

Q&A with Susan Newhof, author of *Spirits and Wine*

It's a mystery and a ghost story, all wrapped up in one.

A newly married couple buys an old house in a small lakeshore town in West Michigan and finds it haunted by the dramatic secrets of its past inhabitants. As the couple settles in, disturbing events prompt them to investigate who those residents were, what happened to them, and why one spirit remains active. Could the Spanish influenza epidemic in the region, which resulted in the deaths of an unprecedented number of young, healthy adults in Michigan and elsewhere in 1918—19, and the resulting slew of orphans, have something to do with the spirit now haunting their house?



They are determined to discover the truth about their house, even if it jeopardizes their own safety.

Susan Newhof, author of *Michigan's Town and Country Inns*, is a writer and a consultant in media relations and public speaking. She and her husband, Paul Collins, live in a century-old home in Montague, Michigan.

The University of Michigan Press: What prompted you to start writing fiction after a lifetime of writing non-fiction?

Susan Newhof: I actually started writing fiction as soon as I could pick up a pencil. I was writing little stories and poems and songs – and often in the car when we would go on road trips. Then there was this long span of time in my professional career where I was in marketing and public relations, and I had to be very accurate and very truthful. I always wanted to write a novel, and it was, in fact, things that started happening in this old house that my husband and I bought, that prompted this particular story and the plot for this story popped into my head in about fifteen minutes – the entire story – and it was time to start writing.

UMP: Authors often write what they know. Is your story based in any way on actual events?

SH: The story is fiction, first, but many of the things that happened in the story are based on events that happened in our lives, and based on things that happened in the house. For example, in the story, John and Anna bought a house that was completely decorated for Christmas and they bought it in July. That comes directly out of the old house that my husband and I bought, which was decorated from first floor to second floor for Christmas and we bought it in July. And much like Margaret in the story, it was decorated for Christmas just because the owner loved Christmas. So things like that came directly out of our life, but the story is fiction.

UMP: Is there really a Carlston, Michigan?

SH: Carlston is a made up town, but so many of the little towns along the lake shore have a part of Carlston in them - and when I was writing about the town, and I looked at all these little lakeside communities, and I saw their history that was very much tied to the logging industry in Michigan in the 1800's, and the age of these towns and all of the things that had happened in them in the past 200 years - I brought much of that into the history of Carlston - and in fact, at one point after I'd written it, a new friend was asking me 'what's the history of this little town that you live in' and 'why is this little town here' and I started telling them what I remembered of the history of the town that I live in, and about part way through I realized that I was actually giving them the history of Carlston - so I had to back up and start over. So, it's very similar to a lot of the towns up the lakeshore.

UMP: How long did it take you to write *Spirits and Wine*, and why?

SH: In the great Margaret Mitchell tradition, this story took me about thirteen years to write. All I could say is that life intervened. The plot came into my head, I started to write it - it was the most fun writing that I ever did, but it also kept getting pushed to the bottom of my priority list. Three years ago my mother came to live with us and mother - I dedicated the book to her, she's my biggest fan - and I had started reading parts of the book to her and she had loved it. So every morning she'd wake up and say 'what did you write'? Well, I wasn't writing on it at the time, so after she went to bed, I began writing on it and I realized that I had a couple of hours in the evening and I could keep working on this - knowing that I had this great fan who every morning would wake up and want to hear the next part of it. So, that's how I eventually finished the book.

UMP: What effect do you want the book to have on its readers?

SH: I would love for readers to get so engrossed in this book that they completely lose track of time. I would like the hair on their arms to stand up, I'd like them to cry a little, I'd like them to laugh - there are parts of it that are funny - I want them to feel when they're done like they had a great few hours of entertainment, a good story, characters that they really came to know and like, that it was time well spent and that they were well entertained. There's another part of the book that became equally interesting for me to write. It is layered with very complex human relationships; there's a lot in it about family and having to make these difficult decisions - the things that they were completely unprepared to handle - and looking at the way they turned, did they defend, did they protect, did they turn their backs - and all of these things happened. I think that it's that development of the characters and the people in the story that makes the book very strong and, certainly, makes it compelling.