

# VASHON-MAURY ISLAND BEACHCOMBER

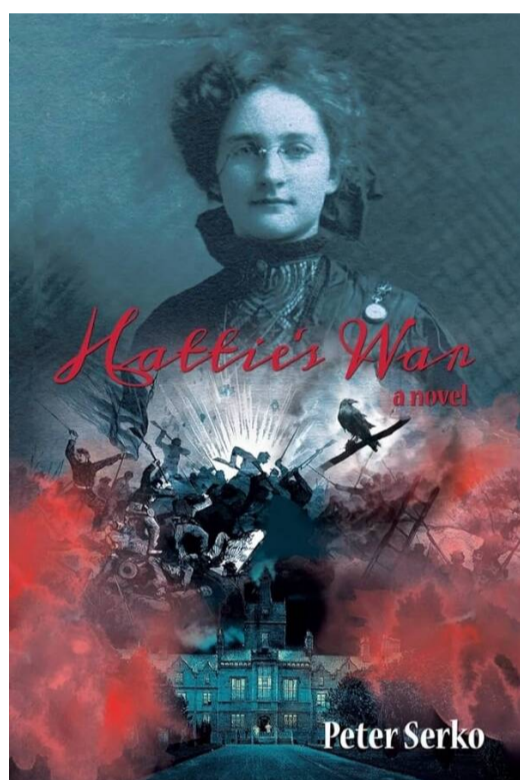


## ARTS

### In conversation: Peter Serko talks about his new novel

The book tells the story of a teen girl who tries to make sense of her father's death.

By [Elizabeth Shepherd](#) • October 11, 2023 1:30 am



"Hattie's War," Peter Serko's young adult historical novel, tells the story of a teen girl who tries to make sense of her father's death and his reasons for volunteering to fight in the Union Army with his two brothers (Courtesy Photo).

history.

Peter Serko, perhaps best known to many on Vashon for the sweeping vision of his activist art/theater/film project honoring his younger brother, David, who died of AIDS in 1992, has reinvented himself once again — this time, as an author of young adult historical fiction.

And this time, once again, Serko's work is deeply personal.

At 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct 22, he will read from his new book, "Hattie's War," at the Vashon Island Coffee Roasterie, and sign copies of his book.

"Hattie's War," set in the aftermath of the Civil War era, tells the story of a teen girl, Hattie Howell, who tries to make sense of her father's death and his reasons for volunteering to fight in the Union Army with his two brothers.

The mystery of her father's death and subsequent family hardships hang over her like a shroud, until she embarks on a remarkable journey of discovery that helps her heal as she takes her first no-longer tentative steps toward adulthood.

But here's the classic Peter Serko twist, that makes his first novel so extraordinary: Hattie Howell was Serko's great-great-grandmother, and he dove deep into his own family history to understand her life story, devise the character in his book based on her, and immerse himself in a complex, epic and heartbreaking chapter of American

The book has won rave reviews, including one from Midwest Book Review that called it "a must-read for anyone who loves a good story of ambition, rebellion and the power of perseverance."

Cindy Powell, a retired middle school history teacher on Vashon, called the book "readable, relatable and solidly researched — the three Rs, if you will, of what I always looked for in literature to make history come alive."

Hoping to reach more middle-school teachers like Powell, Serko has launched [a website devoted to his book](#) to help Hattie find her audience.

"My Hattie is a rebel," said Serko, in a recent interview. "She wants more out of life than being a farmer's wife. But, she's torn. And she is determined to find out what happened to her father. I don't know if my writing is true, but it feels true to me. It captures the spirit of the times. The heroism and courage at home and on the battlefield. The trauma inflicted on a generation."



In the interview, Serko answered more questions from the Beachcomber about his book and creative life, and exactly how —well into his 60s — he set out to write his first novel.

*The David Serko Project, about your brother, kept morphing and resulting in new works and different kinds of presentations. Do you see the possibility of that kind of life for “Hattie’s War?”*

Several people have mentioned the story would make a great movie. I have the first 10 minutes of a film worked out in my head. I will probably put it on paper soon. I know several accomplished filmmakers, so making a film is not far-fetched at all. We shall see. My main interest now is getting the book into the hands of young readers.

Play or movie, there definitely will be molasses cookies. The book has my family recipe for molasses cookies dating to Hattie’s time in the back. Quite a few scenes in the story come directly from my family history. Molasses cookies are one of them. There will be molasses cookies served at the reading.

*How did your work on The David Serko Project inform and guide your process with “Hattie’s War?”*

It turns out that the two stories are pretty much the same, each told from a different perspective and time. AIDS was the scourge striking down people in their prime — my brother was one of them.

The Civil War was the scourge in Hattie’s lifetime. It is impossible for us today to comprehend the impact the massive scale of death and suffering had on the population during and after the War. Two hundred thousand women were left widowed. Probably an equal number had husbands or brothers maimed and disabled. I’m sure PTSD was endemic.

Both stories are about grief and healing. Hattie’s story is in the form of an adventure. It’s also a coming-of-age story. Her father died on July 1, 1863. She was a toddler. She never knew him — Hattie’s on a mission.

In the David Serko Project, I was on a mission to learn about my brother’s life and tell the story of his death. I never realized the similarities until you posed this question — thank you!

*What was your writing process?*

Writing “Hattie’s War” was not hard. It took me two years. I enjoyed every minute of it. I never felt stuck or at a dead end. However, I couldn’t have done it without professional help. I hired professional editors. I didn’t have a clue what I was doing. I’m terrible with grammar and such. I just wrote. And re-wrote. And re-wrote some more. I also asked trusted friends for comments and suggestions. You never know what works or resonates with readers until you put it out there, flaws and all. I took reader input seriously.

*I’m fascinated by the “late bloomer” aspect of your creative life.*

Everything I’ve done creatively has happened after I turned 50. This will sound weird, but I credit my brother David. His last words to me were: “Listen to your heart.”



I knew what he meant but had no idea how to live it. It took me into my 50s to figure that out. Part of my healing journey was coming to terms with his death and its impact on me and, ultimately the impact on my art. It was rough in the years following his death. I was like Hattie. I put a lot of my experience with depression into Hattie. It was not hard to find the right words.

I have about a 10-year attention span. I can do something intensely for that long and then get bored and need to move on to something else. Often, it involves a different medium. Photography is a perfect example. I was crazy about it for ten years. Had a solo show at a major museum. I hardly take any photos these days. Now I’m on to writing books.

*What advice would you give to those who want to try something completely new in late mid-life?*



Don't quit your day job. Start small with something you like and are good at.

Don't be afraid to try something new, but be prepared to work hard at it.

If you're a planner, make a plan, and write it down. Be comfortable with uncertainty, even a little chaos. I'm not a planner. I just start to do something and figure it out as I go. I'm comfortable with the confusion that brings.

Take a class. Find ways to learn more. These days, the internet is a gold mine.

Be willing to make mistakes. Learn from them and move on. Ask for help. Find people who know more than you or have the skill or expertise you desire.

Don't be afraid to ask to show off your work. Before you ask, be sure you can deliver the goods. Offer help or give away your service if you can afford to.

Look for opportunities to collaborate. I've collaborated with high school art students, activist artists, poets, and photographers, to name a few. You learn a lot that way. At the same time, you give back and encourage your collaborators.

Find out more about "Hattie's War" and where to purchase it, [here](#).

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