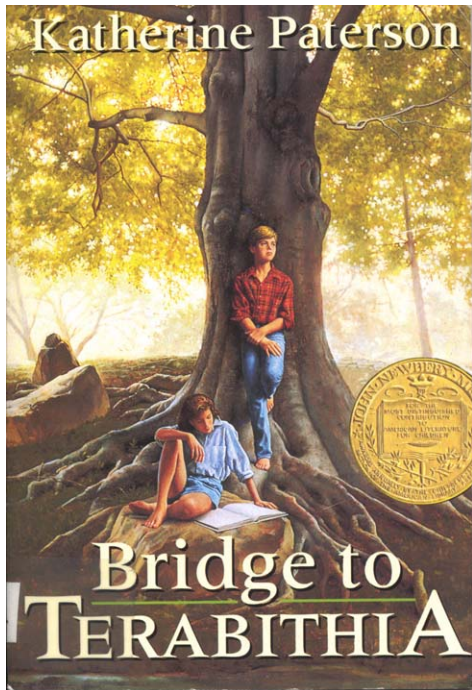




Lisa Hill and the *Bridge to Terabithia*

New movie originated close to home (This column reprinted from June 2005 Takoma Archives)



This book is often required reading in Takoma Park schools. The story behind it is closer than kids may realize.



A photograph of Lisa Hill, at age 8, placed alongside a bouquet at the foot of the new tree.



Poster from the newly released movie.

The tree that had always shaded the front entrance to Takoma Park Elementary School (TPES) was dying. In the fall of 2004 it was unceremoniously cut down. Few of the students or their parents who passed it every day paid particular attention. But there were others who remembered with much sadness how the tree came to be there and the little girl in whose honor it had been planted.

Ann Riley, a TPES parent and children's librarian at the Library of Congress, knew only part of the story. When her first child arrived at TPES, she had seen a plaque in the school hallway telling how the tragic death of second grader Lisa Hill had inspired author Katherine Paterson, then a TPES parent, to write *Bridge to Terabithia*. Riley was familiar with the book, a classic

of young adult literature, but was surprised to learn of its connection to TPES.

The plaque had disappeared several years back and now the loss of the tree inspired Riley to find a way to keep Lisa's legacy alive. With the enthusiastic support of TPES principal Zadia Broadus, she tracked down the Patersons as well as Lisa's mother, who still lived in Takoma DC, and Lisa's brother and sister. They all accepted Riley's invitation to return to TPES and plant a new tree in Lisa's memory.

In April, the families reunited and along with students, staff and community listened to the story of Lisa's life and death and its impact on the Takoma Park community.

In August 1977, the summer after second grade, Lisa was enjoying a day at the beach with her mother, brother and

sister. It was sunny, though a storm was forming on the edge of the horizon. Somehow, a bolt of lightning reached out of the blue, striking Lisa as she sat on the water's edge. And she was gone.

The entire Takoma Park community was in shock, but none more than Lisa's best friend, David Paterson, Katherine's eight-year-old son. Lisa and David had met in second grade and became inseparable companions. As Paterson recalled at the April ceremony:

"David, our third child, had trouble adjusting to his new second grade...until he and Lisa found each other...I don't know what brought Lisa catapulting into our lives. I only know...Lisa was the person David did everything with and told everything to. They played long, imaginative games in the woods behind her

house, and in the late spring they both turned eight years old....

"Then the phone call came. How can you comfort? We listened to David and cried with him, but we could not give Lisa back to him."

Over the next several months, Paterson put the story of David and Lisa on paper. *Bridge of Terabithia* ultimately became the tale of Jesse Aarons and Leslie Burke living in rural Virginia rather than suburban Takoma Park. Nor was Leslie struck by lightning (editors said no one would believe it). But the emotions remained the same. As Paterson put it:

"When children ask me why she had to die, I want to weep, because it is a question for which I have no answer."

Even adults find it hard to accept. David, now a screenwriter living in New York, is

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working on a movie adaption of the story. The Hollywood producers involved can't understand why she has to die either, and are trying to find a way to allow her to live.

Published in 1979, the book received the "Newbery Award" as the year's best children's book. That same year, TPES moved from the old Philadelphia Avenue building into the current building on Holly. The Patersons dedicated a cherry tree in honor of Lisa to shade the entrance.

Not long afterward, John Paterson's pastoral duties took the family away from Takoma Park after 13 years as pastor of Takoma Park Presbyterian Church. Katherine continued to write (upwards of 30 books now). She returned often to

Takoma Park, but over the years few of the sixth grade students who read *Bridge to Terabithia* had any idea that Jesse and Leslie were really David and Lisa, who once upon a time had been second graders at TPES.

Thanks to Ann Riley, the legacy of Lisa Hill and of *Bridge to Terabithia* has been revived for an entire community. With a tree once again gracing the school entrance and the new plaque hanging in the hallway, the story will continue to be shared with future generations..



David Paterson, his mother Katherine, and Lisa Hill's mother



TPES students gather for tree-planting and re-dedication



Ann Riley introduces Katherine Paterson at the April 2005 re-dedication ceremony honoring Lisa Hill at Takoma Park Elementary School.

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