

Excerpts from Mary Downing Hahn's acceptance speech at the NLA/NEMA Conference
October 26, 2007

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First of all I want to thank not only the kids but all the adults in this room who contributed so many hours and so much time to make awards like this possible. I have friends who have served on different committees, and I know from them how much reading you have to do to make up a list. I also remember from my own days as a children's librarian in the public library system in Maryland, when we got together to make out lists how much



work that was. But how much wonderful work it was, because we all wouldn't be in this profession unless we really loved reading. So thank you so much for all of your hours and all of your enthusiasm and for sharing our books with your students, because that's one of the most important things for a writer.

I want to visit with you about where the idea for The Old Willis Place came from. Often I visit a real place and it has a sort of atmosphere that somehow speaks to me. For instance, Wait Till Helen Comes, which was also a Golden Sower winner, the idea for that began with a visit to an old church out in the country that people had bought. The people had built an addition on the side where they lived and they used the church itself as an art gallery. I was quite taken with the idea of living in an old church out in the country. And then I realized when you buy an old church out in the country, you get something else absolutely free—a cemetery. Dead people buried in your backyard! Of course, that makes for very quiet neighbors but sort of a weird atmosphere. I decided then and there that I would have to come up with an idea that used this setting in a story.

The same happened with The Old Willis Place. I live in Columbia, Maryland, which some of you may know is a new town. It was built and developed by James Rouse, who up till then had been mostly famous for building shopping centers and malls all over the place. He wanted to do something grander than malls. Of course Columbia has malls, but he built a whole town. He bought up all this farmland. But there was one woman, one hold-out, named Miss Smith, kind of a strange old lady who lived all by herself in a tumble-down old house that was built in the early 1800s, on a 314 acre farm. She refused to sell her land. So Columbia was built all around her and her farm stood in the middle of Columbia. You couldn't see the house from the road. She got more and more eccentric as the years passed, and she lived all alone in this house. She had a caretaker who did all her errands for her because she never left the farm. She ended up dying all alone in the house and the house was in terrible disrepair. The Howard County Recreation Department bought the farm and wanted to develop it into a park. But there was disagreement on what they should do with the land. It's been ten years since she died and they still haven't done a thing with the property.

How did I get to know about it? My niece Ann, her husband Tom, and their daughter Jocelyn became the caretakers for the property, and they indeed lived in a little trailer outside the house because the house was no longer fit to live in. They soon became

aware of all the ghost stories. Teenagers used to sneak back in there late at night and sit in their cars and wait to see the ghost of Miss Smith wafting across the landscape or scream at them from a window. There were all kinds of stories about ghostly sightings of this poor old lady, who was just a perfectly nice, slightly eccentric old lady who happened to die there by herself. They invited me to come see the place, and I was really excited because I'd heard about it for years and never thought I'd have a chance to see it because at that point it wasn't open to the public. We toured the grounds and the house itself. It was the spookiest old house I have ever been in. It's just like the description in the book. Most of the furniture was gone except for an old chair in the parlor, and Tom told me in all seriousness, "That's the chair where Miss Smith died."

After I left the house, I looked back at it and thought, "There's a story here! There's got to be a story here!" First, obviously, some very eccentric old lady has to die all alone in that house and give rise to rumors that the house is haunted. But she couldn't just be a nice, ordinary, slightly eccentric old lady—she has to be somebody much more wicked than that to be interesting. So I came up with the idea of old Miss Willis. I thought for awhile I'd tell the story from Lissa's point of view. She and her father were caretakers on the property, and Lissa, a normal human child, would tell the story of meeting the ghost of Miss Willis. But then I thought, "No, I've told that kind of ghost story before. Maybe I should make it a little bit different. How can I give this ghost story a kind of a twist?" And that's when I came up with the idea of telling the story from a ghost's point of view.

I decided then to make the ghosts children, a brother and sister, Georgie and Diana. Then I thought to myself, "I wonder if I try to be subtle enough with this if people would notice at first that Georgie and Diana were not real living children just hiding out on that farm and having to obey a lot of strange rules or if they will know that they are ghosts." So I decided to try that, but I didn't really think that it would work. I thought everybody would figure this out by the second or third chapter because I knew the whole story so naturally I thought that other people would figure it out too. I added the entries from Lissa's diary because I thought that it would be nice to show how the ghosts appeared to a little child, and of course Lissa has no idea they're ghosts. So I think the diary entries helped you to not realize right away the children's true natures.

One of the important things in the story to me was the end. I wasn't quite sure for a long time while I was writing the book exactly how I was going to end it. Finally I decided that one of the main themes of the story is forgiveness and that would be how I would end it.

