

A note from Laura Amy Schlitz



Writers spend their lives making up stories that never become books. Why some ideas give rise to books and others don't is a mystery to us. Some stories burn like flash paper, igniting with a burst of flame and an impressive *whhfff!* only to go out. Others conduct themselves like dedicated fans in a standing-room-only line. They bundle up against the cold and advance doggedly, step by step, refusing to be dismissed. *The Hired Girl* was a story that persisted.

It was written on the rebound. *Splendors and Glooms* was a drawn-out, maddening, tortuous book. While I was writing it, I swore that I would never again tackle a book with five main characters or multiple points of view. "If I ever get through this mess," I promised myself, "I will write about one character who wants one thing." And I meant it.

The Christmas after I finished *Splendors and Glooms*, a much-loved student gave me a beautiful blank book. It had a tooled leather front, gilt-edged pages, and a red ribbon to mark the place. I thought to myself, *Maybe my next book will be a diary. . . . After all, with a diary, you have to stick with a single point of view. . . .*

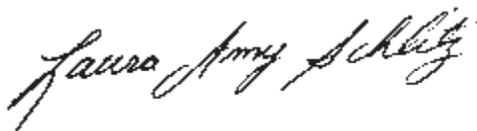
Which reminded me that I had two diaries in my house: the diary I kept in 1972 and my grandmother's from 1910 (which was not only enthralling, but far

less embarrassing). I thumbed through them for ideas. It was around this time that the Park School of Baltimore was gathering information for its centennial celebration in 2012. I began to learn a little about the community of liberal German Jews who founded the school.

After some months, a writer friend and I made a bargain. We bound ourselves to write every day during the forty days of Lent, and we agreed to pray for each other's writing. Like many promises, we only kept half. For some reason, we almost always forgot to pray. But we wrote faithfully.

What happened next was a surprise, a gift. Maybe it was the prayers we forgot to pray, but Joan's voice came to me with the utmost ease and clarity, often making me laugh. I liked her. I could scarcely move my writing hand fast enough to keep pace with her voice. I quickly filled the first diary and had to hunt down another one. If finding my way through *Splendors* was like pulling wet tissues through a coin slot, *The Hired Girl* unraveled like a ball of yarn, bouncing in its eagerness, with only a few tangles to be smoothed out. I felt as if I were wearing the seven-league boots of fairy tales.

In the end, the joke was on me. I'd made up my mind that I was going to write about *one* character who wanted one thing, but as I wrote, I came to realize that Joan — like young girls everywhere — wants *everything*: real life and true love, art and literature, education and religion, friendship and freedom, a cat and a hat. Though Joan's pursuit of a bigger life is hampered by her age and sex and background, she never takes no for an answer. She's Quixote in petticoats. I like that, too.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Laura Amy Schlitz". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a mix of capital and lowercase letters.