

# • Meet the Author •

## Rachna Gilmore

Grades  
K-2



Rachna Gilmore is a Governor General's Literary Award-winning Canadian author of more than twenty children's books. Her titles include picture books such as the popular classic *My Mother Is Weird*, reissued in 2012; *The Flute*; *Catching Time*; and others. Her children's novels include *That Boy Red*, *The Trouble with Dilly*, and the fantasy novel *The Sower of Tales*, among others. Rachna's books have received multiple honors and awards and have been translated into more than a dozen languages. She lives in Ottawa, Canada, where she continues to "plark"—play, work, and lark—at dreaming up weird and wonder-filled tales.

**I read on the jacket flap that *Grandpa's Clock* was inspired by your father-in-law. Tell us more about him and which parts of the story are true.**

**RG:** John Gilmore was an engineer by profession. He had grown up on a farm on Prince Edward Island during the Depression and he was resourceful, self-reliant, and steady. He had a love of woodworking and when he retired, like Grandpa in the story, he began making clocks. One day, when I was down in his workshop watching the eagerness with which he bent over the clock he was working on, a chill went through me and I thought: "Old man playing with time." I knew I had to write about it somehow.

As it happens, Cayley's favorite clock in the story, the Lord Nelson, is one that John made for us, too. It's in my home, and I love it. So the parts that are true are the love of making clocks, and also much of the clock lore included in the story. It makes me shivery, too, to peer into the doors at the side and see the metal rods ring the chimes on one side, and the strike on the other. Actually, I've written another book inspired by John, a novel, *That Boy Red*. It reflects John's life experiences and stories, although a good part of it is completely fiction.

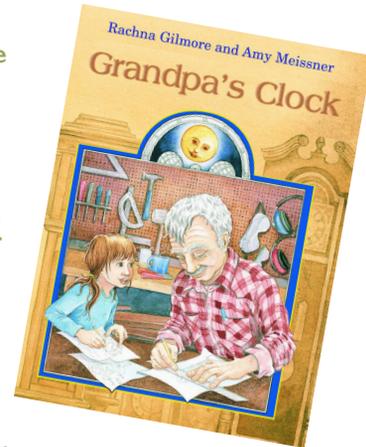
Interview conducted by Toni Buzzeo, career media specialist and author (visit [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com)).

**I am especially enchanted by the parallel between the ticking of the clock and the beating of Grandpa's heart. Was this layer of the story there from the very beginning or did it come to you in time?**

**RG:** I think it came fairly early on as the story grew. A story often has an internal organic flow to it, and as a writer you just have to follow it. Once I decided I had to write a story inspired by John's love of clock making, I thought immediately of a young girl who loves her grandfather and helps him with his clocks. Then I simply followed the idea from her heart and point of view . . . and the story just unraveled naturally.

***Grandpa's Clock* is a story full of emotion. In particular, you captured the fear and anxiety that came with Grandpa's hospitalization and surgery. Was that portion of the book difficult to write? Did you draw on your own personal experiences for it?**

**RG:** Yes, in some ways that portion of the story was hard to write. I didn't want a story inspired by John to have



hospitalization and near death in it, especially as John was in his late seventies or early eighties then. And yet the integrity of the story demanded it, from the beating of the clock to the passage of time, and what the clocks represent in terms of a loving heritage left behind. There needed to be a story arc and some tension, and it felt right that Grandpa's heart and health would play a part. I struggled with that, but I knew that it was the only way to go.

I didn't draw on personal experiences for the hospital scenes, not consciously, and yet perhaps the visceral reaction did come from general memories of hospitals. Mostly I was in Cayley's head and heart and gut and knew what she'd feel. As it happens, John was at the book launch for *Grandpa's Clock*, and it was such a delight to have him there, so proud of the book.

**Many of your children's picture books have been honored and celebrated in your home country of Canada. And in 1999, *A Screaming Kind of Day* was awarded the Governor General's Literary Award for Children's Text. Tell us more about that award and what it meant to you.**

**RG:** It is one of the highest awards in Canada and it was a huge honor and surprise. That said, wonderful though awards and honors are, it's the writing that matters. I try—not always successfully—not to let the awards go to my head. The minute you start believing you are a fabulous writer, you're doomed. But that award and others did raise the level of attention that my books receive, and for that I am so grateful. I'm grateful, too, for the validation.

**In addition to picture books, you've also written novels for children. Talk about the differences between writing in the two formats and what you prefer about each.**

**RG:** A picture book almost has the form of a crystal. It's small and contained and each word has to count. The cadence and rhythm of the language are crucial, so I read out loud obsessively to get that right. Also, since there are so few words, it's essential to have the character be real and full-blown from the start, which is something that new writers sometimes neglect in picture books, creating instead generic characters.

That said, it's crucial, too, in a novel, to have full-blown characters right from the start. I love the challenge of writing sparsely in picture books, of playing with words and the music of sentences. In writing novels, I love the challenges of developing more nuanced and conflicted characters, as well as creating intriguing plots. I love the flow, the rise and fall of the emotional arc, and trying to get the voice spot-on. I also love the sense of discovery when I'm writing a novel, that "aha" moment when I consciously get something my characters knew all along, and which my writing was leading toward without my even realizing it. And most especially I love it when the characters take over and all I have to do is chase after them and write down what they're doing. Often, they surprise and sometimes even shock me.

I can't honestly say what I prefer about writing picture books or novels, because each story has its own challenges and

demands its own format, and as a writer you simply have to honor that and do the best by the story and the characters.

**What are your plans for future books? Do you have new projects under way that we might see soon? Others that are a mere glimmer at this point?**

**RG:** I'm not actively writing anything at the moment, but there are a number of ideas simmering and leaping upward at times. Which one I decide to spend time with next will in part depend on which idea or character is most tenacious in grabbing me by the throat and refusing to let go. I do, though, have a book coming out next year with Acorn Press, a picture book about a gentle early-morning walk a young girl takes with her grandfather along the shore on Prince Edward Island. Yes, another grandfather/grandchild story, and also set in PEI.

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

**RG:** My website, <http://www.rachnagilmore.ca/>, as well as a blog, which I confess I have not added to in a while: <http://rachnagilmore.blogspot.com>.

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*Toni Buzzeo, MA, MLIS, is both an author and a career library media specialist. Her credits include the 2013 Caldecott Honor-winning One Cool Friend among nineteen picture books, which include But I Read It on the Internet! (Upstart, 2013) and Just Like My Papa (Hyperion, 2013). She has also authored many professional books and articles. Visit [www.tonibuzzeo.com](http://www.tonibuzzeo.com) or e-mail [tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com](mailto:tonibuzzeo@tonibuzzeo.com).*