



We all have that teacher in our past, don't we? The one who made a difference...and started us down the path toward who we are today.

Mr. Hartshorn was that teacher for me. He was my sixth grade English teacher. I wish I could say I was one of his best students, but I wasn't. I was just your average "B" student.

I was quiet and shy in sixth grade. And a little bit scared of Mr. Hartshorn. I was scared of him because he told it like it was. And because he made us give speeches.

Let me be clear. We didn't just have to get up in front of the class to give these speeches. There was a stage at the back of Mr. Hartshorn's classroom. We had to go up ON THE STAGE, where there were bright lights and a podium, and give our speeches from there.

Did I mention I was quiet and shy?

I was also short. I was so short I couldn't see over the podium. So I had to stand beside the podium...which was worse than hiding—I mean, standing behind it because then everyone could see my hands shaking as I read my speech.

I didn't do very well on any of my speeches. And I was in danger of getting far worse than a B in Mr. Hartshorn's class that quarter, so I went to see him after school.

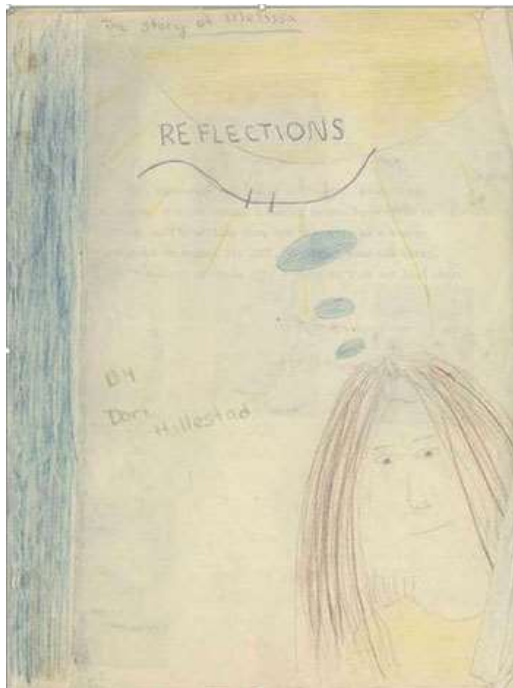
I asked him if he'd give me extra credit if I wrote a novel for him. I don't know what possessed me to ask him that. I'd never written a novel before. But I certainly wasn't going to give another SPEECH for extra credit! What else could I do? I knew I had to do more than just write a short story or two to bring up my grade.

He said, "You write the novel and we'll see."

I worked on my novel every single day after school. I don't remember how many pages the original hand-written version was, but the typed version was 42 pages. My mother typed it for me, which was nice considering it was about a girl whose mother dies!

I felt really good about it when I turned it in. I couldn't believe I'd actually done it! I'd written a whole novel (42 pages!). Just like real authors did. And I sooo wanted to be a real author when I grew up.

I watched Mr. Hartshorn read my novel at his desk. It took him several days. At first I enjoyed watching him. But then I got worried. What if my novel wasn't very good? When I was in fourth grade, a chorus teacher told me I couldn't sing. I was devastated because I loved to sing, and I had no idea I had no talent for singing until



that teacher told me. So now I was afraid Mr. Hartshorn was going to tell me I had no talent for writing, either.

He didn't say much when he returned my novel to me. Or maybe I just don't remember what he said. But I've hung onto the note he stapled to the inside cover all these years:

A NOTE FROM
R. L. Hartshorn

Doc,
Your story is interesting and
basically, very well written.
I appreciate your effort
and am awarding you
a AA for extra
credit, plus a daily grade
of A. This will bring

Your average to a
B⁺ (B+)
The rest will depend
upon your final exam
M.H.

That note meant far more to me than all the extra credit in the world. If Mr. Hartshorn thought my story was “interesting, and basically very well written,” then it was. And maybe, just maybe, I really could be an author when I grew up.

I kept writing because of that note.

But Mr. Hartshorn's influence doesn't end there. I had him again for seventh grade English. We had a drama unit in seventh grade, and the play was “I Remember Mama.” While going up on the stage to give speeches in sixth grade was one of my most traumatic school experiences ever, I wasn't nervous about being in the play. I wanted to be in “I Remember Mama.” And I wanted to play Katrin. Not because it was a lead role, but because Katrin was a writer.

I didn't expect to actually get the part. [See: quiet and shy] But Mr. Hartshorn did indeed cast me as Katrin!

I don't remember much about the performance itself (I'm sure I was fabulous! Haha!), but after it was over, I remember telling Mr. Hartshorn my secret: that I wanted to be a writer just like Katrin.

He said, “Then you have to keep writing. You can't give up when you get rejection letters. Katrin never gave up.”

I never gave up, either, Mr. Hartshorn. I didn't know it at the time, but you gave me the secret to becoming a writer when I was in seventh grade: Keep writing and never give up!

The Ghost Backstage is book 3 in my new Haunted Library series. The Haunted Library is about a ghost boy and a “solid” girl who work together to solve ghostly

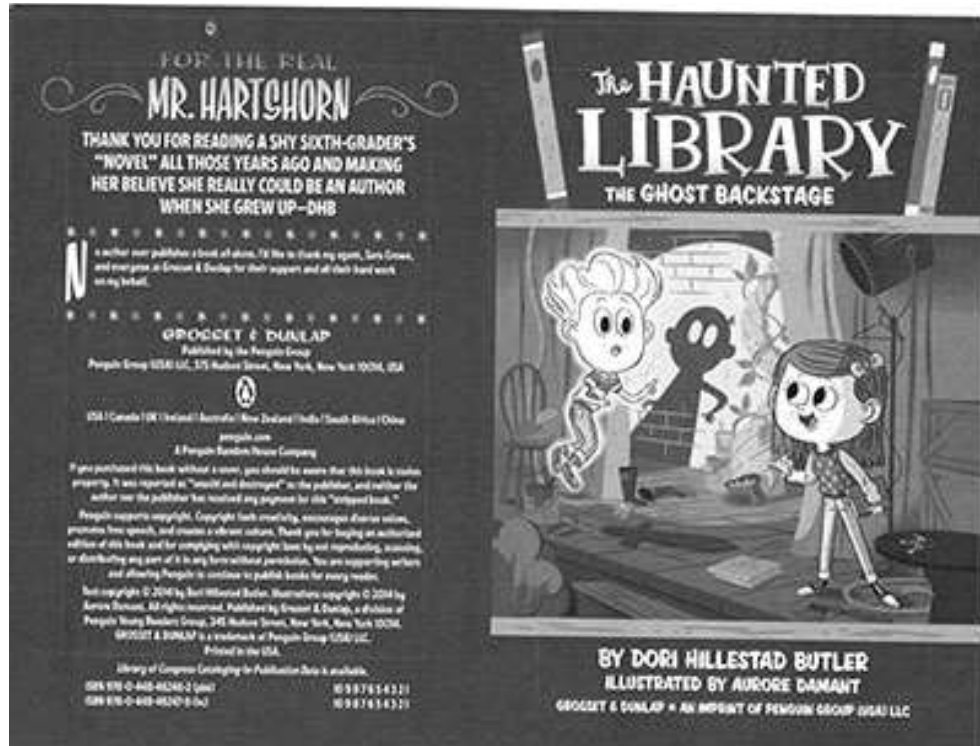
mysteries. In this book, Claire is in the school play...and there's a ghost wreaking havoc backstage. I didn't have to think very hard about what to name the drama teacher.



I never described Mr. Hartshorn in my text, but the very talented [Aurore Damant](#) drew him almost EXACTLY the way I remember the real Mr. Hartshorn. (He's not wearing his glasses in this picture but trust me: he had them!)



I didn't have to think very hard about who to dedicate this book to, either:



I've reread that novel I wrote in sixth grade. It's NOT interesting. Nor is it particularly well written. Even taking into account I was a sixth grader, it's average writing at best. I know that. But Mr. Hartshorn made me FEEL like my novel was interesting and well written. He gave me confidence at a time I desperately needed some.

I've thought of Mr. Hartshorn often over the years. Without his influence, I may not be an author today. Success as an author has very little to do with talent. It's all about putting in the time ("Keep writing!" Mr. Hartshorn said) and never giving up. Maybe that's true of anything in life?

By the way, Mr. Hartshorn, if you're reading this...I actually LIKE to give speeches now! Who'd have thought?