

Former PV teacher writes romance novels based at Mayport and shares royalties with military families

by EMILY PADGETT
STAFF WRITER

Navy veteran and Atlantic Beach resident Heather Ashby is writing a military romance book series and donating half of her profits to wounded military members and their families.

Ashby's first book, "Forgive and Forget," will be in stores on July 23. It is the first novel in a four-book series based on fictional ships and squadrons set in Mayport.

Ashby's son joined the Army before 9/11, and he was part of the initial invasions in Iraq and Afghanistan. To keep her mind off of worrying about him, Ashby started reading military romance novels and fell in love with them. When her son returned home both safe and more mature, she said, it was a double blessing. She wanted to try her hand at writing military romance books as a way to show her thanks for her son's safe return.

Although Ashby can remember writing in a diary as early as first grade and said she's always been a writer of memoirs and journals, she had never attempted a book.

"The muses started whispering in my ear," she said. "I wasn't sure I could write fiction until I jumped in with both feet."

Retired from teaching in Ponte Vedra, she began to focus on writing the books for women of the fleet to give them something to read while out at sea. She said she soon realized that others could enjoy the story as well and worked hard to write it in a way that non-military members could under-

stand.

"It gives them a chance to join the Navy and see the world without doing a single pushup," she said. She herself once served in the Navy.

She does not consider the novels to be romantic suspense because that would require 50 percent of each genre, and her books are 75 percent romance and 25 percent suspense — just enough to keep the couple apart until they happily ever after.

Publishers from Henery Press, a small publishing company in Texas, liked her high, dry and wry humor, she said, and picked up her book because her writing voice was similar to their current authors.

She decided to donate half of the royalties to support military families that did not fare as well as hers did. After researching many military programs, she chose Fisher House, a charity that offers a free home for families while one of their members is being treated at a military hospital.

Mayport Naval Base members have helped her do research for the books. She said everyone she's spoken to has been so excited an author is finally writing about the work Navy women and men do every day.

Ashby's international travels with her Navy husband had an influence on her writing. While he was stationed in Saudi Arabia, her family became immersed in the culture and customs there, and she said some of that shows up in the first book.

The project began as a one-book deal until she realized how funny the sidekick was in her first book and realized she needed to write more about him, a character she swears is a male version of herself.

"The muses have a strong voice," she said, laughing.

As more characters begin to speak up, two books turned into three, which turned into four, which is the extent of the Love in the Fleet series — at least for now.

The second book, "Forget Me Not," is set to be released in December. Book three, "Never Forget," should come out in July 2014, and the fourth book, "Gone But Not Forgotten," is planned for December 2014.

Inspiration for "Never Forget" came from a British officer who suggested a story about an officer exchange program with the U.S. Navy and the British navy. Ashby said she returned to that idea later on and used it as the basis of the third book, which includes amphibious assault ships. She said she added those to the story because Mayport will soon have them as well.

Ashby said she had taken time away from the military to become a mother and teacher. But now, she gets to be involved again through her writing and research.

"I have reimmersed myself in the Navy world, and I love it," she said.



Heather Ashby, who served in the Navy, traveled the world married to a Navy man. She was a teacher in Ponte Vedra.