

The Iron-Barred Door

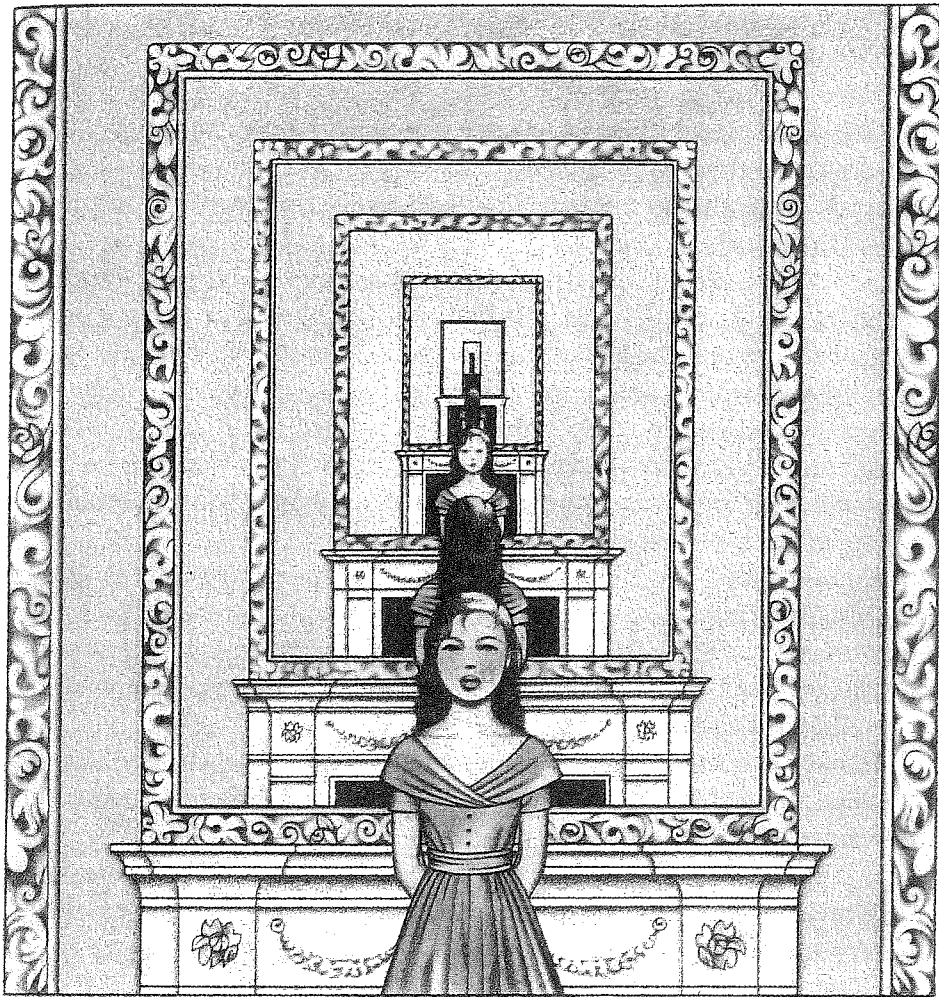
BY MONICA HUGHES

The house in which Rebecca lived was more like a castle than an ordinary house. It stood high and alone at the northern end of what had once been the city, its stone walls rising with ancient strength out of the mounds of rubble and charred wood. The windows that faced outward had all been fitted with a grillework of bars, and could be shuttered from within the house. The one massive door was secured not only with a great bolt near the floor and another at the top, but also by a heavy iron bar which, for as long as Rebecca could remember, had lain in its sockets, braced across the door diagonally from lower left to upper right. Over the years there had been some attempts to break into the house. None had ever succeeded. Rebecca had never seen the pitiful, weakened intruders.

Within the barred and bolted house there was a feeling of safety and permanence, of beautiful things that endure without change or decay. It was in the curve of the marble staircase, in the stone arches of the cloisters, and in the large central courtyard that opened to the sky. It was in the many rooms.

Whenever Rebecca entered the vast drawing room she felt as if she were going back in time. If you stood quietly in the doorway you could hear (could you not?) the small clatter of a teacup being placed upon an elegantly carved table. You could catch the echo of a waltz from a grand piano in the far corner, and a shiver of sound from the golden harp, as if white fingers had just moved softly down its strings.

When you looked into the wide mirror above the mantel you could see the reflection of the whole room behind you, including the mirror above the second fireplace at the far end; and each mirror was reflected in the other, so that you seemed to look down a vista of time filled with tiny and yet tinier rooms, until the last room was almost too minute to see. In each of these rooms, a thin girl with long black hair stood on the oak parquet floor, wondering if she were really alone.



The year that Rebecca turned thirteen, spring came early to the great house. Snowdrops and crocuses forced their way through the newly unfrozen ground. Then the fruit trees flowered and their scent filled the empty rooms. Rebecca fancied that a ghostly lady had just passed by, disturbing the air with a waft of her perfume.

When summer came she lazed in a hammock in the sun, half listening to the cool splash of the fountain falling into its stone basin, dreaming the dreams of young girls. When it became too hot to bear she would go indoors again, to drift through rooms that seemed even more crowded with ghostly figures than usual. Sometimes she would wander through every room in the great house, all twenty-eight of them, climbing the smooth marble stairs, walking around the upper-level cloisters, opening doors.

"What are you looking for?" George sometimes asked her.

"I don't know."

"Have you lost something?"

She didn't answer him. What was she to say? How can you tell if you have lost something, when you don't know what it is that you are supposed to *have*? When all you know is an emptiness in the heart and a sadness behind the eyes?

She never talked to George about the shadows who peopled the empty rooms of the house. It was not the sort of thing that George would understand. He was too logical, too practical. It was he who kept the house repaired and clean. It was he who prepared the meals from vats of nutrient solution stored in the workrooms at the back of the house, where the kitchens and storerooms had been in the old days. It was George who made new clothes for Rebecca when she outgrew the old ones, from material long laid by on storeroom shelves.

He nourished her mind, too. He had taught her to read, then let her loose in the library where the walls were lined with more books than she could devour in a lifetime. He taught her mathematics and physics and chemistry. And history, which was the true story of the people who had once inhabited the house and the city.

History was sad, and made her feel empty inside. The past had all come to an end when she was a little girl, too small to remember or understand. Only noise and smoke and fear...

Geography was better. She would spin the globe that stood on the thick jewel-coloured carpet in the library, then stop it abruptly with her hand. "Where are we? Show me where we are."

George would point with one lean, hard index finger — so. But when she looked, it was only a dot with a name beside it. There was no house to be seen, with curving marble stairs and a courtyard, no splashing fountain and fruit trees. She and George and the house were all smaller than a dust mote on this great globe, spinning in space.

There were travel books in the library, though, books with photographs of mountains, of oceans, of prairies; of pyramids, temples, cathedrals. She went through them again and again.

"Where is this place? Tell me where it is," she would demand, and George would point out the right place on the globe.

"I wish I could go and see it for myself. Will it still be there, do you suppose?"

It was always the same question she asked, and George always gave the same answer. "I don't know, Rebecca."

"I thought you knew everything." Sometimes she liked to mock him like that, teasing a little. It was her way of showing that she loved him.

"I only know what happened *before*," he would say, unsmiling.

Before. It was a word that made her feel the way she had felt when she climbed daringly upon the tiled roof and looked down at the tiny squares of stone that were really the floor of the courtyard, three storeys below. It made her stomach flutter to look. Just one little slip and down you would go. When George saw her, he forbade her to climb up there again.

The lazy summer seemed to last forever, but slowly the weather changed and it was autumn. The mornings became crisp and cool, and the courtyard was full of drifting leaves that George had to sweep into piles. She helped him, and when the leaves were all gathered together in the stone centre of the courtyard, close to the empty fountain, they made a bonfire. The smoke rose bitter-smelling to the clear empty sky. The leaves crackled and curled, and the flames had an exciting, dangerous life of their own. Rebecca had always been fascinated by the yearly bonfire ritual. She danced around the fire and sang wordless songs until the embers glowed and died and night came.

Winter was a hard time. The trees were leafless and dead and the ground was like iron. The courtyard was as lifeless as the ruined city beyond the barred windows.

At night the wind howled a lament through the arches of the cloisters and cried against the bars of the windows, as if someone were out there, begging to be let in. Sometimes Rebecca would dream that she was on the outside and that the house was bolted and barred against her, and she would wake up sobbing and shaking.

George would be there. He was always there when he was needed. He would hold her in his arms, as if she were still just a little girl, and rock her and talk to her softly until she stopped crying.

"What was the dream about?"

"I don't remember. Only that I was all alone."

"You're not alone. You'll never be alone. You have me."

"I know." Her hand clutched a fold of his tunic. "George, don't ever leave me."

"I will never go away, child. I will never leave you," he promised. Rebecca believed him.

One night, when February had finally given way to March, a gale roared out of the southwest. It shook the stone house, threatening to tear it from its foundations. But the house did not budge. Only four tiles

clattered from the roof and smashed to pieces on the stone pavement of the courtyard.

In the morning, George swept away the debris and looked up at the roof.

"What are you going to do?" Rebecca asked.

"I must repair it at once. If the rain gets into the house it will ruin the furniture."

"Be careful," Rebecca told him, remembering his warning to her.

She called to him again as he wedged and fastened the new tiles to the steep slope of roof on the west side of the courtyard, three storeys above her head. "Oh, be careful!"

"I will," he called back.

There was a glaze of frost on the tiles, left from the night's cold. Now the morning sun was beginning to warm them just a little. George planted one foot and stretched up, but at that moment his foot slipped on the thin layer of melting frost. He tried to grab the overhang of the roof as he slid. He missed...and cartwheeled out into space, a golden figure, a falling star.

He lay without movement at Rebecca's feet. She fell to her knees beside him, calling his name, pulling frantically at his tunic. It tore, and then she could see the gold-coloured metallic mesh inside his chest. Within the cavity electronic microcircuit panels had been shattered. As she tried desperately to lift him, electromagnetic relays rattled to the ground. George's head rolled to one side. His left arm hung crookedly, attached by a single cable.

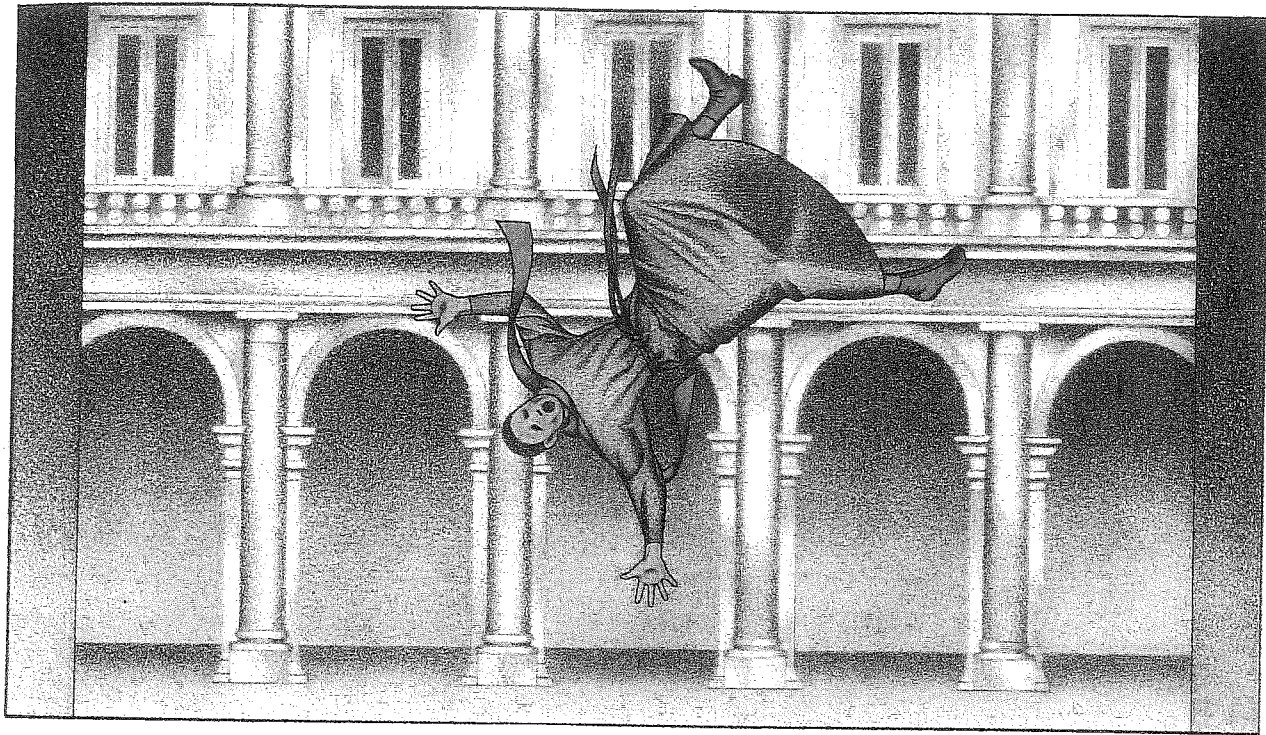
Stay with me, she had said to her only friend.

I'll never leave you, he had promised.

After a long moment, Rebecca stood up. She straightened George's body decently. She would have liked to take him into the house, but he was too heavy for her. In the end she went into the dining room, removed the great silver candlesticks from the long table, pulled off the white damask cloth, and brought it out to cover the broken golden form. It shimmered in the sunlight — gleaming, yet motionless.

That night the wind howled again and shook the house. Rebecca hid her head beneath her pillow and did not sleep. In the morning she went into the workrooms and found some food that George had already prepared for her. There was enough for a day, maybe two. She looked at the rows of vats, the maze of glass tubing, and she didn't understand any of it.

If only he had taught her useful things — how to make food or look after the great house — instead of history, mathematics, geography. The meagreness of his microchip memory slowly dawned on her. He must have



been programmed so simply and so long ago that he couldn't imagine the possibility of crisis or change.

She ate a very little, so as to make the food last longer. Besides, she wasn't very hungry. Then she sat in the courtyard by the silent fountain. She watched the clouds scud across the sky and the last of the snow swirl and drift against the still figure lying beneath the white cloth, until it was too dark to see any more and she was cold.

Next morning she felt empty and faint, and she ate more, almost all of the food that was left. Then she did her rounds of the house. She climbed the curved marble staircase and walked steadily along the arched cloisters, and she went into every one of the echoing rooms.

In the drawing room there was already a film of dust on the small tables where porcelain cups had once rested, and on the polished top of the grand piano. When she looked into the mirror above the mantel she could see herself standing in the middle of the empty room, and she could see the reflection of herself in the other mirror, smaller and smaller reflections of Rebecca, each one alone, until they were too small to be seen.

The piano sat dumb in the corner of the room. The harp beneath the tall window was mute. There was nobody else in the room. Nobody in the whole house. Nobody but herself.

Rebecca walked slowly back along the arched cloisters and down the curved marble stairs, her large dark eyes tearless and determined. She did not go back to the courtyard, where George lay motionless beneath the white cloth. She did not even look that way.

Instead, she walked across the hall toward the big front door. Slowly, but without hesitation, she pulled back the bottom bolt. It slid smoothly, though it had not been used in twelve years. George had kept it oiled, so that now it worked properly, as everything George touched had worked.

She dragged a chair over to the door. Stepping up on it, she could just reach the upper bolt and slide it back. She climbed down. Using every bit of her strength, biting her lip beneath her teeth, she lifted the great iron bar from the sockets where it had lain for as long as she could remember. When she let it fall the echo clanged around the house, along the corridors and through the twenty-eight empty rooms.

The door swung slowly open and Rebecca walked out, whether into freedom or into a new kind of imprisonment, she didn't know. But as she looked down the road toward the ruined city, the expression in her eyes softened. In the sky, drifting red and yellow above what looked like a green field, was a child's kite.

IN CONTEXT

AUTHOR PROFILE

Monica Hughes

Although her feet are planted firmly in the prairies of Alberta, Monica Hughes travels widely throughout solar systems near and far. She takes thousands of readers with her, introducing them to exotic characters whose feelings and hopes sound wonderfully familiar to Earthling ears.

Monica Hughes is a self-described wanderer who lived in England, Egypt, Rhodesia, Scotland, and many Canadian cities before choosing to make Edmonton her permanent home. But whether "cold and lonely" in the Yorkshire moors or walking in Toronto's concrete jungle,



Hughes always had her eye on the distant future. "I think science fiction is very, very good for young people," she writes, "particularly today, when they are facing so many difficult choices in life, and we don't even know what kind of choices in their future."

Monica Hughes has a lot to say about choices and how the wrong ones can lead to a bleak tomorrow: "I care very much about our planet and what we are doing to it, and about the people of the Third World and the underprivileged at home, and what we are doing to them." Hughes has chosen to voice her concerns about Earth subtly through books about faraway planets and far-flung travellers, who are really very much like us at heart.