

## YHBA NOVEL RESOURCE # 3

Submitted by Nancy Dawson  
Ben Davis Ninth Grade Center

*The Old Willis Place: A Ghost Story*  
By  
Mary Downing Hahn

Copyright 2004 by Mary Downing Hahn  
Published by The Houghton Mifflin Company

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mary Downing Hahn was born in 1937 in College Park, Maryland. She grew up in a neighborhood filled with other children who loved to play outside.

In elementary school, she enjoyed reading and drawing, but she hated to write. However, she loved to make up stories, usually about orphans and runaways. Instead of putting her stories into words, she illustrated them

By the time she was in junior high, Ms. Hahn realized she needed word to express the more complex stories she was creating. She decided then that

she would be a writer and illustrator of children's books. She began her first book at age 13. It was about a girl named Sarah who looked remarkably like Mary: tall, freckle-faced, and skinny. Although Mary was quiet and shy, Sarah was outgoing and a leader. Sarah was the girl Mary wanted to be.

In high school, Mary continued to write in her diary. She wrote poetry and short stories, but she never had the confidence to send anything in to be published. In fact, she was 41 before her first book was published. Since then, she has written at least one book per year. Ms. Hahn has developed a method that suits her well. She spends a great deal of time developing her characters and situations before deciding where they will go. She says she wished she had paid more attention to the craft of writing when she was young. She says, "Writing is a journey of discovery. That's what makes it so exciting."

Other books by Mary Downing Hahn are:

*Daphne's Book*

*Wait Till Helen Comes*

*December Stillness*

*The Doll in the Garden*

*The Dead Man in Indian Creek*

*The Spanish Kidnapping Disaster*

*Stepping on the Cracks*

*The Wind Blows Backward*

*Time for Andrew*

*Look for Me by Moonlight*

*The Gentleman and Me, Eli: A Story of the Old West*

*Following my Own Footsteps*

*As Ever, Gordy*

*Anna All Year Round*

*Promises to the Dead*

*Anna on the Farm*

*Hear the Wind Blow*

*The Witch Catcher*

*Closed for the Season*

Most of Ms. Hahn's books feature orphans or children who find themselves on their own, often in terrifying situations.

Mary Downing Hahn does not publish her street address. Her website address is: <http://www.childrensbooksguild.org/hahn.htm>

## ABOUT THE BOOK

Genre: Horror and Suspense Fiction

Themes: Friendship, loyalty between the brother and sister, the common fear of a haunted house and the ghost who inhabits it are common threads that are woven into this book. The title of the books lets the reader know that a haunted house is featured in this story.

Reading Level: 6.2 Interest Level: 5<sup>th</sup> Grade through 8<sup>th</sup> Grade

Setting: Oak Hill Manor, Adelphia (fictional town in the Northeast)  
Modern-day time

Point-of-view: Diana narrates this story in 1<sup>st</sup> person.

If you like *The Old Willis Place: A Ghost Story*, you'll love *Trading Places with Tank Talbott* by Dori Hillestad Butler, *Defiance* by Valerie Hobbs, *Becoming Naomi Leon* by Pam Munoz Ryan, *The Dark Hills Divide* by Patrick Carman and *Doll in the Garden* by Mary Downing Hahn.

## ANNOTATION

### *The Old Willis Place: A Ghost Story*

Mary Downing Hahn weaves suspense, evil spirits, a haunted house, and an innocent friendship into another chilling ghost story. The reader will want to know what “the bad thing” was and when it happened. Why are the children living alone in the woods behind the Old Willis Place?

Twelve year-old Diana and her eight year-old brother Georgie live an unorthodox life, but they know they must follow the rules that have bound them in the woods for what seems like forever. Mrs. Hahn puts the reader in Diana’s shoes and makes him/her feel the pangs of loneliness and the pull of friendship.

The author has a special talent for developing intriguing characters who share frightening secrets. The deserted old mansion takes on a life of its own, making the story even more frightening. The conclusion should satisfy most readers.

## BOOKTALK

### *THE OLD WILLIS PLACE: A GHOST STORY*

What does a ghost look like? Have you ever seen one? Have you ever felt the presence of a spirit? Are all ghosts evil, or are some friendly? (Besides Casper!)

There is an evil ghost in this story. Miss Lillian Willis is locked in the parlor of the Old Willis Place at Oak Hill Manor. Tragic and frightening things have happened in that house. Twelve year-old Diana and her eight year-old brother Georgie are the keepers of a terrible secret that holds them together. They are also bound by the strict rules that govern every phase of their lives.

Desperate for a friend, Diana risks everything to approach Lissa, the daughter of the new caretaker. Though the girls have much in common, they don't seem to fit comfortably in each other's world.

By breaking the rules, Diana and Lissa set free an evil spirit that would harm both Diana and Georgie. The many plot twists will keep you reading to a surprising conclusion.

## CHARACTERS

### *THE OLD WILLIS PLACE: A GHOST STORY*

Diana Eldridge – Diana is a twelve year-old homeless girl. She and her brother live in the woods behind the Old Willis Place. They remain unseen, because to be noticed would be to break the stringent rules by which they live. Diana's greatest wish is to have a friend.

Georgie Eldridge – Georgie is Diana's eight year-old brother. He also is afraid to break the rules, and he gets very angry with Diana when she allows herself to be seen. Georgie is adventurous and mischievous. He becomes more and more like a savage.

Lissa Morrison – Lissa is the twelve year-old daughter of the new caretaker of Oak Hill Manor. She is also motherless and is seeking companionship and friendship. She feels someone watching her, but she can't see anyone. Some items disappear: her new bike, her stuffed bear, and a book. Her father thinks she has just misplaced them.

Miss Lillian Willis – Miss Lillian is the daughter of the owners of Oak Hill Manor. After they pass away she inherits the estate. She is a demanding woman who is unkind to the Diana and Georgie and their parents who are the caretakers. Miss Lillian commits an unspeakable act, then pays for it the rest of her life - - - and after.

## CONFLICT AND RESOLUTION

### *THE OLD WILLIS PLACE: A GHOST STORY*

The internal conflict in this story is between the children's strong desire to leave the estate, to cross the road, and their fear of breaking the rules. Diana longs for a friend, but she is afraid of what will happen. Diana and her brother squabble more and more, but are fiercely protective of each other. They haven't seen Miss Lillian for years, but she has a strange hold over both of them.

Diana's longing for a friend overrides her fear of breaking the rules. She also disregards her brother's dire warnings.

The conflict is resolved when a tragic secret is revealed, and the children are reunited with their parents.

## READ ALOUD PASSAGES

Diana has decided to venture into the open and let Lissa see her.

Chapter 4, page 41 – 44

“I took another small step . . . crying as I hadn't cried for years.”

In spite of Diana's pleadings, Lissa opens the door into the parlor where Miss Lillian died.

Chapter 11, page 116

“Suddenly, there she was . . . ‘You,’ she whispered. ‘You and your brother. Just wait!’”

