



## The Secret of Spirit Lake

**Jane Haltmaier**

Palmetto Publishing

(357pp)

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*Historical abuses haunt a girl's new seaside home in the intriguing novel The Secret of Spirit Lake.*

In Jane Haltmaier's earnest supernatural novel *The Secret of Spirit Lake*, the inhabitants of a Victorian home contend with treacherous secrets.

To fulfill their dreams of running a watersports store, fourteen-year-old Amy's parents buy a lakeside home in North Carolina. Amy is unhappy about being the new girl in town, but she admits that their new house is charming. She claims its tower as her room. Then she hears rumors that the house is haunted and that a girl who once lived there vanished.

Eighty-five years earlier, in 1938, Penny is orphaned by a fire and is placed in the care of her distant Aunt Lucy, who lives in the same Victorian home that Amy later occupies. Lucy treats Penny as a default nanny for her children. As Amy and Penny navigate their isolation in separate periods, they each meet Sally, a ghost who was Penny's predecessor.

Amy and Penny are developed in parallel to one another: Of similar ages, their situations are compared and contrasted with one another's. Amy complains about her siblings, whom she dubs "little beasts," while Penny has no room for self-indulgence. As Penny develops protective affection for her much younger cousins, Amy warms up to her own family as well. However, while Amy's meetups with her swim team friends and her crush on a neighboring boy flesh out her new life in town, they distract from the book's main focus. More centering are Penny's efforts to help her cousins escape from their "house of horrors." And Sally proves her cleverness throughout, adding touching glimpses of her potential had she lived. Lucy is too typecast, though: A domineering child abuser, she is not developed beyond her biting remarks and stinginess around food.

Throughout, the lake setting is used to reflect people's moods and to build suspense, with references to the weather and to changes in the water proving evocative. For instance, Amy takes note of the wind, hears moaning noises, and feels the temperature drop. She investigates the house's history using microfiche and finds revealing old letters.

Still, the mysteries surrounding Sally and Penny's servitude prove somewhat anticlimactic in the end, with the book leaning too much into melodrama. For example, Sally and Penny share their suspicions about a person's murderous manipulations; in time, this line of inquiry is dropped. Later, there are coincidental encounters with a few adults, but their roles in the story are brief, used to fill in missing details.

Coincidences and help from willing adults shuttle the story toward its ultimate revelations about Penny and her cousins. An unlikely reunion in which further details are conveyed by a centenarian strains credulity, though. Further, Amy's realization of "how good her life" is by comparison is forced, if hopeful.

In the atmospheric mystery novel *The Secret of Spirit Lake*, a teenager who is new to town seeks to learn about her new home's past.

KAREN RIGBY (April 20, 2026)

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