



Beth Gutcheon

More Than You Know
ISBN13: 9780060959357

The Story Behind the Book: ***More Than You Know***

by Beth Gutcheon

I began writing this story fifteen years ago when it came to me that being an adolescent in an unhappy family is a lot like being haunted: You are wrestling with strong and bewildering forces that are new to you, and invisible, and often it appears to the adults in your life that you are falling in love with the wrong people and doing those things to your hair merely to annoy. It seemed to me interesting in a story about a very unhappy mother-daughter relationship to add a real ghost to the mix, one who is experienced by Hannah but not by her mother. The ghost appears to Hannah precisely because she is at that point in her life when she is acutely aware that we are all influenced and

tugged around by forces we can't see or sometimes even think about. This is a truth that Edith (her mother in early drafts, later her stepmother) does not acknowledge, which is one of the things that makes Edith so unpleasant and even destructive. Edith (and other characters in the 19th-century part of this story) believes and behaves as if she acts in rational and moral ways when in fact she does not for a moment see that other people's feelings are as real as her own or as important as her own (without which knowledge there is no truly moral behavior).

The rest of the story came together with the setting, the coast of Maine, and the nature of ghosts themselves. Ghosts are very place-specific; they tend to appear to or communicate with people about whom they had strong or unresolved feelings (good or bad) in life; when their people are gone in the natural course of events, they keep appearing in the places where their intense emotions played out. The trouble for a novelist, especially one who is as interested in why the ghost is so stuck in limbo as in what its appearance does to the living, is that once a ghost appears in a place, in a story, you've got little more to do than research who lived in the place and what happened there. But in Maine, they move houses. And Maine was settled first from the sea, starting with small and then quite large villages on the seaward edges of coastal islands. When such villages were later deserted, the buildings on them were often moved to the mainland, which made it possible for me to extend the mystery by having the ghost appear in a building that was not originally a house and did not stand where it stands in Hannah's story.

Hannah's story alternates with that of another family living in the same village many years earlier, a story of another very unhappy mother and daughter and a domestic snarl so intense that it led to a murder. The reader quickly understands that some character from that earlier story must be the defiantly balky and twisted spirit who has refused to move on from life after the body to wherever normal spirits go. Hannah is trying to sort out the puzzle of who the ghost was and what it wants in the hope that if she knew, it might make a difference in her own story. The reader has a more complex puzzle, because the reader has much more information than Hannah ever does, and in the end can solve most of the puzzles to which Hannah wants the answers so badly. Though perhaps not all of them.

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