

STEPPING STONES™
a chapter book

History

Hannah

A young girl with
big dreams



Gloria Whelan
National Book Award Winner

STEPPING STONES™

a chapter book

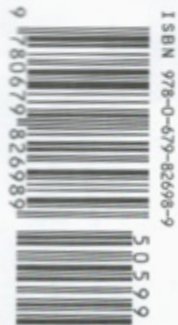
History

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happened long ago!**



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Everything felt strange and unfriendly. Blackberry briars scratched my arms and snagged my hair. Branches slapped at me and tore my skirt. Every direction I turned seemed to lead me into more trouble. The ground gave way and slipped out from under me. I gave up, sinking down to my knees. At first I was too stubborn to call for help. Then, knowing I was lost, I cried out. There was no answer. . . .



To Linda

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SUMMARY: Hannah, a blind girl living in Michigan in the late nineteenth century, doesn't go to school until a new teacher tells her about the Braille method of reading for the blind.

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the right to read.


Hannah



by *Gloria Whelan*

illustrated by *Leslie Bowman*

A STEPPING STONE BOOK™

Random House  New York

1

It was the fall of 1887. I heard Papa's horse and wagon before my brother, Johnny, and sister, Verna, did. Because I can't see, I listen harder than they do. Ever since I learned the new teacher was coming to board with us, I tried to imagine what she would look like. I thought she might be heaped into a round, soft shape like the big pile of laundry Mama does on Mondays, or she might be tall and straight and hard like the oak tree that grows next to the porch. I wondered what her voice would be like and hoped it

there were no women on his farm, for the

would have the gentle sound of a mourning dove on a summer day.

When the buggy pulled up, everyone rushed to the window to see her. I just stayed put. I had been told often enough to keep out of the way so I wouldn't get knocked over when people were rushing around. Verna didn't forget me, though. She called out, "Hannah, the teacher's pretty! She's got a big puff of brown hair and a lace collar on her jacket."

"Never mind pretty," Mama said. "Pretty doesn't make a good teacher."

We were picked to have the teacher live with us because our farm was the nearest one to the school after the Bonners' farm. The Bonners couldn't board teachers any more because they were getting too old. Even though it would mean more work for her, Mama looked forward to having the teacher. Our nearest neighbor was Mr. Peterson, and there were no women on his farm, so the



teacher would be company for Mama. Papa liked the idea of having the teacher too, because she would pay us a dollar a week for her room and three meals a day. It was money you could count on, not like money you got from the winter wheat, that might freeze, or the corn, that could dry up if the rain didn't come.

"Here's the new teacher, Miss Lydia Robbin," said Papa.

Lydia, I thought. What a beautiful name. I said it over to myself. It was like the sound of Mama's silk dress sliding off when she got home from church.

Papa was introducing us. "This here is Martha, my wife. And Verna, she's eleven. Johnny, he's six. And Hannah, she's nine."

Miss Robbin said "How do you do" to each one of us. When she came to me, Mama said, "You needn't shake hands with Hannah. She can't see you, nor anything else, poor thing."

Everyone around us had always known I was blind, so it was only when a stranger came that it had to be explained. Even though I had grown used to it, I didn't like to hear it said out loud. But Mama claimed it was a "fact of life" that had to be faced.

I felt someone take hold of my hand and squeeze it gently. I knew it must be Miss Robbin's hand, because it was soft and smooth. One of Papa's hands had a finger missing where he got it caught in the combine. Mama's hands were rough from all the washing up and digging in the vegetable garden. Johnny's hands were little and sort of damp because he still sucked his thumb. Verna's hands felt raggedy at the nails because she bit them. "How do you do, Hannah," Miss Robbin said. "I look forward to having your three children in my class, Mrs. Thomas."

Mama said, "Verna and Johnny won't give you any trouble. Hannah doesn't go to



school. There's no point to it." Mama's plain-spoken, but I guess what she said sounded a little hard even to her. She knows how I hate it when Verna and Johnny leave me behind in the morning. So she added, "Hannah keeps me company."

"Well, we must see about that," Miss Robbin said. Her voice wasn't as soft and polite as it was at first.

"There's nothing to see about," Papa said. "No point in buying books and clothes for someone who can't see to learn. Now, I expect you'd like Martha to show you where your room is. I'll get your trunk from the wagon."

As soon as we were alone, I said to Verna and Johnny, "Tell me what she looks like."

Verna said, "She's a little thing, but she stands up straight. Her eyes are blue. Her complexion is all white and pink. Her jacket has little buttons down the front and a sort of ruffle in the back."



Miss Robbin sounded elegant. I sighed and wondered what I looked like to her. I hoped she wouldn't notice that my hand-me-down dress from Verna was too large for me. I knew my hair was tangled too. When it was long, like now, I had trouble combing it. Mama had been so busy she had forgotten to cut it.

"Even though she's little, I think she'll be able to handle the older boys," said Verna. Last year's teacher whined all the time about how bad the older boys were. They threw erasers across the schoolroom and didn't do their lessons. They even tipped the privy over one night. The teacher complained, but she never did anything.

Verna and Johnny were good about telling me what happened at school, but it wasn't the same as being there. I would have given just about anything to go to school.

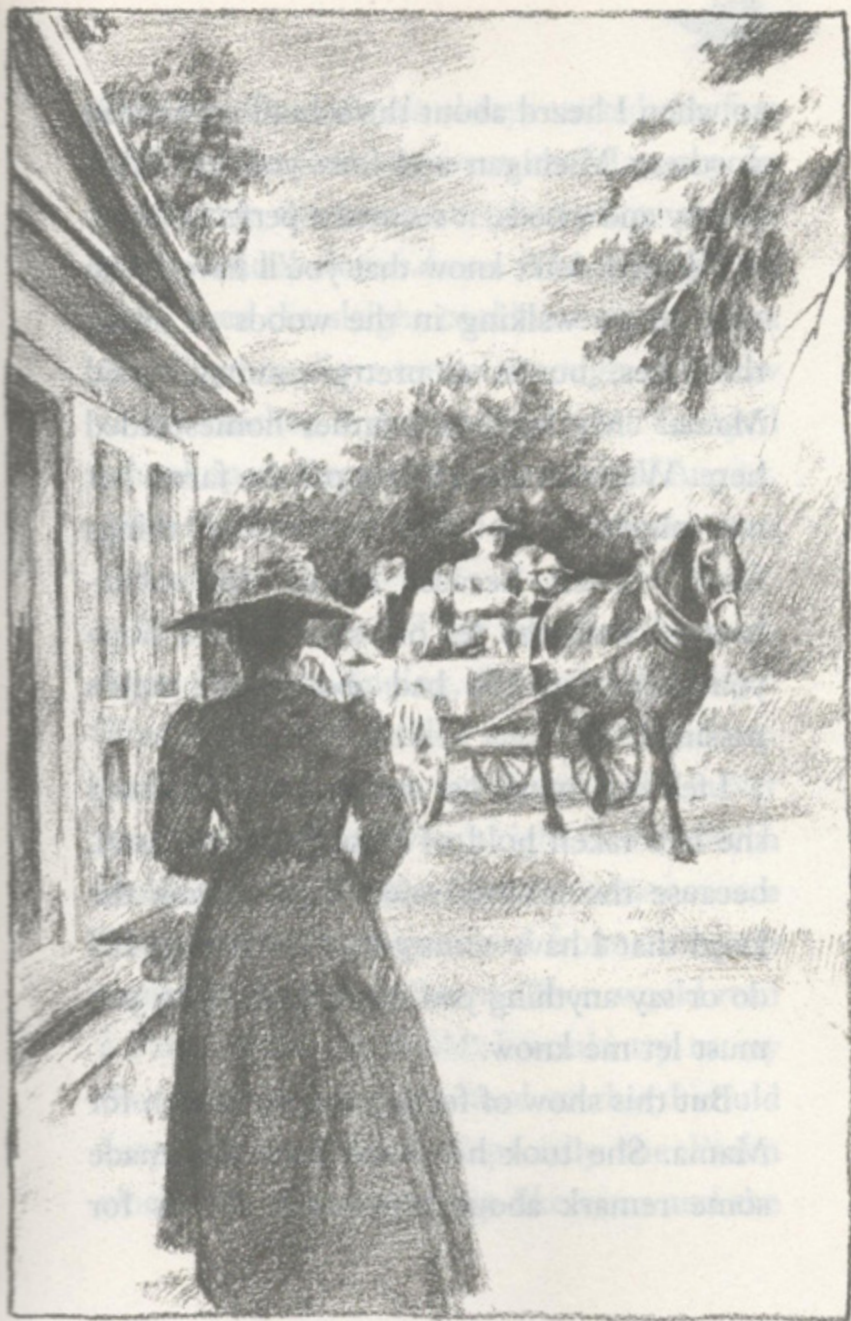


2

The next day was Sunday. It was my favorite day because I got to go to church. The church was five miles away, so we all crowded into the wagon.

"Where were you before you came to us?" Mama asked Miss Robbin. Mama likes to know all there is to know about someone.

"I was born downstate, in Flint. When I was only a baby, my mother and father died of typhoid, and I went to live with my aunt and uncle on their farm. My uncle died six years ago. I lost my aunt last winter. I was teaching in a school near their farm, but after my aunt died, I decided to make a new start someplace else. I could never live in a city,



so when I heard about the school up here in northern Michigan and how you had lakes nearby and woods, it seemed a perfect place.”

“Well, I don’t know that you’ll have much time to go walking in the woods or along the lakes, but it *is* pretty country,” said Mama. “My husband’s father homesteaded here. We’ve made a living off the farm, but not much more. You won’t find things fancy.” Then, because Mama was softer-hearted than she let on, she said, “I hope you don’t feel too bad about your aunt’s passing.”

I felt her stretch her arm out, and I guessed she had taken hold of Miss Robbin’s hand, because the teacher said, “I just thank the Lord that I have come to a kind family. If I do or say anything you don’t think right, you must let me know.”

But this show of feeling was too much for Mama. She took her hand back and made some remark about how warm it was for

Hannah is blind, but full of hope.



Some people think that since Hannah can't see, she's not smart. She is about to prove them wrong! In the fall of 1887, a new teacher comes to town. She convinces Hannah's parents to finally let her go to school, and Hannah can't wait to learn. But many challenges—and people—still stand in her way. Is Hannah brave enough to make her dreams come true?

"A warm, believable picture of a blind child as she takes her first steps on the long road toward independence." —*The Braille Monitor*

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