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The Tween Ghost Story: Articulating the Tween Experience

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The Tween Ghost Story: Articulating the Tween Experience

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
English

by

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Table of Contents

Abstract	iv
Introduction.....	1
Disruptions	5
The Ghosts	10
Stuck vs. Flux.....	16
Discovering Death	22
Taking Action	26
Emerging with a New Understanding.....	32
Conclusion	34
Appendix A: The “Murder or Cover Up” Storyline	35
Works Cited	40
Works Consulted.....	42
Vita.....	44

Abstract

In the early 1980s, a particular kind of “tween” (children aged 10-14) ghost story emerged. Through examining multiple examples of tween ghost stories (such as *Wait Till Helen Comes* by Mary Downing Hahn, *Stonewords* by Pam Conrad, and *Time Windows* by Kathryn Reiss), this paper illustrates the ways in which these stories are remarkably consistent in nature, and then investigates this sub-genre’s specific and consistent articulation of the struggle of moving away from childhood and into the teenage years. By using a ghost to create a situation so off balance (a ghost who is stuck, a protagonist who is in flux), the tween ghost story is uniquely and cleverly designed to help the protagonist navigate through the scary situation of growing up.

tween, ghost, Mary Downing Hahn, ghost stories, young adult literature, children’s literature

In the early 1980s, a particular kind of “tween” (children aged 10-14) ghost story emerged. These stories, aside from the appearance of a ghost, are both realistic in nature, and feature a young female protagonist (usually around 12 years old) who has recently experienced a fair amount of upheaval in her life. A library and Scholastic book orders staple throughout the 1980s to the early 2000s, the tween ghost story is a category one might assume easily links to the broader generic conventions of children’s literature or children’s Gothic tales. However, these stories are actually quite distinctive in nature. One attempt at defining the standard plot of a tween ghost story can be found in Anna Jackson’s essay “Uncanny Hauntings, Canny Children”:

Usually, it is the ghost plot which disrupts what would otherwise be a cosy, domestic story, or a familiarly generic school story. The ghost plot turns a story about family life or school politics into something that is both more introspective and more open to extraordinary pressures rather than the ordinary social pressures of family and school.

The ghost plot is what compels the central character to reconsider issues of identity—to grow up. (159-160)

In some ways, this description relates well to the tween ghost story as I conceptualize it; the tween must, because of her experiences with the ghost, “grow up.” And it is true that—without the ghost—this genre could be seen as having something in common with standard pre-teen, coming-of-age texts, the “cosy, domestic” or “generic school story” Jackson references. (Judy Blume’s novel for tweens, *Just as Long as We’re Together*—a story about 12-13 year old girls dealing with the arrival of a new friend and the confusing world of junior high—is a classic example.) However, unlike typical coming-of-age tales, these particular tween ghost stories often place the protagonist in not only an emotionally isolated place (the “introspective” space, as Jackson describes), but also—contrary to Jackson’s description—a physically isolated place.

Counter to Jackson's conceptualization of the ghost story "world," the tween ghost story rarely deals with school, dating, or the broader social life of the tween (which are all standard tropes in tween coming-of-age tales). Instead, the tween ghost story puts the focus on the protagonist herself in a particularly lonely and isolated time (summer break, winter break, etc.). She, as a "tween" or pre-teen, is facing these changes on her own, usually without friends, family, or routine to support her. The disturbance this tween is experiencing is usually a combination of a changed living situation and a drastically altered family situation. For example, the protagonist may have moved to a new city/home or embarked on a summer stay with a distant relation, in addition to dealing with major changes at home like the death of a parent, a newly blended family, or a recently broken one.¹

While these texts resist grouping among traditional coming-of-age tales, they also do not easily fit within other story categories. Of course, the ghost is a paranormal element. However, what makes these particular tween ghost stories unique is the overall realistic nature of the stories. In other words, these texts are not "horror" stories, nor are they particularly Gothic. For example, recent critics interested in the Gothic in children's and young adult's literature define Gothic fiction for children/tweens as a "mingling [of] horror with healthy doses of humour and hope" (Coats 91). Further, many critics read Gothic elements like ghosts rather metaphorically, as symbolizing, for example, the "social changes wrought by menstruation and the possibilities it

¹ Examples of texts in which the tween protagonist has moved to a new home/city: *Behind the Attic Wall* by Sylvia Cassedy, *Creepers* by Joanne Dahme, *The Doll in the Garden* by Mary Downing Hahn, *Ghosts Beneath our Feet* by Betty Ren Wright, *The Old Willis Place* by Mary Downing Han, *Time Windows* by Kathryn Reiss, and *Wait Till Helen Comes* by Mary Downing Hahn. Texts in which the tween protagonist goes for an extended stay with a distant relative: *Christina's Ghost* by Betty Ren Wright, *Deep and Dark and Dangerous* by Mary Downing Hahn, *The Dollhouse Murders* by Betty Ren Wright, *House of Ghosts* by Ann Turnbull, and *Stonewords* by Pam Conrad. Texts in which a death of a parent has occurred: *The Doll in the Garden* by Mary Downing Hahn and *Ghosts Beneath our Feet* by Betty Ren Wright. Texts in which the family structure has changed in some way: *Crandall's Castle* by Betty Ren Wright, *The Doll in the Garden* by Mary Downing Hahn, *Footsteps on the Stairs* by C. S. Adler, *Ghosts Beneath our Feet* by Betty Ren Wright, *Stonewords* by Pam Conrad, and *Wait Till Helen Comes* by Mary Downing Hahn.

closes and opens for women's subjectivity" (Coats, Jackson, and McGillis 5). Yet tween ghost stories are not horrific or fantastical, they are not humorous, nor are they particularly interested in the seemingly monstrous change in women's bodies. This is not to rule out any sort of link between the Gothic and growing sexuality; tweens, after all, are on the cusp of adulthood. Rather, my point is that the tween protagonists in these particular ghost stories have much more in common with traditionally innocent children's literature protagonists—or what Martha Parravano describes as the typical Newbery Medal winning character: "an older (twelve-ish) protagonist who is nevertheless not an adolescent (not preoccupied with adolescent concerns)" (qtd. in Nodelman 311)—than they do with Gothic protagonists. An additional departure from the Gothic is the fact that the ghost herself is a realistic, human-like character. For example, in *Stonewords* by Pam Conrad, the protagonist Zoe describes the ghost as follows: "The girl wore a lavender cotton dress with tiny pink buttons, and her hair was neatly parted in the center and bound in two thick braids. Below each ear was an enormous, fussy bow. I had never seen a girl so pretty before" (14). In *The Doll in the Garden* by Mary Downing Hahn, the ghost Louisa is described as "a little girl in a white dress, sitting on a stone bench under a dogwood tree ... her face was hidden by long, golden curls" (55). In *Time Windows* by Kathryn Reiss, the ghost "appeared to be seven or eight years old, and she wore a striped blue dress with long puffed sleeves and a starched blue sash tied in an oversized bow at the back. Her long blonde hair was pulled into two pert braids tied at the ends with blue ribbons" (Reiss 23). In *Wait Till Helen Comes* by Mary Downing Hahn, Molly describes Helen as "a girl no bigger than Heather. She wore a white dress, and her hair, as black as Heather's, tumbled in waves down her back" (107). In *House of Ghosts* by Anne Turnbull, the ghost is "about Grace's [the protagonist's] own age and holding a dog in her arms. She looked at Grace, and Grace looked back and saw her

expression (scared, she thought—scared, and yet defiant). She took in the hair, plaited and looped on either side of the head, the old-fashioned, full-skirted dress” (15). And in *The Old Willis Place* by Mary Downing Hahn, the ghost Diana describes herself after a bath: “I laughed and tossed my hair. With no tangles to weigh it down, it flew [...] free around my face [...] clean and sweet with shampoo” (62). In many ways, the most disturbing part of the ghost in these texts is that she is *not* a Gothic ghoul howling in an attic or swooping across a night sky. Instead, this ghost is most often a little girl from the past, and she is just as bewildered and frustrated by her particular state of being as the tween protagonist is in hers.

The tween ghost story, then, is both a hybrid of and departure from other similar children’s or young adult tales: in other words, the tween ghost story is a sub-genre all its own. One very important way in which these texts can be identified and grouped together is their similar plot structure. As I have identified it, the narrative arc common to the tween ghost story is roughly as follows:

- The protagonist faces big changes in her life (recent move, altered family, etc.)
- A ghost appears, and the protagonist is often the only one to see it—the ghost is usually a girl about the same age or younger who has died under accidental or natural circumstances
- The tween runs to a parental figure for support, but is rejected in some way (“you are lying,” or “you’re too morbid,” or “I don’t have time for this”)
- The tween struggles with the notion of death
- The protagonist realizes she is truly on her own

- After researching or discovering the history of the ghost, the tween gains agency: she learns to face her fear of the unknown, and is thus able to help the ghost move on
- The tween emerges at the end of the text with a new outlook and understanding

What makes tween ghost stories worthy of study is their clever use of the above plot structure to uniquely articulate the struggles tweens face as they move away from childhood and into the teenage years.

Disruptions

The first attribute key to a tween ghost story is the notion of disruption in the tween protagonist's life, both in her living situation and her familial situation. There are many different kinds of familial disruption found in these texts, but the most prominent seem to be: one parent or family member is recently gone (divorce or death), a newly blended family (step parent, step siblings), or a holiday stay with an obscure relation. When a parent or important family member leaves the family, a tween is left lacking one crucial support system. Some examples of these stories include *The Doll in the Garden* by Mary Downing Hahn (tween Ashley's father has recently died of cancer), *The Ghost by the Sea* by Eileen Dunlop (tween Robin's brother is in a coma), and *Ghosts Beneath our Feet* by Betty Ren Wright (tween Katie's stepfather has passed away). These sorts of losses leave the protagonist to experience a different, more human side of the remaining parent(s) or family member(s); sometimes, the tweens will witness a seeming weakness in the adult they might not have been aware of before. Also, this disruption often causes the tween to harbor anger toward either or both parents, a belief that this separation might have been her fault, or a fear of talking about these feelings (anger towards a parent, sadness,

missing a parent/guardian, etc.) with the remaining family members. It is a new sort of loneliness this tween protagonist is suffering, which makes an encounter with a ghost (who is lonely too) more probable. Remember: a ghost has also been left by her parents, and that connection to the similar pain of a tween is a very profound one. A change in her family teaches a tween that things won't always be the same.

For example, in *The Doll in the Garden* by Mary Downing Hahn, 10-year-old (almost 11, she insists) Ashley and her mother have moved away from Boston to rent “the top floor of what had once been a single family house” (1). The reason for the move is not a happy one; Ashley describes their move as being important because it was “far away from everything that reminded us of Daddy” (5). Ashley’s father recently died of cancer, and she feels the toll not only on herself, but sees the weight this experience has put on her mother: “Like me, Mom had been sad for too long. ... I wanted her to smile and laugh and joke the way she used to before Daddy got sick” (17). Ashley not only feels the burden of her own sadness, which she describes as leaving “such a big hole in [her] life, [she] knew nothing could ever fill it up,” but the sadness of her mother, who has more gray hair, more wrinkles, and is struggling late into the summer nights to finish her dissertation so she can find work (48). Ashley feels she cannot talk to her mother about the anger and sadness she is feeling about the loss, and instead tells herself, “I couldn’t talk about Daddy. Not to Mom, not to anybody” (48). While her mother works, Ashley is left alone to ramble about the property on hot summer afternoons, and it is in the backyard’s overgrown rose garden that she encounters a ghost her age named Louisa, a ghost who understands the grief of losing a parent, a ghost who herself is forced to reenact her death by tuberculosis every summer. Louisa “returns” every year because she is yearning for a doll an old playmate had stolen from her—a doll with special significance because, as Louisa explains, “Papa gave her to me before

he died.” When Ashley looks into the eyes of the ghost, she sees “the terrible sadness. Sadness like [hers]” (58). The connection between Ashley and the ghost is a deep one, and yet Ashley is still left hoping that somehow she can change the past; she wonders if she were able to return the doll to Louisa, that “maybe she wouldn’t die. Maybe [she] could change what happened” (93). But unlike many tween ghost stories (which often see the protagonist changing the past), Ashley ultimately finds that she cannot change what happened—she can only help the ghost feel more at peace. For Ashley, the recent death of her father has made her both accessible to the ghost Louisa, as well as profoundly connected to the ramifications of her attempts to save the ghost. Her ultimate realization that “death is too big to change” (123), leads her to a stronger understanding of her new life with her mother and a new strength to move forward.

A newly blended family is an even greater disruption in some ways because one parent is gone and another is supposedly taking that parent’s place. Examples of the newly blended family plot can be found in *House of Ghosts* by Ann Turnbull, *Wait Till Helen Comes* by Mary Downing Hahn, *Footsteps on the Stairs* by C.S. Adler, and *Crandall’s Castle* by Betty Ren Wright. Again, feelings of anger and sadness are challenging to share with the newly married primary parent, because s/he appears so happy with a new partner (and is often somewhat oblivious to the tween’s discomfort). As tween Charli muses in *Crandall’s Castle* about the arrival of her new stepfather Ray Franz, “she and her mother had been doing fine, just the two of them” (CC 5), and “[s]ometimes she’d wished he would disappear” (CC 6). Before this new relationship, the tween was almost always that parents’ primary friend, and the child now feels displaced. A ghost is also displaced, as she is not where she should be (resting in peace, presumably). These strained relationships often include new siblings: as tween Molly complains about her new stepsister Heather in *Wait Till Helen Comes*, “No matter how hard I tried, I

couldn't even like her, let alone love her as Mom urged me to" (WTHC 7-8). In *Footsteps on the Stairs*, though tween Dodie is excited about her new stepfather (calling him "the best hugging teddy bear of a man!"), she is unable to connect with her angry, aloof stepsister Anne (FOTS 1). Family, which was once a familiar, reliable place, is now a maze of new people and new expectations through which the tween protagonist must maneuver.

Regardless of the cause of familial disruption in the tween ghost story, a new home is always in order: a new house is purchased, a smaller apartment is moved into, or a tween and her parent move into the house with the new step family. No tween protagonist gets to stay in her old bedroom—the room with that old, familiar comfort is gone. This is essentially true for the tween protagonists who leave for an extended stay with a relative as well—they don't even have the luxury of their old furniture in a new space; these protagonists are staying in unfamiliar rooms with unfamiliar beds and unfamiliar, lumpy pillows. The symbolism of "home" in children's texts is a popular topic among literary critics². For example, in Perry Nodelman's comprehensive study of children's literature entitled *The Hidden Adult*, one convention he finds consistently throughout children's texts is the prevalence of the "home/away/home" plot: the child views home as safe and comforting, the child goes on an adventure, and then the child returns home with a new understanding of life³; as Nodelman explains, this structure both confirms "the virtues of childhood as an enclosed and unchanging space," as well as "acknowledges and admits change" because the "away" space symbolizes growing up, and the return to home at the end of the story keeps growing up at bay—for the moment, at least (67). However, when a text's audience moves from children to young adults, the structure, Nodelman claims, changes to "home/away": because home represents childhood, "there are likely to be far more young-adult

² For further details, see Nodelman's overview of this critical history on pages 59-76 of *The Hidden Adult*.

³ Some obvious examples of this sort of structure would include *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* by Lewis Carroll or *Where the Wild Things Are* by Maurice Sendak.

novels [...] that end with their protagonists in a new home” (65). In other words, to gain in maturity, the child must ultimately leave childhood—the familiar bedroom with the piles of stuffed animals and old board games—and move to a new home, signifying the growth of the protagonist throughout the course of the story. However, what sets the tween ghost story slightly apart from this convention is that the actual plot structure of the tween ghost story is simply “away”—in the very first pages, the tween protagonist is moving into a new home, driving toward the new home, or arriving at the remote relative’s house; the “original” home is rarely seen, and if it is, it is usually through the rearview mirror. By placing the tween protagonist firmly “away” from home, the tween is forced into an incredibly unstable state of being—there is no routine to fall back on, no “home” to run to, and she must grow up.

When the tween protagonist is sent to live with a remote relative for the summer (or forever), the inadvertent message seems to be (from the parents): we don’t need you; see you later. Examples of stories with this plotline include *Stonewords* by Pam Conrad, *The Ghost by the Sea* by Eileen Dunlop, and *Christina’s Ghost* by Betty Ren Wright. The tween, even though logically understanding the reasons behind the new living situation, still feels some resentment and insignificance. In *Christina’s Ghost*, Christina’s parents go on a vacation to Alaska, and Christina must stay in an old Victorian mansion with an uncle she barely knows—and who clearly dislikes her. In *The Ghost by the Sea*, because protagonist Robin’s brother has been in a coma since Christmas Eve, Robin’s parents somewhat welcome the relief of dropping Robin off with her Granny Lambert for an extended Easter holiday. Upon arriving, Robin “couldn’t help a slight qualm at the prospect of spending weeks alone with a woman who, although she was her grandmother, she really scarcely knew” (GBTS 3). Pam Conrad’s *Stonewords*, is a bit different, in that protagonist Zoe is dropped off not as a tween, but before the story begins: she was left by

her slightly crazy mother at her grandparents' house on a remote island when she was just four years old. Zoe explains, "my mother brought me to their house late one hot, sweltering afternoon ... I can't remember her saying good-bye, but I do recall the dark rings under her arms on her soft blouse and that her hands were like ice," and then "after dinner, like the dirty glasses and empty mugs, she was gone" (S 4-5). Zoe indicates through her narration that her life before coming to her grandparents house was not ideal for a young child; she mentions that her grandmother's bathroom "didn't echo like all the other bathrooms [she'd] known," and that she would always have to leave those other bathrooms when someone "had to wash their dishes in the sink, or take a bath" (S 5). Remembering the last house she lived in with her mother, Zoe recalls "the dark staircase in the back alley that you had to get to by passing garbage cans swarming with bugs" (S 8). The loss of her mother affects Zoe; even though she claims she "wasn't even very sensitive to it" (S 2), she still admits that her mother's yearly visits upset her and that "the strongest feeling [she'd] ever had for her was anger" (S 4).

The Ghosts

In short, being abandoned in some way and placed in an unfamiliar situation allows the tween protagonist to relate to a ghost. Like a ghost, the tween has been cast away from the world she knew and is forced to cope on her own. As mentioned, the tween often barely knows the relative(s) she is staying with, and feels uncomfortable and shy. She cannot talk to her parents because they are gone. She cannot confide in the new caretaker(s) because they've just met. The disruption, whatever combination of circumstances it may be, creates a powerful sense of loneliness and isolation for the tween protagonist—the perfect scenario for a lonely ghost to appear.

A tween ghost story always deals with a ghost whose death was accidental or natural—murder is not the purview of a tween ghost story. Why? When a ghost’s death is accidental, it opens up the possibility for change. The death of a child is always perceived as “wrong,” and when it is the result of an accident, it opens the door for the circumstances to be somehow altered. (“If only ___ hadn’t happened, she would still be alive.”) Even if the ghost cannot be saved as in *The Doll in the Garden*, the death leaves the main character with a fuller understanding that some things like death cannot be changed. This distinction is very important because when a ghost was intentionally murdered, or similarly, if a ghost died under mysterious circumstances that have been covered up, what results is not a tween ghost story, but instead a “ghost story/murder mystery.” The focus becomes less about the tween protagonist growing up and coming to grips with death and more about solving a mystery. This not only shifts the spotlight from the sadness of a child death to a “whodunit,” it also leaves the tween protagonist a passive witness to a transgression of long ago. In this situation, the tween lacks agency and is forced to witness violence without being able to do anything about it. Usually, an adult in the story is the one who gains from this type of haunting, not the tween. Stories like *The Dollhouse Murders* by Betty Ren Wright or *Deep and Dark and Dangerous* by Mary Downing Hahn (though they, on the surface, appear to be tween ghost stories) are actually examples of the hybrid ghost story/murder mystery. Both illustrate the “murder” or “cover up” storyline, usually resulting from a repressed incident an adult in the story experienced in his/her past.⁴ While the tween protagonists do end both *The Dollhouse Murders* and *Deep and Dark and Dangerous* having solved a mystery, little else changes for them. These tweens are forced to deal with a ghost and even endure being punished by a disbelieving relative again and again—all because this relative has been unable to face the past. Therefore, because a necessary trait of a tween

⁴ For a detailed analysis and explanation of the ghost story/murder mystery plot, see Appendix A.

ghost story is the ultimate agency and self-reliance the experience gives the tween protagonist, it is clear when reviewing these particular stories that simply witnessing or re-enacting trauma from someone else's past does not work. Yes, the protagonist still has to overcome fear, but it is logically murky why the child—instead of the adults actually involved—must see the ghost. In both *The Dollhouse Murders* and *Deep and Dark and Dangerous*, the tween protagonist acts as merely a proxy for the adult/guardian who is unwilling to deal with these demons from the past on her own. Therefore, these types of stories can be excluded from the tween ghost story sub genre.

Because the murder or cover up plot of a ghost story/murder mystery concludes without the tween protagonist gaining agency and a sense of independence, it necessarily follows that a key component of a compelling tween ghost story involves a ghost's death that is accidental, or natural. First of all, the accidental death takes away the "whodunit" element, and focuses the story more on the sadness of and circumstances behind the child's death. If the child/ghost died in an accidental situation, there is no one to blame (no adults with guilty secrets)—or, unfortunately, the "blame" falls on the ghost herself. In *Wait Till Helen Comes* by Mary Downing Hahn, for example, Helen dies when she runs from her house (which she inadvertently set on fire by knocking over an oil lamp) in the dark into a pond full of weeds and drowns. In *Stonewords* by Pam Conrad, Zoe Louise dies when she unintentionally sets the family kitchen on fire while lighting her birthday cake. Consider: as a young reader/tween protagonist, which is scarier? Being the victim of a random murder, like in *The Dollhouse Murders* (See Appendix A), or being the cause of your own death as in *Wait Till Helen Comes* or *Stonewords*? In the context of the ghost story and its necessarily spooky qualities, the idea that at any second one could fall down a long flight of stairs and die is more effectively scary because it illustrates the growing

awareness (by the reader, by the protagonist) of one's own fragility and even mortality. Similar to the "ghost is to blame for her death" plot, an equally popular plot involves an adult from the past putting the death process in motion, but not directly causing it—i.e. accidentally putting the child/ghost into a situation that leads to her death. For example, a common plot along these lines involves an adult locking a child up and then somehow becoming incapacitated. Meanwhile, the other adults around the child/ghost are unable to retrieve the child because they do not even know she is missing. *Time Windows* and *The Old Willis Place* offer two good instances of this plot element. A "bad thing," happened, but the adult is not to blame, exactly.

A strong example of the "child's punishment leading to death" plot can be found in Kathryn Reiss's *Time Windows*. The ghost in the story is a young girl from 1904 named Dorothy who has long, blonde curls. Dorothy only appears when 13-year-old Miranda looks through the windows of an old dollhouse she found in the attic of her new home, and Miranda is only able to watch events from the past—at first it seems she cannot interact with the ghosts she is watching. At one point, Miranda watches as the little girl's mother Lucinda "storm[s] into the [attic] ... dragging little Dorothy by the arm. The girl wore only a thin white petticoat and was shivering from cold as well as fear" (TW 76). Lucinda fumes to Dorothy, "You will stay here until you can learn deportment. I will not have a clumsy, disobedient child in this house!" (TW 77). Then she sweeps out of the attic and locks the door. Though Dorothy screams and screams for her mother, "kicking the heavy door with her small, bare feet," her mother never returns (TW 77). Lucinda instead runs off with her lover—only to die that same afternoon in a train wreck. Dorothy's father assumes his daughter went with her mother and died in the accident. He is so devastated, in fact, he cannot return to his home. Meanwhile, Miranda watches through the dollhouse windows horrified as Dorothy slowly wastes away in the attic: "long gaspy breaths rasped from

her throat,” and “her blue eyes were filmy and wild-looking. Her mouth hung limp, lips cracked and bleeding” (TW 277). Ultimately, Dorothy dies in the attic, and though her mother is not necessarily to blame (perhaps she assumed her husband would return that very evening and find Dorothy screaming to be let out?), locking her daughter in the attic set the horrible incident in motion. Though Miranda cries and cries when she first witnesses these events, unlike witnessing a murder intended for someone else in her life, Miranda is clearly the person who is “meant” to see this accidental death occur. Further, Miranda is able to investigate the situation on her own through careful study of the dollhouse, and she ultimately gains strength and courage by learning to use the dollhouse to pass Dorothy the attic key and change the past.

Like *Time Windows*, Mary Downing Hahn’s *The Old Willis Place* is a ghost story involving an adult punishing children and then becoming incapacitated. The story is narrated by the ghost girl herself, though readers only discover this as the story progresses (and when Lissa, the tween protagonist, figures it out). Diana and her brother Georgie (both ghosts) live in the woods near a decaying old mansion. Throughout the story, Georgie refers to when “the bad thing happened,” but readers are left hanging as to what this might mean (OWP 129). As the story unfolds, readers discover that Diana and Georgie’s parents were caretakers for old Miss Lillian Willis back when the mansion was lovely and lived in. Miss Lillian, a cranky, slightly demented old woman, did not like the children, and hated to see them in her home. One afternoon, Miss Lillian, “caught [the children] in the kitchen, and began to rant and rave” (OWP 126). To escape, Diana and Georgie “ran down the cellar stairs to hide.” But Miss Lillian follows them, locks them in a little room at the back of the cellar, and yells, “Stay there! ... I’ll come back when you’re ready to apologize!” (OWP 127). But Miss Lillian never comes back; almost immediately after, she suffers a debilitating stroke. Diana and Georgie’s parents, first busy with helping Miss

Lillian, and then secondly (assuming the children were abducted), combing the woods and enlisting the help of the police—never realize the children are in the mansion cellar, slowly dying. Like *Time Windows*, though the adult is not exactly to blame for these tragedies, the adult certainly shares responsibility. For the tween protagonist Lissa, experiencing and uncovering these events with her ghost friend Diana allows her to both help Lissa and Georgie reunite with their parents, as well as assert her needs to her father and come to a better understanding of the death of her own mother.

What makes this particular plot element so effective, I believe, is that this sort of scenario can be related to real-life situations from the reader's or protagonist's past. Children do get punished (sometimes unfairly) and are told to go to their rooms. What becomes frightening in the world of these tween ghost stories is that these particular ghosts die because of this type of punishment. The tween protagonist is reaching the age where she is almost too old to be sent to her room—but the threat is still there. What results, then, is a world where a tween can no longer rely on adults to do the right thing, a world where an adult's disbelief or frustration could translate into an extremely isolating and even dangerous situation for the protagonist. She can no longer rely on anyone but herself to navigate the situation. Further, the accidental death of a ghost in general (drowning, fire) is a horrific, yet also exhilarating for the tween protagonist. As Avery F. Gordon points out in *Ghostly Matters*, "haunting, unlike trauma, is distinctive for producing a something-to-be-done" (xvi). While the traumatic event of the ghost story/murder mystery (witnessing violence) does not empower the protagonist, a haunting spurs a tween into action: can this accident be changed? If not, what can the tween protagonist do to put things "right" somehow? The accidental death of the ghost and the haunting that follows leaves the protagonist with only one option: do something.

Stuck vs. Flux

Ultimately, what makes the particular plot elements and narrative arc of the tween ghost story worthy of study and detailed explanation is its clever way of articulating the struggle tweens face as they move away from childhood and into the teenage years. These stories do this through a unique generic convention I call “stuck vs. flux”—a principle I will articulate using three typical yet diverse examples of the tween ghost story: *Wait Till Helen Comes* by Mary Downing Hahn, *Stonewords* by Pam Conrad, and *Time Windows* by Kathryn Reiss. Broadly, while a ghost is stuck—stays the same age, wears the same outfit, and stays in the same place (something many young tweens wish they could do)—the tween protagonist, on the other hand, is in a state of extreme flux: the tween lives in a world that is incredibly unstable and always changing; she is becoming aware of her own mortality as well her growing independence. If life can be considered to have a balance, the “lives” of the ghost and the tween protagonist are extremely imbalanced; they are on opposite sides of the scale. Life in these stories is so off kilter, in fact, that the ghost needs to be saved and, simultaneously, the tween’s problems need to be solved in order to regain stability. Because this imbalance is what sparks the ghostly encounter in the first place, the only way forward in the world of the tween ghost story is to fix the imbalance: the stuck ghost needs to end a long-lived reality, and the protagonist needs to move beyond her state of flux and accept her new life as a tween. In this sense, stuck vs. flux pays homage to the Gothic convention of doubling—two extremes must be mitigated. Also notable is that both the ghost and the tween are incredibly lonely in their journeys, and the common bond of loneliness or friendlessness is often what connects them. To help a ghost move on is to help normalize in the new reality of a tween. No child is as off balance as the tween protagonist—she is not a child,

but not a teenager; she is not independent, but not completely dependent. In other words, both girls in a tween ghost story—the ghost and the protagonist—need to transition into a new state of being, and the particular generic elements of a tween ghost story (change in tween’s familial and living situation, appearance of the ghost, rejection by the parental figure, recognition of being on one’s own, gain in agency to help the ghost move on, emergence as a more confident tween) are precisely what make this happen.

In the case of the text *Wait Till Helen Comes*, 12-year-old tween protagonist Molly and her younger stepsister Heather are both struggling with their new life as part of a blended family. In the very beginning of the story, the family moves away from their cozy home in Baltimore to live in the country in a converted old church; both parents are artists, and the idea of the country—all the extra room for painting and pottery, a fresh start for everyone—prompts this move. But Heather has made things uncomfortable in the household from the very beginning. As Molly explains, “in the six months that Mom and Dave have been married, things had gotten very tense in our house, and, as far as I could see, Heather was responsible for most of the bad feelings” (WTHC 8). On the day they arrive at the new house, Heather reluctantly follows as Molly goes exploring in the woods. When they happen upon a graveyard, however, Molly is terrified while Heather is fascinated; Molly runs away from the graveyard to her mother, sobbing, “You never told me we were going to have a bunch of dead people buried in the backyard” (WTHC 18). What Molly and Heather soon discover is that the graveyard is haunted by a young girl Heather’s age named Helen Harper, and readers soon realize that Helen has her eyes on stealing Heather away, but Heather simply sees Helen as her friend. When Molly tries to talk to her mother about this, she is repeatedly shot down; her mother complains, “Honestly, Molly ... reading all that poetry is making you morbid” (WTHC 50). When Molly tries to

explain, “But, Mom, if you’d been there—” it becomes clear to Molly that her mother does not believe her. When Molly creeps to the cemetery late one night, following Heather to one of her meetings with Helen, Molly actually sees Helen appear above her grave: “I saw the glimmer of blue light shape itself into the figure of a girl no bigger than Heather. She wore a white dress, and her hair, as dark as Heather’s, tumbled in waves down her back. Her features were indistinct, her eyes in shadow, but I knew who she was” (107). Molly is scared, and she again tries running to her mom for support, crying, “You don’t understand, Mom!” and throws herself at her, trying to climb in her lap. “There’s something awful here,” Molly tries to explain, but her mother responds by grabbing Molly’s shoulders and holding her away, looking at her as if she were crazy (116). Both Heather and Molly see the ghost because they are both young girls in a vulnerable state of flux; the parents and Michael—Molly’s methodically-minded 10-year-old brother—do not. Michael is emphasized throughout as being a logical, scientific child, complete with extensive collections of pinned insects as well as a firm belief that their new life at this new house will take some adjusting to, but is generally fine. He doesn’t worry himself about trying to get along with Heather and instead focuses on his own pursuits. When annoyed by Molly’s repeated claims that there is a ghost, he yells at her in frustration, “I know it’s not a ghost Molly. It’s just not possible” (WTHC 89). Molly herself starts to see that she is truly alone; at one point she feels “overwhelmed with a terrible feeling of sadness and despair,” but when she thinks about running to her mother, she realizes, her mother “would only laugh ... or worse, get cross” (WTHC 60). While both Molly and Heather are experiencing this haunting, it is only Molly who feels truly isolated and ridiculed because of it. She is all alone.

Pam Conrad’s *Stonewords* is very different than *Wait Till Helen Comes*, in that the plot does not surround what appears to be a menacing, scary ghost: the ghost is instead Zoe’s best

friend. Zoe has lived with her grandparents since she was four years old, and she met the ghost Zoe Louise on the very first night she was dropped off by her mother. Zoe describes Zoe Louise as follows: “The girl wore a lavender cotton dress with tiny pink buttons, and her hair was neatly parted in the center and bound in two thick braids. Below each ear was an enormous, fussy bow. I had never seen a little girl so pretty before. Or so translucent. She was like a block of ice that I could see, and see through at the same time” (S 14). The girls soon become constant companions; four-year-old Zoe “never tried to hide [Zoe Louise] in those days from [her] grandparents” (S 15). As Zoe explains, “It never occurred to me. After all, she’d sit right beside me. In the open” (S 15). While it is a bit of a deviation that so young a child would connect with a ghost, it is important to remember that Zoe’s mother abandoned her at a young age, leaving her vulnerable to connect with a ghost who has also been cast away. More importantly, it is only when Zoe is roughly a 12-year-old tween that her relationship with the ghost Zoe Louise becomes volatile. Zoe is in a state of flux; she is trying to move forward in life, grow up, be more mature, but Zoe Louise is stuck; she is still 10 years old, still in the same dress, still repeating the same stories, still playing the same old games. But Zoe no longer wants to play dolls or build snowmen. As Zoe explains, “things were always changing. Except Zoe Louise herself, who didn’t seem to be growing older, as I was” (S 22). As Zoe grows, she starts to notice that her grandparents “had always gotten that patient sound to their voices” when she mentioned Zoe Louise, so Zoe stops talking about her and lets her grandparents believe that Zoe Louise is just an imaginary friend she has outgrown (S 25). Unlike Molly in *Wait Till Helen Comes*, Zoe does not initially fear the ghost Zoe Louise and run to her guardian for protection. Instead, it is only when Zoe reaches an age almost beyond childhood that she has a big realization: Zoe Louise is a ghost because Zoe Louise must have died. Upon realizing this, Zoe is inconsolable. As she lay on her

bed considering the death of her friend, “tears ran from the corners of [her] eyes down into [her] ears” (S 47). Zoe laments, “not my beautiful Zoe Louise, my first friend” (S 47). But in this realization is another, more terrifying one: “There was no one to speak to, no one to tell that [her] oldest friend had died” (S 89). Like Molly, Zoe tries to run to her guardian’s lap for comfort. Zoe approaches her grandmother: “Can I sit in your lap, Grandma? You know. Like I used to?” (S 79) Her grandmother welcomes her, but the feeling is gone. Zoe describes the moment: “I moved in front of her, sat across her legs, and put my arms around her neck. Where my cheek used to nuzzle against her soft chest, now my face was even with hers” (S 79-80). Though her grandmother hugs her close, Zoe laments, “it wasn’t the same. I tried to let myself melt into her arms, tried to feel the old feeling—safe from echoing bathrooms, dark cellars, mysterious staircases—and even though she stroked my hair like she used to, tucking strands behind my ear, it wasn’t the same anymore. It didn’t make me safe.” (S 80). Zoe is so emotionally isolated at this point, all she can do is repeat to herself “She is dead” (S 96). In understanding this death, Zoe Louise becomes, like Helen in *Wait Till Helen Comes*, something to fear; as Zoe explains, “Zoe Louise was dead and she was a ghost and I wondered how long she would continue to haunt me” (S 96). Zoe, reacting to her realization that Zoe Louise is a ghost, is now isolated by both grief over Zoe Louises’ death and fear—now that she knows the truth—of Zoe Louise’s continued appearances.

Time Windows by Kathryn Reiss also results in the isolation and fear of the tween protagonist. The text begins in the typical tween ghost story manner: 13-year-old Miranda and her parents are driving away from their old life in New York City to live in a small town called Garnet in Massachusetts. Miranda’s mother Helen, a doctor, has the opportunity to open a private practice there, and Miranda’s father Philip is excited to take time off from teaching and

work to fix up the old, big house they have purchased. As Miranda tours the new house, she finds a beautiful old dollhouse in the attic, an exact replica of the house. But right away, something isn't right. When she looks through the windows of the dollhouse, she is able to watch the previous residents of the house going about their daily lives. At first, she tries to discuss it with her parents, but her mother is dismissive: "You probably just saw shadows—they played a trick on you" (TW 15). Very soon, however, Miranda starts to believe she should keep the dollhouse to herself and stops trying to discuss it with her parents: "She had a strong sense that the dollhouse must be kept private. It would reveal its secrets to her, but it didn't want outsiders around" (TW 33). These secrets, however, are not necessarily harmless. When Miranda watches through the windows one afternoon, "A woman swept in on a wave of magnolia perfume, and Miranda's heart leaped in her throat. Terror poured into her stomach. She was going to be sick. She was going to die. *Helpmehelpmehelpmehelpme!* a voice screamed in her head." (36) The dollhouse woman who causes Miranda so much terror is Dorothy's mother Lucinda. Miranda watches, helpless, as Dorothy is locked in and dies in the attic, again and again. But what becomes even more terrifying for Miranda is that "it wasn't just the dollhouse that showed her the past. She saw it happening right here in her own house, like repeat performances of very old plays. A drama played out in three different times with three different casts, yet the same story unfolding in each, the same lines being spoken." (TW 117). Miranda's mother is beginning to act like Lucinda, and Miranda can no longer run to her for support; in fact, Miranda is becoming afraid of her. At one point Helen actually slaps Miranda as they drive home in the car, to the astonishment of both Miranda and her father: "In one movement, Helen tore her hands from the wheel, turned in her seat, and slapped Miranda across the face. Philip caught Helen's hand as it flew back for yet another blow, and Miranda collapsed against the side window" (TW 89). When

Philip questions Helen, appalled by her behavior, Helen responds as Lucinda might have: “I won’t have a whining child in this car!” (89). For Miranda, the appearance of the ghosts and the fact that she is the only one who can see them has placed her in a lonely position. The fact that she keeps witnessing the events leading up to Dorothy’s death leads her to believe that she must be seeing these ghosts for a reason, and—because her mother’s actions are becoming increasingly erratic and violent—Miranda has only so much time to figure out what to do.

Discovering Death

Key to each of these stories is the plot point involving the tween’s growing awareness of death. As critic Holly Blackford is quick to point out, “meditation upon loss is a common concern of the adolescent novel” (101). Further, according to the National Institutes of Mental Health, children from ages 9-10 through adolescence “begin to comprehend fully that death is irreversible; that all things die and that they, too, will die someday.” The tween ghost story, then, with its tween protagonist in an unstable, changing world, offers a perfect backdrop for this growing comprehension because it amplifies it, makes it more present, more tangible. In *Wait Till Helen Comes*, Molly, who has a cemetery in the backyard, is forced to face death every day. In *Time Windows*, Miranda witnesses a little girl starving to death. And in *Stonewords*, Zoe discovers that her best friend Zoe Louise is a ghost, is dead. Molly in *Wait Till Helen Comes* offers (as she stands over Helen’s grave) a thoughtful description of the growing awareness of death these tween protagonists share over the course of their stories:

I stared at the earth mounded over Helen’s grave. Beneath it was her coffin. In her coffin were her bones. I imagined her skeleton lying on its back, her skull staring up into darkness, held fast by the earth, cradled in the oak tree’s roots, trapped forever.

I looked at my own arms, still outstretched, and saw veins running blue under my skin, the bones beneath them. My skeleton. My bones. Someday they would be all that was left of me.

They would lie all alone in the dark and the cold while the years spun past, years I would never see.

I wouldn't feel the sun on my back anymore; I wouldn't hear the wind rustling in the leaves; I wouldn't smell the sweet scent of honeysuckle; I wouldn't see the green grass growing over me. I wouldn't think about what I would do tomorrow. I wouldn't write any poems or read any books. All my memories would die with me, all my thoughts and ideas.

I backed away from Helen's grave. It was horrible to die, horrible. Just to think of myself ending, being gone from the earth forever, terrified me. As a shadow slanted across the tombstone, I wondered if it might not be better to live on as a ghost; at least some part of Helen remained.

Turning my back on the oak tree, I ran out of the graveyard, anxious to get away from the bones buried under my feet, but knowing I couldn't get away from the bones under my skin. No matter how fast I ran, they would always be there, always, even when I would no longer be alive to feel them." (WTHC 146)

Each protagonist sees or imagines skeletons, bones, or dead bodies; when Zoe in *Stonewords* looks at the ghost Zoe Louise critically in the sunlight, she notes that the light made "her face look like a soft jellyfish" and "the bones in her fingers showed like little neons, glowing" (S 37). When Zoe enters Zoe Louise's time, she is terrified to find herself invisible, ghostlike: "I looked down at my hand, then held it up to the brightly curtained window and watched the shadows of

my skeleton wiggle beneath my flesh” (S 62). Further, entering Zoe Louise’s world makes Zoe the ghost, and Zoe finds this unbearable; she cannot handle “the idea of someone not seeing” her (S 50). It is this terror of not existing that is shared between Molly and Zoe, this fear of nothingness. In *Time Windows*, Miranda’s fears are more associated with her heart-wrenching experience witnessing a little girl waste away, but Miranda, too, witnesses death and is horrified: “Illuminated in the circle of light lay a small, huddled figure wrapped almost entirely in a tattered gray blanket. One tiny hand was flung outside the blanket—and long blonde curls fanned out across the floor” (TW 168). Miranda has found the remains of the little girl Dorothy in her attic, mummified in a small, airtight crawlspace. Her terror is extreme, and she cannot get the image out of her mind. In *Wait Till Helen Comes*, Molly and Heather fall through the floorboards of Helen’s old house, and Molly ends up tripping on what she assumes is a rock. But when she holds it up and “realize[s] what sort of eyes [she] was staring into, [she] recoiled in horror and hurled the thing into the darkness” (WTHC 168-169)—Molly has found a human skull, and eventually realizes she is sitting in the darkness with two skeletons. All three protagonists are assaulted by images of death and dead bodies—for these tweens, coming to terms with death occurs in a very real, visceral way. However, it is Zoe in *Stonewords* who arguably experiences the most vivid of death images. As opposed to just imagining death or seeing Zoe Louise actually dead, Zoe is instead forced to watch as Zoe Louise slowly rots away. At one point, Zoe watches as “a clump of [Zoe Louise’s] hair fell from her head onto her lap” (S 58), at another point Zoe can “see the skin of [Zoe Louise’s] head through her rotting hair and through that the plate of her skull, through that the pale, watery blood soaking through her brain” (S 73), and later Zoe describes Zoe Louise’s “awful eyes [as] held to her face with the thinnest cobweb of lids” (S 74). In other words, as Zoe becomes more and more aware that her friend Zoe Louise is actually

dead, Zoe Louise, in turn, gruesomely decays. Near the end of the story, before Zoe figures out how to help Zoe Louise, Zoe describes her friend as follows:

Zoe Louise had never looked more terrible. It was hard to tell what was holding her together other than bits of shredded clothes and gristly tendons. When Oscar [the family pug] saw who it was, he went to her gaily, oblivious of her condition, and ran a slow circle around her, his wagging tail making his rump rock left and right. She bent over to run her bony fingers over the top of his head, and when she did a thick runny fluid ran off her shoulders and throat and onto the floor at her feet. Then with tremendous effort, she straightened up and her lone remaining lusterless eye looked right at me. (S 94-95)

When Zoe tries to confront Zoe Louise saying “I think you’re dead,” Zoe Louise only gets angry. “And who’s fault is that?” she yells, and as she “stamp[s] her foot ... a long thin bone tipped out from her ankle and fell on the floor with a rattle” (S 95). While all three tween protagonists take their experiences with their hauntings and the incredulity of their guardians as signs that they must move forward on their own in order to save these ghosts, Zoe is the only protagonist who has a ghost explicitly blame and taunt her. Zoe Louise yells at her (“You’re no help!”) and pleads with her (“It’s not too late”) (S 96). Yet the other ghosts—Helen and Dorothy—are also, in their own ways, crying out for help. Helen uses her power to lure young girls into the pond to drown, hoping one of them will stay with her in the afterlife and be her friend. Helen is separated from her parents and so lonely that Molly can’t help but feel a little sorry for her and wish she could ease her pain. Dorothy appears to Miranda again and again through the dollhouse windows—whether it is Dorothy herself or her repentant mother making these images appear makes really no difference—regardless, Dorothy’s story is being broadcast to Miranda in order for Miranda to help. This is not to say these protagonists don’t have a choice, necessarily—but the ghosts’

insistent presence and the knowledge that all of these deaths were accidental (and thus “wrong” somehow) moves the tween protagonist from fear to action: another important plot element of the tween ghost story.

Taking Action

Action for Molly in *Wait Till Helen Comes* first involves research at a local library with her brother Michael. She is looking for evidence that Helen truly exists, but she is also sure Helen is trying to hurt Heather somehow and is trying to find information to save her. Molly and her brother soon discover that there really was a girl named Helen Harper who had once lived nearby their home (in an old, burned down house near a pond where Heather keeps disappearing to), and they also find evidence that while Helen’s parents were never recovered from the wreckage of the house, Helen is indeed buried in the cemetery. According to local legend, “people claim the child’s ghost haunts the graveyard and the pond,” and as the librarian tells Molly and Michael somewhat dismissively, “[t]hey actually believe the poor girl is responsible for some of the drownings” (WTHC 87). Apparently, other young girls Heather’s age have died in the pond. As the cemetery groundskeeper Mr. Simmons explains to Molly, “a girl drowned three years ago. She was one of these lonely little creatures. No friends, nobody who seemed to care much about her—you know the kind. Well, she disappeared one day, and this is where they finally found her ... ten feet under ... and all tangled up in weeds” (WTHC 92). Faced with this knowledge and its implications (Heather is also one of those “lonely little creatures”) as well as Michael’s continued disbelief in Helen (“[Heather]’s made it all up somehow!” Michael claims), Molly realizes she is the only one who can help Heather (WTHC 88). Further, even though Molly is continually dismissed by her brother, her stepfather, and even her mother as being

morbid and fearful (and worse: a liar), by making the decision that no matter how scared she is, she “promised [her]self that [she] would protect [Heather] somehow. No matter how much trouble Heather had caused, [Molly] couldn’t let Helen lead her into Harper Pond,” Molly clearly asserts herself and takes action regardless of other’s opinions (WTHC 139). Further, in taking action to save Heather (in a dramatic scene in the middle of a thunderstorm, Molly pulls Heather away from Helen in the pond, and takes shelter with her in the half burned old house—where they fall through the floorboards), Molly discovers that she is also helping Helen. Through saving Heather, Molly has unintentionally opened and landed in the space where Helen’s parents have been buried so long: the cellar. Helen is no longer stuck; she is finally able to reach her parents. Molly describes the scene: “‘Mama, Mama, I’m sorry,’ Helen wailed above us. She looked more tragic than frightening, and I ached with pity for her. She seemed unaware of Heather and me. All that existed for her was her own sorrow” (WTHC 169). Helen, Molly finally acknowledges, is a little girl, just like Heather—and in many ways, just like Molly, too. Molly continues, “As I watched, another figure appeared in the cellar. From mist it seemed to form itself into a woman wearing a long dress. Smiling, she drew Helen to her feet and embraced her, comforting her, stroking her hair, rocking her gently. For several seconds, the two figures shimmered in the darkness. Then they disappeared as quickly as images on a screen vanish when the projector is turned off” (WTHC 170). Through her resolve to help her stepsister, Molly also realizes the importance of helping Helen; consequently, Helen is no longer “scary.” She is, as Molly mentions, a tragic figure who is finally reunited with her mother. Death is not, as Molly had thought, a cold, lonely place—it was only through a series of horrible events that Helen became the figure she was. By facing her fear of death, Molly finds that perhaps it is not so scary after all.

In *Stonewords*, Zoe also resolves to discover the history of Zoe Louise. However, her very first realization—that Zoe Louise is dead—is something Zoe unintentionally discovers. Zoe must endure yearly visits from her slightly crazy mother (a woman described as having “empty eyes” and “mighty strange ways” (S 2)), and is encouraged on one of these visits to follow her out into the woods to collect vines and pinecones to make wreaths. As Zoe walks behind her mother, she gets caught in prickly brambles. “What did you do, find the rosebushes?” asks Zoe’s mother (S 44). Zoe is incredulous; why would roses be planted in the woods? But Zoe’s mother goes on to explain: “These are the memory roses that were planted when that little girl died ... they said [the child’s] mother was so heartbroken when she died that she planted a bank of roses along the back here, pink roses, the little girl’s favorite color, so that in the spring they would always bloom on her birthday” (S 44-45). Zoe is chilled to the bone. When she asks her mother the name of the child, deep down she already knows: “Zoe. Zoe something. That was the name I had seen on the old tombstone, but it was mostly worn off” (S 46). Zoe is hit with two horrible realizations at once: she is named after Zoe Louise, and Zoe Louise is dead. After this discovery, Zoe Louise starts haunting Zoe in a grotesque parade of slow decay. Because of this, Zoe decides to read through newspapers roughly corresponding to the date on Zoe’s tombstone in order to find out what exactly happened to her friend. Her grandparents get involved, enjoying the tour through local history, even though they don’t realize what Zoe is truly doing. They come upon a story about their very own home from the mid 1880s:

Condolences and heartfelt sorrow are extended to the LaBarge family of Helen Road this week ... at the tragic death of their young daughter, Zoe Louise. ...A devastating fire was confined to the kitchen area by local firemen and volunteers who had gathered at the

house for a birthday celebration. While both LaBarge children were in the kitchen when the fire began, only the younger escaped, and the elder perished in the flames. (S 108)

Almost immediately upon reading this (Zoe must first feign innocence to her grandparents' claims of "what a coincidence! Remember your imaginary friend was named Zoe Louise?"), Zoe takes action. She heads up the old staircase (their worlds are connected through a back staircase in the house) to find Zoe Louise and try to save her. Remember: Zoe is terrified of being the ghost; she is terrified of not being seen. In the moment when Zoe Louise starts trying to light the candles on her birthday cake, Zoe explains that, "My transparent body was taking on a weird vibration. It was fear. Fear with no fingers to make tremble, fear with no eyes to make tear. Fear with no defenses, no body to absorb it and protect me" (S 117). Zoe tries to stop Zoe Louise, but she ignores her. Zoe's feeble attempts to stop Zoe Louise show Zoe just how insubstantial she is in this world:

I was powerless, and knew that as long as this fear enveloped me I was just as weak as smoke. Nothing I did worked. I just passed through Zoe Louise like a wave of anxiety. I had to shake the fear, had to strip myself of all the terror that possessed me, and taking an instant, knowing an instant here could be a year somewhere else, I slowly took the time I needed—to think of something else, anything else, something empty of fear. (S 119)

Significantly, Zoe calls up the image of her absent mother in order to calm herself and gain courage. As Zoe explains, "There was no fear there. Anger, maybe confusion, but never fear" (119). Because she is able to use her mother's image in this way, Zoe is able to pull Zoe Louise from the burning kitchen and pull her as far away from the flames and smoke as she can. Zoe loves Zoe Louise, and Zoe describes the moment of holding her friend's unconscious, smoke-wracked body: "I held on to Zoe Louise, balanced her there between death and time with all the

strength I had ... and, I know now, with all the love I had” (S 122). When the fireman arrive and Zoe Louise comes to, Zoe searches her eyes, and tries speaking to her. But Zoe Louise does not hear her, does not see her. Zoe feels sadness, but triumph: “I knew then for sure it was over. And Zoe Louise was alive” (S 125). Unlike Molly in *Wait Till Helen Comes*, Zoe is able to actually “save” the ghost—give Zoe Louise the life she deserved. Yet Molly’s is a triumph too—Helen finally finds peace and comfort in death because of Molly’s actions.

Finally, in *Time Windows*, Miranda also feels the tween protagonist’s need to take charge. As she says herself, “I just feel like I’m supposed to *do* something. You know, change things” (TW 218). To do this, Miranda does several things. First, of course, she watches the scenes the dollhouse shows her carefully, trying to piece together what terrible things have happened in this house and what clues the dollhouse might be giving her. As the story goes on, she visits the dollhouse despite her parents’ disapproval; at one point she is even forbidden from going in the attic because she is being, as her parents see it, too antisocial. Secondly, Miranda’s flute teacher, Mrs. Wainwright, prides herself on being “the town’s amateur historian,” and Miranda picks her brain for all the information she can (TW 52). Miranda even tries speaking to Dorothy at her grave in the cemetery, asking her what she wants. When all the animals, bugs, and plants seem to come alive around her, Miranda comes to an important realization: “Dorothy died too soon. It was a mistake. ... She doesn’t *want* to rest in peace. She wants not to have died in the first place!” (219). Miranda comes home eager to figure out the mystery, but in a terrifying repetition of past events, her mother grabs her and punishes her, the very same way Lucinda punished Dorothy:

Helen grabbed Miranda’s arm and propelled her out of the room. Then she half pushed, half dragged her up the stairs. The magnolia scent was even more intense on the second

floor. They stopped at the foot of the attic stairs. “Get up there!” Helen shoved Miranda at the steps so viciously that Miranda fell to her knees. “I said, get up there!” Miranda moved slowly up the stairs, her shins aching from the fall. (TW 223-224).

The scariest part of all is that when Miranda looks at her mother closely, she sees that “the cold eyes glitter[ing] from her mother’s face were Lucinda’s own” (TW 224). Miranda feels as if she is trapped in a nightmare, and there truly seems to be very little time to make things right.

However, Miranda is also in the attic, and uses this opportunity—despite her fear of her possessed mother—to look through the dollhouse. After re-watching the moment after Lucinda locks Dorothy in the attic, Miranda realizes that the pinging sound she keeps hearing is Lucinda dropping the attic key on the kitchen floor. Daring the wrath of her own mother, Miranda quietly descends the stairs and heads to the kitchen. Frantically, Miranda stabs a kitchen knife into the linoleum, trying to get to the original flooring below. She finds nothing, and in “angry desperation” she pulls “back more of the floor covering, her breath coming in short sobs” (TW 233). At last she finds the key, and then tiptoes back upstairs with it, fearful that her mother will appear at any second and punish or—worse—hurt her. Behind the dollhouse again, Miranda waits for just the right moment to slide the key into the dollhouse, and Dorothy finds it with “an exclamation of surprise” (TW 237). “I can’t do anymore!” Miranda yells hopelessly at the dollhouse and Dorothy, “Now you have to save yourself!” (TW 238). Miranda has done all she can to help Dorothy out of being stuck forever as an 8-year-old girl. With a “half cry, half laugh” Dorothy unlocks the door and escapes the attic. Miranda—by defying her parents initially (and her possessed mother ultimately), by taking chances like ripping up the linoleum in the kitchen, and by listening to her instincts that tell her Dorothy’s death is truly a mistake—she is able to set things right.

Emerging with a New Understanding

In the conclusion of the tween ghost story, the protagonist emerges with a new understanding of life and death as well as the confidence to move forward in her own life. The tween protagonist is no longer floundering about, unsure of where to go, what to believe, what to do. In short, she is no longer in the state of flux she began her story in. For Molly in *Wait Till Helen Comes*, her fear of death and the graveyard have been replaced with a sense of peace—both in her family (she and Heather are now close and she looks forward to their years together as sisters) and her views on death. As she explains at the end of the story, “[t]he cemetery had lost its gloom, and I no longer feared it” (WTHC 182). In fact, Molly and Heather now view the old cemetery as a place to relax, read stories together, and enjoy the fresh air. In *Time Windows*, Miranda’s rather traumatic memories of her early time in Garnet are replaced by countless excursions with her parents, and even a closer friendship with a neighbor boy. The difference for Miranda is that she emerges with a new outlook on life because she was able to change the events of the past. However, because she has changed time, she cannot recall what exactly happened through the course of the story. When Miranda tries to remember what exactly happened with the dollhouse and with her mother, “[t]hreads of memory, like dreams, tried to weave themselves into a story. But—as with dreams—the harder she thought, face bent in a frown of concentration, the strands fluttered like spider gossamer, broke, and were gone” (TW ii). Regardless, it is clear that Miranda’s pull toward the dollhouse and her efforts to change Dorothy’s fate ultimately benefit everyone: Miranda’s father and mother seem even happier than they were at the beginning of the story (before anything bad had happened), and Miranda has been able to create such a close bond with the neighbors that she might even get to go away with

them on a family vacation. *Stonewords* ends with arguably the most poignant conclusion. While Zoe has faced her fears of Zoe Louise's decaying body and entered her world to save her, she has also lost her best friend. On yet another walk with her mother in the woods, a walk in which she finds no rosebushes, Zoe describes her feelings of loss and confusion:

I knew for certain now that within the borders of the present day, there had been no death. No little girl had died over a hundred years ago. And no grieving mother had planted a stand of rosebushes in her memory. But surely it was true that a little girl had once come calling for me to come see her birthday pony. I stood in my moment in time, felt my face give way, and I started to cry. (S 128)

What is beautiful about this moment is that it is Zoe's wayward mother who comes to her support. Zoe's mother approaches her:

"Oh, Zoe," my mother said softly. "What's wrong?" And without my having to tell her, and maybe because she was a little crazy, she never asked again. She just wrapped her cape around me and we stood there like that, holding on to each other, like two statues maybe, yes, like two tiny statues in an antique globe, and the light snow swirled about us like forgiveness. (S 128)

For Zoe, the ultimate realization is not exactly a better understanding of death, but through this experience with haunting and death she has gained a more mature understanding of her relationship with her mother. As her mother leaves, she turns to Zoe and tells her she is sorry: for everything. When she says this, Zoe explains, "I smiled at her, maybe the first time I'd ever really smiled at her in my whole life, and I backed up the stairs to the house. 'It's all right,' I told her and in that instant I meant it. It really was all right." (129-130). Throughout *Stonewords*, Zoe

harbors resentment and anger, and it is only through her experience with the ghost Zoe Louise that she is able to finally accept her mother as she truly is.

Through examining multiple examples of tween ghost stories and illustrating the ways in which they conform to the plot conventions and narrative arc as I have articulated them, it is clear that a unique system is at work that makes the tween ghost story so effective at articulating the tumultuous transition from child to teenager. Tweens face the challenge of growing up in many different ways, and while it is true that other children's/young-adult literature addresses these concerns in a variety of successful ways, it is the tween ghost story's specific and consistent articulation of the struggle of moving away from childhood and into the teenage years that makes this sub-genre worthy of study and understanding. By using a ghost to create a situation so off balance (a ghost who is stuck, a protagonist in flux), and by following a particular pattern of plot development, the tween ghost story is cleverly designed to help the protagonist navigate through the scary situation of growing up—through gaining agency by saving the ghost or helping the ghost move on—and ultimately move beyond childish fears and concerns and into a new life: the life of a tween.

Appendix A: The “Murder or Cover Up” Storyline

For readers familiar with *The Dollhouse Murders* by Betty Ren Wright and *Deep and Dark and Dangerous* by Mary Downing Hahn, the delineation of these works as outside the tween ghost story genre might initially seem counterintuitive. After all, the murder or cover up storyline does take advantage of many of the plot elements of a tween ghost story. Yet the ghost story/murder mystery ultimately falls outside the sub-genre because it turns the protagonist into a passive witness rather than a young adult with a stronger sense of independence. For example, *The Dollhouse Murders* by Betty Ren Wright begins as many tween ghost stories do: 12-year-old Amy goes to stay in the country with her Aunt Clare, who is “staying temporarily in the huge old house that had belonged to Amy’s great-grandparents” (DM 13). Amy hardly knows this aunt and feels shy around her because Aunt Clare “had lived in Chicago since long before Amy was born” (DM 13). Like the traditional tween ghost story protagonist, Amy is facing substantial change in her life: she’s struggling to adjust to staying in a new home with a relative she barely knows. However, while many ghost story protagonists deal with adapting to their new environment, what is notably different about the murder or cover up storyline is that it is specifically the adult’s repression of the yet-to-be-known incident that causes the tension that makes adapting such a challenge in the first place. For example, when Amy shows enthusiasm for the big old house and a beautiful dollhouse in the attic—an exact replica of the house—Aunt Clare becomes rather tight-lipped and nervous, dodging questions about the past, clearly indicating that she is not telling Amy the whole story of the house. When Amy asks Clare why she moved away to Chicago at eighteen years old, Aunt Clare explains haltingly that her grandparents “were killed—in an accident—” (DM 22). In reality, Clare’s grandparents were brutally murdered, and the killer was never found—a fact Amy only discovers through research

at the local library. Later, Amy learns that Clare had always suspected her high school boyfriend Tom of the murders, but he died soon after, and no evidence ever linked him to the case. In short, Clare has always felt that the murders of her grandparents were her fault. Thus, when the ghostly presence appears—in this case, a spirit who moves dolls in the dollhouse at night, placing them in the rooms they died in to reenact the murders—Aunt Clare becomes outraged, assuming that Amy has been moving the dolls out of mischief or morbid curiosity. Of course Amy has not been tampering with dolls, but her aunt will not accept the truth: a ghost is trying to communicate with her. Things become scarier for Amy when she sees the dollhouse light up late one night and actually witnesses the dolls moving on their own. Again she tries to tell her Aunt what is going on. Finally, on a dramatic night complete with thunder and lightning, Aunt Clare truly listens to Amy and accepts that Amy’s advanced knowledge of the incident must mean that there is a ghost manipulating the dollhouse. Ultimately, Amy and Clare follow clues from the dollhouse to discover a note written by Clare’s grandmother on the night of the murder. The note indicates that the handyman was to blame, and Clare is finally free of the secret guilt she has been harboring all these years: “Aunt Clare dropped into a chair and leaned back. ‘I just can’t take it in. Do you see what this means? Tom didn’t kill Grandma and Grandpa. It wasn’t my fault they died!’”(DM 139). While Amy plays sleuth and does face the fear of dealing with the dollhouse, the person who truly grows from the experience, the person who emerges changed with a new outlook on life is Aunt Clare. As she says to Amy the next morning, “I feel so *light* ... as if a whole world has slipped off my shoulders. I can’t tell you how different I feel!” (DM 142). Even physically, Claire has transformed: “[t]ight little lines in Aunt Clare’s face melted away, and her pale cheeks flushed with color. She looked younger, gentler, prettier than Amy had ever seen before” (DM 140). Clearly, Clare is the one who benefits at the end of the story—Amy is just

ready to finish her stay and go home. Therefore, *The Dollhouse Murders* is not an empowering tween ghost story.

An example of the “cover up” plot emerges in Mary Downing Hahn’s *Deep and Dark and Dangerous*. Again, this plot in many ways resembles a traditional tween ghost story: 13-year-old Ali goes to stay with her artistic, free-spirited Aunt Dulcie for the summer. Ali has been enlisted as a babysitter to her 4-year-old cousin Emma, and the three of them are staying at the family’s old lake property, Gull Cottage, a place neither Dulcie nor Ali’s mother Claire have returned to since they were children. From the beginning of the story, it is clear that Ali’s mother, a nervous, depressed woman, hates the idea of Ali going there for some mysterious reason, and she repeatedly objects to the plan. Ali explains her mother’s reaction: “Mom squeezed my hand. ‘I know you think I’m too protective,’ she said, ‘but I want to keep you safe. You’re so young. You don’t know the terrible things that can happen, how quickly one’s life can change’” (DDD 20). When Ali tries to ask her mother what exactly she’s talking about, however, her mother responds, “My head hurts. I can’t talk anymore.” (20). When Ali, her aunt, and Emma arrive at the cabin, Aunt Dulcie (like Amy’s Aunt Clare in *The Dollhouse Murders*), immediately becomes tense and irritable when faced with questions about Gull Cottage’s past. For example, when Ali questions her Aunt Dulcie about a little girl named Teresa who went missing when Dulcie was a child (a little girl who is currently haunting Ali under the nickname “Sissy,” by the way), Dulcie responds stiffly, “I don’t know anyone named Teresa” (DDD 55). Ali discovers the truth by questioning people from the beach town: Teresa took a boat out alone and drowned in the lake the last summer her mother and aunt stayed there as children—many locals insist that Dulcie and Claire were there and are hiding something about that day. The ghost Sissy continues to appear at the beach and taunt Ali and her cousin Emma; sometimes Sissy seems almost

dangerous. When Ali tries to discuss this with her aunt, however, Dulcie will hear none of it. When the ghost Sissy forces Ali and Emma into a boat on a foggy day, causing them to tip over in the water and then grip the overturned boat to survive, Sissy finally tells Ali why she has been bothering them all summer: “I want you to make Dulcie and Claire tell the truth ... They should be punished for what they did. It’s not fair. They’re grown up, and I’m— ... It’s all their fault. Make them tell. Or they’ll be sorry” (DDD 133). When Ali counters that Teresa had been alone in the boat, Sissy gives Ali “a look of pure hatred,” and whines: “Dulcie and Claire lied! They’re *still* lying” (DDD 133). Faced with the near drowning of her own daughter and niece, Dulcie finally admits the truth to Ali: Dulcie and Claire had gone out on the lake with Teresa that foggy day long ago; Teresa had jumped in after a doll that had been thrown overboard and accidentally drowned. Scared they would get in trouble, Dulcie and Claire never told anyone what really happened. As Dulcie admits, “It was the worst thing I ever did. I’ve tried to forget about it, pretend it never happened ... But I can’t forget her. And neither can your mother.” (DDD 139). Yet spurred by Ali’s experiences, Dulcie decides to finally admit the truth to the public; she calls her sister and asks her to come to the cabin, and then she calls the local paper. In the end, Sissy can finally rest in peace and Ali’s mother and aunt are finally able to put this bad experience behind them; they both feel rejuvenated and free of this weight that had been pulling them down for so long.

But Ali, the tween protagonist? Ali ends the story having solved the mystery, just like Amy in *The Dollhouse Murders* did, but little else has changed for her. The only major change for Ali is that both her mother and aunt have finally relaxed. Ali has been repeatedly forced to deal with a ghost, almost drowns because of it, and she even endures being punished by her disbelieving aunt again and again—all because her aunt and her mother have been unable to face

the past. Thus, if a necessary generic trait of a tween ghost story is the ultimate agency and self-reliance the experience gives the main character, it is clear that simply witnessing or re-enacting trauma from someone else's past does not work. Yes, the protagonist still has to overcome fear, but it is logically murky why the child—instead of the adults actually involved—must see the ghost. In both *The Dollhouse Murders* and *Deep and Dark and Dangerous*, the tween protagonist acts as merely a proxy for the adult/guardian who is unwilling to deal with these demons from the past on her own. Therefore, we can exclude these types of stories from the tween ghost story sub-genre.

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