



## PROFILE: NICOLE HELGET (APRIL 2016)

BY DANA MELIUS

**S**t. Peter's growing artisan community now includes the ranks of two more highly-acclaimed talents, singer-songwriter

Erik Koskinen and novelist Nicole Helget.

Koskinen and Helget reside together on a country site in the 7-mile Creek area, enjoying the rural lifestyle, the community's close proximity to the Twin Cities and Mankato, as well as the steady growth of artisans locating to the region.

Koskinen and Helget both cited similar draws to the St. Peter area, as have musicians Zachary Scot Johnson and the Ericksons, sisters Bethany Valentini and Jenny Kapernick. Johnson is the Facebook phenomenon who launched "thesongadayproject"; Valentini lives in St. Peter and Kapernick in rural Henderson.

Ann Rosenquist Fee, who has entered her second year as executive director of the Arts Center of Saint Peter, also sings in an acoustical duo, The Frye, with guitarist Joe Tougas. That duo has also taken the region by storm (as well as Bryant Lake Bowl in Minneapolis) with Tougas' unique operetta, "*The Best of Hank & Rita.*"

Helget's diverse talents go well beyond her acclaim as novelist, currently studying at the Humphrey School of Public Affairs at the University of Minnesota. Her current passions include "Integrity in Public Education" and the state's growing concerns over water quality.

Her first dip last year into the “middle-grade and young adults” market, *“Wonder at the Edge of the World,”* continues to play well throughout that niche group. And like her other books, it’s continuing to get favorable reviews, even as she moves on to other works and projects.

Helget’s youth targeted novel also received accolades from The Chicago Tribune, which utilized a librarian panel to list some recommended reading for the summer of 2015.

Helget has moved a bit past the roller-coaster ride of speaking out against some national educational reform movements. She exited a beloved instructional position at South Central College (North Mankato) just over a year ago, while still hitting the book sales circuit. But she’s used to a hectic pace after six children from two marriages. Now dating Koskinen, she’s found peace once more. And like him, she’s enjoying the countryside and the St. Peter community.

It’s the young reader market that has also brought a new excitement to her writing career at a time she felt compelled to leave the teaching profession. Her publishing company – Little, Brown and Company of New York and Boston – has served Helget well and been happy with sales, and “it seems like they’re really interested in marketing the author.”

Helget reported in 2015 she had completed her next novel, which remains under wrap. But the “Wonders” book and that marketing effort has brought her into an age that has also dominated her life, that of her children. The book is dedicated to her “wonders” – Isabella, Mitchell, Phillip, Violette, Archibald and Gordon.

Helget, who grew up in Stark Township and rural Sleepy Eye, most recently resided in North Mankato. She’s enjoyed remaining close to the Greater Mankato area, teaming on collaborative projects up with artisans there and in St. Peter.

In Mankato, she hopes to team up with budding installation artist Dana Sikkila and the 410 Project.

“The arts are important,” Helget said. So, too, is education, as Helget often writes. Leaving the teaching community at SCC still hurts, she said. “I miss teaching every single day,” Helget said. And she truly misses those students who attend community college.

“I understand why community colleges are so important, so necessary,” she added. However, with the venture into the young adult novel market, and the move to rural St. Peter with Koskinen – Helget is happy again.

“It’s absolutely wonderful,” Helget said. “It’s so different than the adult market. They’re so great. I love the librarians. This time, it’s been so wonderful and refreshing.”

*(This story is a rewrite and update from an article which first appeared June 2015 in the St. Peter Herald, by Dana Melius, currently Associate Editor, Le Sueur News-Herald).*