

NEWS

Islanders bridge generations in the story of “Hattie’s War”

A young Vashon resident is bringing the protagonist of this civil war story to life, in audio form.

By Aspen Anderson For The Beachcomber • October 24, 2024 10:30 am



From right to left: Peter Serko, Bridget Simmons and Julie Jaffe stand for a picture outside The Hardware Store Restaurant. The three were each instrumental in the creation of an islander’s audiobook project concerning the Civil War. (Courtesy photo)

During the aftermath of the Civil War, a young girl navigates grief and self-discovery in long-time islander (now Seattle resident) Peter Serko’s novel, now brought to life in audio form by 15-year-old islander Bridget Simmons.

In “Hattie’s War,” readers meet Hattie Howell, a young girl grappling with the legacy of her father, a soldier she never knew. This historical fiction, inspired by the real-life experiences and family diaries, explores themes of loss, resilience and the societal expectations that shape Hattie’s world.

Bridget was initially brought in as one of three middle school readers to provide feedback on “Hattie’s War.” Just a sixth grader at the time, she found herself growing alongside the character of Hattie as she revisited the story over the years.

 “felt like I’ve grown up alongside this character,” Bridget said. “Hattie was introduced to me when I was in sixth grade ... it’s cool for it to come full circle.”

“The relationship between Hattie and her uncle Byron — they’re so close, and he’s always encouraging her,” Bridget said. “I feel like Peter and I have grown to be like that”

The audience was captivated by Bridget’s performance, Peter said, and it planted a thought: if the book were ever to be recorded, Bridget would be the perfect narrator.

Bridget, now a freshman at Vashon High School, is a self-proclaimed historical fiction fanatic. She and Serko completed the audiobook recording before the school year started this fall.

“I have always thought of Hattie as really similar to me,” Bridget said.



Serko said Bridget’s feedback significantly changed the story. His goal was to create a character that young people could relate to — someone like Hattie, who struggles with depression and resists societal expectations, particularly the idea of becoming a farmer’s wife. Instead, Hattie aspires to be an artist, following in her father’s footsteps.

“She brings life to Hattie — she is super talented,” Serko said, preaching Bridget’s work in this story.

Drawing from his family history, his great-grandmother, and melding all of his research on the Civil War to create this world for Hattie was a joy, he said.

“There’s been 60,000 books written about the Civil War,” Serko said. “It’s the most written-about and studied subject in human history...so I thought, what am I going to add to this?”

Serko didn’t originally set out to write a young adult novel, but it naturally evolved into one as the story developed.

Julie Jaffe, a recently retired McMurray librarian, was instrumental in bringing the project to life, as she had always encouraged Serko to write a book.

’s really Julie who, behind the scenes, made this all work,” Serko said.

“Peter’s creative energy is really extraordinary,” Jaffe said. “He really inspires others — me, Bridget, everybody around him — to trust and explore their talents.”

Before recording sessions, Serko, Jaffe and Bridget spent their mornings getting to know each other better—discussing books, story ideas and sometimes cake.

“She is really unbelievably expressive,” Jaffe said, gleaming about Bridget. “She sees the sentences and the paragraphs ahead of her eyes.”

Jaffe said that the book would be a valuable classroom aid. It has been approved as a supplemental text and adopted into the McMurray Middle School as one of the reading options.

“It’s a historical fiction, but it taps into a lot of contemporary issues for kids that they can really relate to ... they’re all skillfully woven into the book,” Jaffe said.

Two school districts have adopted the book as part of their curriculum. On Vashon Island, it is used in eighth-grade social studies when students learn about the Civil War. In Watkins Glen, New York—where the book is partially set—it has also been adopted.

“I’m thrilled that young people are going to read the book,” Serko said. “I wrote it purposely to teach about the Civil War, the aftermath of the war, without teaching a lot.”

Serko has always worn many hats—professional photographer, high school career counselor, IT specialist, play writer and more. He jokes that he has a “10-year attention span.”

“I discovered about myself that I just need to be involved in creative pursuits, but I never thought of myself as a really creative person,” he said.

Serko’s work on the David Serko Project, an emotional tribute to his late brother who died of AIDS, was pivotal in giving him the confidence to pursue new creative endeavors, including “Hattie’s War.”

“[It] gave me the confidence that I could do something I have never done before,” Serko said. “His last words to me were, ‘listen to your heart.’”

Serko is already developing ideas for his next book, but for now, the audiobook of Hattie’s War is available on his website (peterserko.com) and will be released on Audible and available on other platforms starting November 1. Serko is also working on getting the book into the King County Library System.

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