

SARAH ELLIS

# BACK BEYOND

STORIES OF THE  
SUPERNATURAL

Margaret K. McElderry Books

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SUPERNATURAL

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**For Barbara, Betty, Cathie, Greg, Joan, Maggie,  
Martha, Nancy, Susan, and in memory of Paul and Ethel:  
Friends across the line.**

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# BACK BEYOND

STORIES OF THE  
SUPERNATURAL

OTHER BOOKS BY SARAH ELLIS

*A Family Project*

*Next-Door Neighbors*

*Pick-Up Sticks*

*Out of the Blue*

(Margaret K. McElderry Books)

**M**ost “fairy” experiences are unspectacular, private affairs, unaccountable little slippages in space or time, oddities pondered from time to time by the people involved, maybe shared if someone asks. Small people dance in a Patrick Street garden, an invisible wall rises in a marsh, a scrubby patch of trees becomes a boundless wilderness: little fairy tricks, and suddenly everyday reality is open to question.

—Barbara Rieti, *Strange Terrain:  
The Fairy World in Newfoundland*

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# TUNNEL

**When I was a kid** and I imagined myself older and with a summer job, I thought about being outdoors. Tree planting, maybe. Camping out, getting away from the parents, coming home after two months with biceps of iron and bags of money. I used to imagine myself rappelling down some mountain with a geological hammer tucked into my belt. At the very worst I saw myself sitting on one of those tall lifeguard chairs with zinc ointment on my lips.

I didn't know that by the time I was sixteen it would be the global economy and there would be no summer jobs, even though you did your life-skills analysis as recommended by the guidance counselor at school. Motivated! Energetic! Computer literate! Shows initiative! Workplace-appropriate hair! What I never imagined was that by the time I got to be sixteen the only job you could get would be baby-sitting.

I sometimes take care of my cousin Laurence. Laurence likes impersonating trucks and being held upside down. I am good at assisting during these activities. This evidently counts as work-related experience.



Girls are different.

Elizabeth, who calls herself Ib, is six and one-quarter years old. I go over to her place at 7:30 in the morning and I finish at one o'clock. Then her dad or her mom or her gran (who is not really her gran but the mother of her dad's ex-wife) takes over. Ib has a complicated family. She doesn't seem to mind.

Ib has a yellow plastic suitcase. In the suitcase are Barbies. Ib would like to play with Barbies for five and one-half hours every day. In my baby-sitting course at the community center they taught us about first aid, diapering, nutritious snacks, and how to skip to my Lou. They did not teach Barbies.

"You be Wanda," says Ib, handing me a nude Barbie who looks as though she is having a bad hair life.

I'm quite prepared to be Wanda if that's what the job requires. But once I *am* Wanda I don't know what the heck to do.

Ib is busy dressing Francine, Laurice, Betty, and Talking Doll, who is not a Barbie at all, but a baby doll twice the size of the Barbies.

"What should I do?" I ask.

Ib gives me the Look, an unblinking stare that combines impatience, scorn, and pity.

"Play," she says.

When you have sixteen-year-old guy hands, there is no way to hold a nude Barbie without violating her personal space. But all her clothes seem to be made of extremely form-fitting stretchy neon stuff, and I can't get her rigid arms with their poky fingers into the sleeves.

Playing with Barbies makes all other activities look good. The study of French irregular verbs, for example, starts to seem attractive. The board game Candyland, a favorite of Cousin Laurence, and previously condemned by me as a sure method for turning the

human brain to tofu, starts to seem like a laff riot.

I look at my watch. It is 8:15. The morning stretches ahead of me. Six weeks stretch ahead of me. My life stretches ahead of me. My brain is edging dangerously close to the idea of eternity.

I hold Wanda by her hard, clawlike plastic hand and think of things that Laurence likes to do. We could notch the edge of yogurt lids to make deadly star-shaped weapons for a Ninja attack, but somehow I don't think that's going to cut it with Ib. She's probably not going to go for a burping contest, either.

A warm breeze blows in the window, a small wind that probably originated at sea and blew across the beach, across all those glistening, slowly browning bodies, before it ended up here, trapped in Barbie World. I'm hallucinating the smell of suntan oil. I need to get outside.

I do not suggest a walk. I know, from Laurence, that "walk" is a four-letter word to six-year-olds. Six-year-olds can run around for seventy-two hours straight, but half a block of walking and they suffer from life-threatening exhaustion. I therefore avoid the *W* word.

"Ib, would you like to go on an exploration mission?"

Ib thinks for a moment. "Yes."

We pack up the Barbies.

"It's quite a long way," I say. "We can't take the suitcase."

"I need to take Wanda."

We take Wanda.

We walk along the overgrown railway tracks out to the edge of town. Ib steps on every tie. The sun is behind us and we stop every so often to make our shadows into letters of the alphabet.

("And what sort of work experience can you bring to this job, young man?")

“Well, sir, I spent one summer playing with Barbie dolls and practicing making my body into a *K*.”

“Excellent! We’ve got exciting openings in that area.”)

We follow the tracks as the sun rises high in the sky. Ib walks along the rail holding my hand. My feet crunch on the sharp gravel and Ib sings something about ducks. I inhale the dusty smell of sun-baked weeds and I’m pulled back to the summer that we used to come out here, Jeff and Danielle and I. That was the summer that Jeff was a double agent planning to blow up the enemy supply train.

The sharp sound of a pneumatic drill rips through the air and Ib’s hand tightens in mine.

“What’s that?”

I remember. “It’s just a woodpecker.”

There was a woodpecker once back then, too.

“Machine-gun attack!” yelled Jeff. And I forgot it was a game and threw myself down the bank into the bushes. Jeff laughed at me.

“No little ducks came swimming back.” Ib’s high, thin voice is burrowing itself into my brain and there is a pulse above my left eye. I begin to wish I had brought something to drink. Maybe it’s time to go back.

And then we come to the stream. I hear it before I see it. And then I remember what happened there.

Ib jumps off the tracks and dances off toward the water.

I don’t want to go there. “Not that way, Ib.”

“Come *on*, Ken. I’m exploring. This is an exploration mission. You said.”

I follow her. It’s different. The trees—dusty, scruffy-looking

cottonwoods—have grown up and the road appears too soon. But there it is. The stream takes a bend and disappears into a small culvert under the road. Vines grow across the entrance to the drainage pipe. I push them aside and look in. A black hole with a perfect circle of light at the end.

It's so small. Had we really walked through it? Jeff and Danielle and finally me, terrified, shamed into it by a girl and a double dare.

I take a deep breath and I'm there again. That smell. Wet and green and dangerous. There I was, feet braced against the pipe, halfway through the tunnel, at the darkest part. I had kept my mind up, up out of the water where Jeff said that blackwater bloodsuckers lived. I kept my mind up until it went into the weight of the earth above me. Tons of dirt and cars and trucks and being buried alive.

Dirt pressing heavy against my chest, against my eyelids, against my legs which wouldn't move. And then, above the roaring in my ears, I heard a high snatch of song, two notes with no words. Calling. I pushed against the concrete and screamed without a sound.

And then Jeff yelled into the tunnel, "What's the matter, Kenny? Is it the bloodsuckers? Kenton, Kenton, where are you? Ve want to suck your blood." Jeff had a way of saying "Kenton" that made it sound like an even finkier name than it is. By this time I had peed my pants and I had to pretend to slip and fall into the water to cover up. The shock of the cold. The end of the tunnel. Jeff pushed me into the stream because I was wet anyway. Danielle stared at me and she knew.

\* \* \*

"Where does it go?" Ib pulls on my shirt.

And I'm big again. Huge. Like Talking Doll.

"It goes under the road. I walked through it once."

"Did you go to that other place?"

"What other place?"

Ib gives me the Look. "Where those other girls play. I think this goes there."

Yeah, right. The Barbies visit the culvert.

Ib steps right into the tunnel. "Come on, Kenton."

I grab her. "Hey! Hold it. You can't go in there. You'll . . . you'll get your sandals wet. And I can't come. I don't fit."

Ib sits down on the gravel and takes off her sandals. "I fit."

Blackwater bloodsuckers. But why would I want to scare her? And, hey, it's just a tunnel. So I happen to suffer from claustrophobia. That's my problem.

"Okay, but look, I'll wait on this side until you're halfway through and then I'll cross over the road and meet you on the other side. Are you sure you're not scared?"

Ib steps into the pipe and stretches to become an X. "Look! Look how I fit!"

I watch the little X splash its way into the darkness. "Okay, Ib, see you on the other side. Last one there's a rotten egg." I let the curtain of vines fall across the opening.

I pick up the sandals and climb the hill. It's different, too. It used to be just feathery horsetail and now skinny trees grow there. I grab on to them to pull myself up. I cross the road, hovering on the center line as an RV rumbles by and then I slide down the other side, following a small avalanche of pebbles. I kneel on the top of the pipe and stick my head in, upside down.

"Hey, rotten egg, I beat you."

Small, echoing, dripping sounds are the only answer.

I peer into the darkness. She's teasing me.

"Ib!"

*Ib, Ib, Ib*—the tunnel throws my voice back at me. A semi-trailer roars by on the road. I jump down and stand at the pipe's entrance. My eyes adjust and I can see the dim green *O* at the other end. No outline of a little girl. A tight heaviness grips me around the chest.

"Ibbie. Answer me right now. I mean it." I drop the sandals.

She must have turned and hidden on the other side, just to fool me.

I don't remember getting up the hill and across the road, except that the noise of a car horn rips across the top of my brain.

She isn't there. Empty tunnel.

"Elizabeth!"

She slipped. She knocked her head. Child drowns in four inches of bathwater.

I have to go in. I try walking doubled over. But my feet just slip down the slimy curved concrete and I can only shuffle. I drop to my hands and knees.

Crawl, crawl, crawl, crawl.

The sound of splashing fills my head.

Come back, Elizabeth.

Do not push out against the concrete. Just go forward, splash, splash.

Do not think up or down.

Something floats against my hand. I gasp and jerk upward, cracking my head. It's Wanda. I push her into my shirt. My knee bashes into a rock and there is some sobbing in the echoing tunnel. It is my own voice.

And then I grab the rough ends of the pipe and pull myself into the light and the bigness.

Ib is crouched at the edge of the stream pushing a floating leaf with a stick. A green light makes its way through the trees above.

She looks up at me and sees Wanda poking out of my shirt. "Oh, good, you found her. Bad Wanda, running away."

My relief explodes into anger.

"Ib, where were you?"

"Playing with the girls."

"No, quit pretending. I'm not playing. Where were you when I called you from the end of the tunnel? Were you hiding? Didn't you hear me call?"

"Sure I heard you, silly. That's how they knew my name. And I was going to come back but it was my turn. They never let me play before, but this time they knew my name and I got to go into the circle. They were dancing. Like ballerinas. Except they had long hair. I get to have long hair when I'm in grade two."

My head is buzzing. I must have hit it harder than I realized. I hand Wanda to Ib and grab at some sense. "Why didn't you come when I called you?"

"They said I wasn't allowed to go, not while I was in the circle, and they were going to give me some cake. I saw it. It had sprinkles on it. And then you called me again but you said 'Elizabeth.' And then they made me go away."

Ib blows her leaf boat across the stream. And then she starts to sing.

*"Idey, Idey, what's your name,  
What's your name to get in the game."*

That song, the two-note song. The sweet high voice calling to me in the tunnel. The sound just before Jeff yelled at me. The sound just before Jeff called me back by my real name.

The final puzzle piece of memory slides into place. They wanted me. They wanted Ib. I begin to shiver.

I find myself sitting on the gravel. The stream splashes its way over the lip of the pipe into the tunnel. I stare at Ib, who looks so small and so solid. My wet jeans with their slime-green knees begin to steam in the sun. A crow tells us a thing or two.

“Ken?”

“Yes?”

“I don’t really like those girls.”

“No, they don’t sound that nice. Do you want to go home?”

“Okay.”

I rinse off my hands and glance once more into the darkness.

“Put on your sandals, then.”

Ib holds on to the back belt loops of my jeans and I pull her up the hill, into the sunshine.



# POTATO

**Dad met me at the front door.** “Nathan is back.”

The duffel bag slid out of my fingers and landed on my foot.  
“Where is he?”

“Up in his room.”

I turned toward the stairs.

“Selina? He’ll join us when he’s ready. Give him time.”

“Is he . . . okay?”

Dad took my hand and squeezed it. “I hope so.”

I went upstairs. Nathan’s door was shut. I stared at it. There wasn’t a sound. I put my ear to the door. He couldn’t be asleep because there wasn’t any snoring.

Nathan is a grand master snorer. A couple of years ago, when Dad tore the back off the house, our bedrooms disappeared and Nathan and I had to camp out in the living room for a month. Every night it was the same. I would sink into sleep and then—RUMBLE, SNORT, GAG, WHISTLE, GURGLE. Pause. Repeat. For hours.

He wouldn’t believe he did it. He said that I made it up. He said that I was systematically undermining his feelings of self-