

LETTER FROM MARY DOWNING HAHN AFTER SHE RECEIVED
THE IOWA CHILDREN'S CHOICE AWARD FOR WAIT TILL HELEN COMES

To all of you -- Thank you! I wish I could be with you in person to tell you how much the Iowa Children's Choice Award means to me.

Whenever I talk to boys and girls about Wait Till Helen Comes, I am invariably asked, "Where did you get the idea for this book?" Thinking you might also be curious, I will tell you a little bit about what it's like to write a ghost story.

The idea for Helen actually began several years ago when I was writing my second book, The Time of the Witch. In that story, a girl named Laura and her little brother Jason are spending the summer in a remote area of West Virginia; they are very unhappy about their parents' decision to get a divorce, and, when a strange old woman offers to cast a spell to keep their parents together, Laura provides the items the witch needs. Too late, Laura discovers the old woman is not the family friend she claimed to be.

In the original version of this story, Laura meets a girl, not an old woman, in the forest and quickly becomes her friend. As the days pass, the mysterious girl gains control over Laura, and eventually possesses her much as Helen possesses Heather. Gradually Laura realizes she is in danger, not just from her friend but from her friend's parents, witches who died in a fire set by Laura's ancestors many years ago.

After struggling with the plot for many weeks, I decided that having witches and ghosts in one story was more than I could handle. Reluctantly, I got rid of the girl ghost and concentrated on the witch Maude, a real old woman very much alive.

Although I was pleased with the final manuscript, I found myself thinking often about my girl ghost and wishing I had a story for her. You could almost say she haunted me for several years while I worked on other stories, realistic novels that had no supernatural elements.

Then one winter day, my daughter Kate suggested we drive out into the farmland surrounding Columbia. The parents of a friend had bought an old country church; they lived in a wing they had added to the original building and were using the church itself as a small gallery to display their pottery and paintings.

We drove for half an hour through the rolling Maryland countryside, and then, as we rounded a curve in the road, we saw a little white church surrounded by woods and fields. After parking my car, I noticed a tall hedge, and, being a nosy person, I peeked over it. Before me was a small graveyard full of old tombstones tipped this way and that, streaked by years of rain and snow, their inscriptions almost worn away.

"Wow," I thought, "What must it be like to have a cemetery in your own backyard?"

Although I enjoyed looking at the pottery in the church, my mind was elsewhere, busily inventing a plot for a story. With Helen, the fire, and the ruined house by the pond ready and waiting, I only had to invent Molly, Michael, and Heather and their painful relationship to set my story into action.

Because I love reading ghost stories, I'm glad I succeeded in making Wait Till Helen Comes scary. We all love a good chill now and then, especially if it's on the printed page and we're safely curled up in an armchair!

But there's more to a ghost story than goose bumps -- in the best ones, the writer uses the supernatural world to say something about the real world. In my story, I wanted to show the healing power of love. To do this, I linked Heather, a lonely, guilt-racked child, with Helen, a ghost equally lonely and guilt-racked.