

# A CONVERSATION

Alison McGhee

Author of  
*Julia Gillian*  
(and *the Art of Knowing*)

## Questions & Answers

**Q: What was your inspiration for writing *Julia Gillian (and the Art of Knowing)*?**

**A:** I wanted to write a book set in my own neighborhood, which is Uptown Minneapolis. I had the sense of a nine-year-old girl (my favorite child age) who was funny, curious, and completely at home in her world. Once I named her Julia Gillian, which is unusual because it's two first names, everything fell into place. Her dog, a St. Bernard named Bigfoot, appeared next to her, as did her schoolteacher parents, her apartment building on Emerson Avenue, and all the landmarks of her daily walk with Bigfoot. I don't think I've ever had so much fun writing a book before.

**Q: Is any of *Julia Gillian (and the Art of Knowing)* based on your own childhood?**

**A:** I'm one of those writers who makes up most everything, but I do draw little snippets here and there from my own life. For example, I've always wanted to win something in a claw machine, but, sadly, I'm not yet a claw master. I love dogs, and Julia Gillian loves her dog, Bigfoot. Julia Gillian is the type of girl who sets a goal and works toward it, and I'm that sort of person too. She's also very good at making papier-maché masks, however, and I'm not.

**Q: Bigfoot, Julia Gillian's dog, plays a big role in this book and in Julia Gillian's life. Did you have a dog growing up? Do you have one now?**

**A:** I grew up in the country, and we had several dogs. Now I live in the city and our dog, Pete, loves his long walks through the neighborhood and around the lakes just as much as Bigfoot does. Bigfoot's routine, in fact, is patterned much after my own dog's daily routine.

**Q: What was your response upon seeing Drazen Kozjan's interpretation of Julia Gillian and her world?**

**A:** When I saw Drazen's first sketches for Julia Gillian, I gasped. It was uncanny! His artwork so closely matches my own internal vision of Julia Gillian, her parents, her apartment building: her entire world. I simply love his art.

**Q: This is your first novel purely for middle-grade readers. What makes writing for this age group different from writing picture books for younger children or novels for older readers?**

Writing for this age group has been pure pleasure. Julia Gillian and her world are so real to me that the stories almost spin themselves out. Picture books are very difficult for me because they're like little puzzles that have to be perfect, and my novels for older readers have all tended to be very intense emotionally. Not that Julia Gillian isn't emotionally intense, but there was something lovely about the specificity and warmth of her world that made writing this book a joy.

**Q: What's next for Julia Gillian?**

**A:** In the next book, *Julia Gillian and the Quest for Joy*, Julia Gillian encounters some unexpected and real difficulties in fifth grade: problems with her best friend, Bonwit Keller; problems with her trumpet playing; and problems with the new lunch monitor at Lake Harriet Elementary. Luckily, Bigfoot, her parents, and her friends are there to help Julia Gillian work them out.

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