm cleaning someone's toilet! She's also in other people's houses and I don't know about you when you were a babysitter but when I was a babysitter, as soon as the parents left, I was opening every drawer and going through their medicine cabinet. So, she starts seeing other people's secrets. She gets a sense of who she is over the summer.

K: When you're having a terrible day, or even just a bad moment, does that translate into your writing at all? Are you able to write happy scenes when you yourself are not happy?

V: No, it's not about whether it's a happy scene. If I'm having a hard day, it's not hard for me to write a happy scene, it's just hard for me to write at all. That's mostly because I don't practice good mental hygiene. So, I don't say 'we'll park that problem and then get to work', instead I really lean into it and grind things over in my head over and over again.

Even today, I'm not particularly having a good day and I've lived long enough to know that this too shall pass. No one's gotten a cancer diagnosis, no atomic bombs have gone off, but have I been able to push aside? No. I've gotten about three paragraphs written today.

K: You just have to accept that it's one of those days.

V: You know what I'm doing now? A friend of mine, who is also an author, we now Zoom once a week for four hours at a time. We've created this faux office atmosphere. We'll pop on and say hey, how are you doing, got my coffee, a small chit chat, and then we get to work. We leave the Zoom call on while we're both working away. Sometimes we'll set a timer. When the timer rings, we'll chat for a few more minutes, get up to stretch and run to the washroom. Maybe all you young folk are doing it all the time already, but this has been great! And it sounded so contrived when she suggested it. It's amazing how much I can get done because it puts me in the headspace of now, we're at work.

K: What can we do as a community to ensure we're promoting reading positively?

V: I guess I would say positivity is in the eye of the beholder, isn't it? So, what one person finds positive or uplifting or putting them in the right frame of mind to help them with the troubles of their day or escape them is going to be different for different people. Some people want to go full on fantasy, some people want to burrow into a non-fiction book of facts. Not to stereotype but we often hear that boy readers like non-fiction. They get deep into reptiles or the ammunition of the Middle Ages or whatever it is.

But I will give a plug for funny books, and like I said, funny is different for different people, but **certainly humor, getting a laugh out of books, or getting a laugh out of anything makes people feel better.** Good readers will gravitate to the big fat books with the funny main characters but there are kids who aren't good readers. There are lots of hi/lo books that are funny, there are graphic novels that are funny, there are so many options for kids.

K: Funny can be found pretty much anywhere.

V: Yeah. I did a talk at a conference last year, talking about funny books, and an adult asked a question and mentioned a book, that I had read, but never in a million years would I consider that book funny. This person was finding humor in it that was completely obscure to me.

Humor comes in all forms. Attached to that, different types of books work for different people. You see how important consultation is.

K: Yes, finding out what they find funny and what would help them feel better.

V: I think that, and I don't write these types of books, but I mentioned **hi/lo books**. (Editor's note: Hi/lo books are books that have a high interest level and a low vocabulary or readability level. [O'Neil, 2016]) Now they have books that are even less challenging in their reading level but aimed at older kids. These books are becoming more and more important as we get more kids who English isn't their first language or who have reading issues, keep making sure that the content and the reading level are appropriate and often there is a big gap between them. It's a challenge.

K: Curating is super important and asking the community what they need essentially asking those teenagers what are you looking for, what is your reading level, are you struggling with this, what are you looking to read?

V: Well, I know if someone asks me that, what are you looking for, I don't often know what I'm looking for. It's like when I go to the hair stylist, I want her to tell me what I'm looking for. I have my own opinions but, Gillian Flynn has only written four books. That must be part of the fun but also the challenge of being a curator is being able to extrapolate, not just to fill orders but to figure out what would work.

We would like to thank Vicki for her time and her wonderful words. If you would like to know more about Vicki and her books, please visit [vickigrant.com](http://vickigrant.com).

## References

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