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STELLA FOSSE



VAMPIRES OF A CERTAIN AGE

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The Pantser's Dilemma

For decades I was a tech writer and wrote what people told me. And resented it fiercely, I might add. Almost as if I knew that by the time I liberated myself from the corporate yoke, the number of books being published would rise exponentially and I'd have a hell of a time separating myself from the dross.

Of course, the dross back then was not like the dross now. For ill or good, there was no AI when I graduated from a paycheck ten years ago. On the minus side, no automated assistant to pin down obscure historical details for my next novel; but on the plus side, no book factories churning out slop by the thousands. These days the upward trend for the number of books being published looks like one of those curves of uncontrolled growth in a petri dish, right before the colony collapses in its own detritus.

But hey, freedom. The real point is that I got out of biotech and get to write my own stuff. And then what? I went from zero writing freedom to total writing freedom and found myself in a whole different kind of trouble.

It turns out that writers (fiction writers, not FDA submission writers) talk about whether they're pantsers or planners. The pantsers are the seat-of-the-pants, total freedom crowd who look down on the planners as bean counters. The planners, of course, look down on the pantsers as flibbertigibbets. Coming from a totally controlled, Gantt-chart-driven environment, I was all about free writes and to hell with planning.

And I have to say that got me through a couple books. I managed to free write my way through two novels and a book of short stories with no compass (nonfiction is a different kettle of fish; I never expected to write those books free form). But then came the vampire prequel that

I'm working on now. I wrote bits at home, bits at a writing retreat, bits on vacation, and then, once I had a fairly respectable word count, I enrolled a brave crew of Beta readers, only to discover I had five versions of some chapters and zero versions of others. So I've spent this month sorting out a rat's nest; imagine trying to unravel an entire skein of tangled, matted yarn, only with words.

The lesson here, if you're interested, is that even so-called "retirement" needs some structure. We humans are not amoebas. We have spines and tendons and ligaments, and our brains, too, want some kind of lattice.

I am resolved, therefore, to become a sort of pantsier-planner hybrid. On future novels I'll start with a rough outline and write stuff into it. For now, in between bouts of cursing my own foolishness, I've turned my mess of mixed up manuscript into something approaching a readable story.

Not quite there yet, though. Better get back to it. And please, don't make the same mistake I made. Make some of your own.



And for heaven's sake, keep the pen moving, or the keys clicking.

All the best,

Stella,

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This Month's Blogs



A Politically Correct Scapegoat?

Stella Fosse

[Anthropologists](#) have long debated the idea that targeting certain members of a society as “others” who don’t deserve care and respect has survival value for the group as a whole. If we assume that people have inborn tendencies toward violence, then focusing blame on a subgroup might support the cohesion of the larger group.

We can find plenty of examples to support that idea, especially in authoritarian societies where stigmatizing a vulnerable group can deflect blame from the powerful. Before it [closed down](#) in early 2025, The Center for Anti-Racist Research at Boston University wrote in a report:

Bigotry in all its forms and manifestations serves to consolidate power in a few at the



My Debut Novel

Jan Flynn

And never once has a publishing professional asked about my age

There are a few, vanishingly rare, incidents in life when the stars line up in such a way that you begin to doubt the evidence of your own senses.

As in, I’ll wake up soon, because this can’t really be happening.

I call these iceberg moments, when a sparkling spire juts above the water line, dazzling in the sunlight — while below it, unseen, is a mountainous accumulation of effort that has taken more than a decade.

One iceberg moment was last month, when I learned that my debut novel, the first in a middle-grade series published by Disney-Hyperion, *GRIFFIN SPEAKER* has been chosen as a

expense of the many. Bigotry operates as a unifying force among those who benefit from social inequality.

Different societies choose different scapegoats; for example, older people may be revered in one culture and reviled in another. And, too, the choice of scapegoats can change over time.

The United States has a terrible history of scapegoating people with dark skin. Racism has never been eliminated in our culture, though at times it has been suppressed by countervailing forces. But those supposedly enlightened subgroups may choose other scapegoats. It's hard to imagine today's *New York Times* publishing an article attacking a group based on skin color (though as recently as 2020, the *Times* published and then [retracted](#) an opinion piece recommending Federal troops be deployed at George Floyd protests).

A Politically Correct Scapegoat

But the paper of record also has a [history](#) of articles casting blame on older persons, purely on the basis of age. To take one example, there's the 2022

May/June 2026 Kids' Indie Next List pick by [IndieBound.org](https://indiebound.org)

Here's another:

On August 9, 2023, I was sitting on the porch of a lovely casita-style hotel room perched almost exactly on the equator, gazing at a view of Mt. Kenya. My husband, son, daughter-in-law, and her parents were enjoying sundown cocktails, celebrating the fourth day of our long dreamed-of Kenyan safari — as well as my husband's and my 20th wedding anniversary.

I'd had to step away, because I'd gotten a call from my literary agent. Between New York and Nanyuki, Kenya, we negotiated the finer points of a two-book deal with Disney's acquiring editor.

I could say it was a dream come true, except I'd never dreamed such a thing happening in such a setting, at such a time. When the call concluded, I semi-levitated across the lawn to stammer my big news to the group.

Now, nearly three years later and with considerable bulk added to the invisible part of the iceberg, my debut novel *Griffin Speaker* hit bookstores on May 5. In recent weeks I've been

opinion piece, "[Why are We Still Governed by Baby Boomers to the Remarkably Old?](#)" Its accompanying graphic features a walker in front of a podium, evoking ableist stigma along with ageist stigma.

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swirling in a heady stew of anticipation, rather like the weeks leading to a wedding, a bucket-list trip, or even a birth.

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