

Obituaries

PHOEBE GILMAN

Writer's alter ego was Jillian Jiggs

'My favourite books were fairy tales,' said the author and illustrator of children's books. 'When the pictures didn't match the images that the words had painted in my head, I would cover them up with my hands. I still do that'

BY ALLISON LAWLOR

Canadian children's writer and illustrator Phoebe Gilman, who brought joy to children around the world through her popu- lar Jilian Jiggs series and other picture books, has died of cancer in a Toronto hospital. She was 62.

Best known as the creator of the scatterbrained character Jilian Jiggs whose adventures spawned a series of books, Ms. Gilman also wrote more serious books for young readers. Her 1992 picture book called *Something from Nothing* is her retelling of an old Yiddish folktale. In it, young Joseph, his grandfather and a family of mice all find new uses for Joseph's favourite blanket as it wears thin.

The book won the Ruth Schwartz Award in 1993 for the year's best children's book and that same year she was awarded the \$10,000 Vicky Metcalf Award for her body of seven published books at the time.

"She was hugely successful," said Diane Kerker, Ms. Gilman's long-time editor and director of publishing for Scholastic Canada. "She was one of the most popular children's book authors and illustrators in Canada."

"Once she realized that her destiny was as an illustrator and author, she devoted her whole life to it," Ms. Kerker added.

Born in New York in 1940, Ms. Gilman supported herself for years reading and selling her paintings around the world before publishing her first book, *The Balloon Tree*, in her early 40s. The exquisitely illustrated book was a success and was soon followed by the first of a series of Jilian Jiggs books. The last in the series, *Jilian Jiggs and the Great Big Snow*, is scheduled for release next month.

"Jilian Jiggs was a character kids really identified with," said Susan Lawrence, Ms. Gilman's friend and the books-for-young-people editor at Quill & Quire.

Ms. Lawrence added that Jilian, whom Ms. Gilman called her alter ego, was energetic, messy and always had a new adventure. Children also loved the rhythm that Ms. Gilman was able to create in her stories through her use of the rhyming couplet.

"Gilman's rhyming couplets tripped rhythmically off the tongue: Jilian, Jilian, Jilian Jiggs! It looks like your room has been lived in by pigs! Was the mother of scatterbrained Jilian in frustration," Ms. Lawrence recently wrote

in Quill & Quire.

When asked how she became a children's writer, Ms. Gilman said it all started after an incident with her eldest daughter, Leora.

"When her balloon burst on a tree branch, I wished the tree would magically sprout balloons. It didn't — what sprouted was an idea in my head. Why not write a story about a tree that blossoms balloons? And that's how I came to write my first book, *The Balloon Tree*," she wrote in a brief personal sketch on her Web site. *The Balloon Tree* was published in 1984 by Scholastic Canada.

Writing the book, of course, wasn't as easy as simply having an idea, writing it down and painting some pictures. Ms. Gilman said it took her 15 years and countless rejection letters before the book (having gone through several versions) was finally accepted for publication.

When the book was finally published, Ms. Gilman couldn't quite believe it, said her husband, Brian Bender, adding that she never imagined her books becoming so popular.

"She did not care about money," Mr. Bender said. "She just wanted to write stories."

Phoebe Gilman was born on April 4, 1940, in the Bronx. She was the second of three children born to John and Hannah Gilman. Her father worked in a textile factory before pursuing his love of photography. It is her mother to whom she attributed her love of books. An avid reader all her life, she loved to sit for hours reading with her granddaughter Emily.

"My favourite books were fairy tales," Ms. Gilman wrote about herself. "When the pictures didn't match the images that the words had painted in my head, I would cover them up with my hands. I still do that."

Growing up in a close-knit extended family, there were always aunts and uncles and cousins around. Her mother's two sisters lived in the same apartment building so meals were shared together and their doors were always open.

As a child, Ms. Gilman loved to draw and copy comic-book illustrations. She studied art at high school, briefly at Hunter College and then at the Art Students League of New York before heading to Europe. After spending time in Rome, she moving to Israel where she studied art and lived for several years as an artist. While living in Jerusalem, she supported herself by selling her paintings.



CANADIAN PRESS

Phoebe Gilman, whose first book was *The Balloon Tree*: 'Why not write a story about a tree that blossoms balloons?'

In the early 1970s, she decided to return to North America. Her first stop was Montreal, where she stayed briefly before heading on to Toronto. Shortly after moving to the city, she met her future husband. The couple married in 1974. Mr. Bender ended up as the spectated, bearded king in *The Balloon Tree* and after that appeared somewhere in most of her books, as did her children or their artwork.

Soon after they were married, Ms. Gilman began teaching drawing and painting at the Ontario College of Art and Design. She spent 5 years as an instructor at the college before leaving in 1990 to devote herself full-time to writing and also illustrating children's books.

While her training and most of her career was focused on fine art, Ms. Gilman discovered that when she started writing she found she liked it even better than painting, Mr. Bender said.

"I prefer the words to the pictures, which is a little odd since I think of myself as an artist rather than a writer," Ms. Gilman wrote about herself.

But being both allowed her to master the art of bringing words and pictures together in the picture-book form, Ms. Lawrence said.

"Words and illustrations were really woven together in her work beautifully," she said.

The illustrator for her own books, Ms. Gilman also did the art for the 1991 book *Once Upon a Golden Apple* written by Jean Little and Maggie De Vries. Working on the illustrations for a book she hadn't written was challenging. She said it was like trying to get inside the head of someone else, Ms. Lawrence said.

"She was as much a writer as an illustrator. She had a perfect balance," Ms. Kerker said.

Ms. Gilman's books and characters struck a chord with young readers. She travelled across the country to give readings and presentations and frequently received fan mail, to which she would diligently reply.

"She just enjoyed that world that they [children] live in," said her brother Mark Gilman.

In addition to her writing and illustrating, Ms. Gilman was also a

big supporter of the Toronto-based Canadian Children's Book Centre where she was the impetus behind the centre's first fundraising art sale.

Two years ago, Ms. Gilman was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent treatment. Doctors later discovered she had leukemia. While Ms. Gilman was sick she continued to write and paint in her bright home studio where her cat and granddaughter Emily were her frequent companions. She completed *Jilian Jiggs and the Great Big Snow* and had written a new story called *The Blue Hippopotamus* but was too weak to do the illustrations.

"She never quit," Ms. Kerker said. "She realized what the most loved thing was creating her books."

Ms. Gilman leaves her husband, brothers Arnold and Mark, daughters Leora and Meissa, stepson Jason and granddaughters Ariana and Emily.

■ Phoebe Gilman, writer and illustrator, born in Toronto on Aug. 4, 1940; died in Toronto on Aug. 29, 2002.