

Hattie's War

By Peter Serko

Editorial Reviews

Kirkus Reviews

August 10, 2023

A sentimental and satisfying tale about a teen in post-Civil War America.

In this debut middle-grade historical novel, a teenager seeks the truth about her father. Harriett “Hattie” Alanson Howell is only 14 years old but has already experienced major loss. When Hattie was 10, her closest sibling, Jennie, died of an illness. Hattie’s father, Hannibal—a successful sign painter who, like Hattie, loved to draw—was killed in the Civil War shortly before her birth. All Hattie’s mother will say is “I pray he had a good death.” As a teenager in New York State’s Finger Lakes area who battles depression, which she refers to as the “Raven,” Hattie decides to look for answers on her own. She begins corresponding with her Uncle Byron, Hannibal’s brother and the only war survivor in the family. Byron not only enlightens Hattie about the good man her father was—he joined the Union Army to fight racism on the home front—but also encourages the teen’s own artistic gifts, even paying for her to attend Atelier De Luca, a prestigious Ithaca art program, when she is 17. After graduation, Hattie must decide between further study or the opportunity to become a sign painter—and whether she can withstand a trip to Gettysburg, where her father perished. Serko’s engaging novel was inspired by his own ancestors—Hattie was his great-great-grandmother and Hannibal his great-great-great-grandfather—as well as a family trip to Gettysburg in 1970 when the author was 16 and first learned of the Howell side of the family. The book contains a host of kid-friendly resources to provide context, including key facts about the Civil War, illustrations by Leslie, historical and family photographs, and a recipe for the molasses cookies that prominently appear in the work’s first chapter. Hattie is an intelligent and thoughtful young hero, wrestling with mental health and discovering her creativity while navigating life in a brand-new landscape. Her story is

both relatable and inspiring for the novel's target audience. A sentimental and satisfying tale about a teen in post-Civil War America.

Reedsy Discovery

Mary Lanni - marylanni.com

A Must-Read designation

A well-researched, thoughtfully-designed historical fiction novel that speaks to middle grade and older readers in a memorable way.

Harriet "Hattie" Howell has never known her father; he left home to fight in the American Civil War before Hattie was born, and he was killed in the line of duty before he could return. The loss of her father weighs heavily on Hattie, especially as she learns more about the circumstances that led to her father's ultimate demise. Melancholy sets in, preventing Hattie from experiencing the joy and happiness she used to take for granted. But thanks to a loving family, thoughtful letters, and her artistic ability, Hattie is able to navigate her own battles against both her sadness and society's expectations for her as she endeavors to discover more about the man her father once was.

This intriguing story introduces readers to the American Civil War from the perspective of some of the people who were left behind. Members of the author's own family form the foundation of the novel, and new life is breathed into them through their dialogue and interactions. Though fictional in nature, true historical events and characters are embedded within the narrative, making Hattie's experience feel ever more real to a contemporary audience. The dialogue and setting are true to the time, utilizing colloquialisms and religious sentiments that were found in upstate New York in the late 1800s. Overall, the pacing is excellent, and the book is accessible to older middle grade readers thanks to its accessible writing style and ample white space.

Alongside the narrative, readers find frequent images both from Hattie's own hand and from publications of the time. These visual aids anchor the story for readers who are less familiar with the American Civil War, and they make the events of that time even more palpable. Additionally, letters between Hattie and her uncles are incorporated throughout the story and provide context while breaking up the traditional narrative structure. Ample back matter gives readers a plethora of information to digest regarding Hattie's story and the real events that led to its creation, which makes the book valuable both as a solitary read and as a tool for classroom teaching. Accessible and educational, this is a noteworthy historical fiction novel for middle grade readers.

Midwest Review of Books

September 2023

Hattie Howell, a 14-year-old girl in 1878, is determined to follow her dreams of becoming an artist like her father. Despite the challenges of living in a time when women had few options

Hattie's haunted by her father's death at the Battle of Gettysburg, and her quest for answers leads her to self-discovery. What will the past reveal as she sets out to learn all she can about his death?

Along the way, Hattie must confront the debilitating depression that runs in her family and the fear of being sent to an insane asylum. Despite these obstacles, she refuses to abandon her dreams and embraces her unconventional nature.

Hattie's War takes you on a fascinating journey as Hattie defies the odds and fights for what she believes in, all while navigating the challenges of her time.

Peter Serko has ingeniously weaved his great-great-grandmother's own story. This book perfectly blends personal history and fiction that will keep you hooked from start to finish. Through meticulous research and attention to historical detail, Serko has brought Hattie's world to life, making the reader feel like they are alongside her. This book is a must-read for anyone who loves a good story of ambition, rebellion, and the power of perseverance.

The Prairie Book Review

October 2023

A riveting, uplifting coming-of-age historical tale...

Pain, memories, and the difficulty of letting go permeate Serko's heartening story about family, friendship, and finding self. At 14, Harriett "Hattie" Alanson Howell has experienced major loss—her closest sibling died, and her father, Hannibal, was killed in the Civil War shortly before she was born. Struggling with mental health issues, Hattie looks for answers on her own and begins to correspond with her Uncle Byron, her father's brother and the only war survivor in the family.

Inspired by the author's family history (Hattie was his great-great-grandmother and Hannibal was his great-great-great-grandfather) and told in accessible, breezy prose, this novel explores Hattie's day-to-day struggles as she tries to fit in an unfamiliar surrounding while working on her artistic talent. The characterization is strong throughout as Hattie demonstrates growth. She proves to be a resilient and inspiring main character, and the ingenuity she displays in overcoming obstacles is compelling. At the same time, her struggles with the debilitating depression, a curse that runs in the family, ring entirely true, as does her inability to let go of her desire to unravel the questions surrounding her father's death. The secondary characters are well defined. Historical details about the war and the post-Civil War era add layers to the well-developed setting. There are plenty of kid-friendly resources here, along with historical photographs and personality-laden illustrations, all combining in a deeply compelling read. A gripping story about family, war, mourning, resilience, and self-discovery told with heart; a must-read.