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# STORYTELLING AND SAFE PLACES: AN INTERVIEW WITH PRINTZ HONOR-WINNING WRITER LISA FIPPS

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## Abstract

Author Lisa Fipps appeared as the featured speaker at the Literature Festival held on the campus of Washburn University in fall 2022. During this interview, discussion ranged from the impact of winning a Printz Honor to the influence of her background in libraries and journalism to the challenges and benefits of writing for an audience of young readers. The interview focuses on the prominent role of safe places and storytelling in Fipps' debut verse novel *Starfish* (2021); following the interview, the article explores these same themes in her second verse novel *And Then, Boom!* (2024). In her books and in this interview, Fipps explores the reasons why young people need to count on having safe spaces in their lives to help them deal with a difficult and challenging world, and she explores the important role that storytelling can hold in the lives of her protagonists as well as her young readers.

**Keywords:** young adult literature, Lisa Fipps, safe spaces, storytelling

Author Lisa Fipps tackles the tough topics in her books—bullying, family disfunction, body shaming, and poverty, among others. Her novels recognize the harsh and sometimes unforgiving world that many of her young readers occupy, and she honors those experiences by writing about them with honesty and forthrightness. Her readers will attest to the fact that she doesn't pull punches; Fipps invites them into an unvarnished and often difficult world where her young protagonists face real challenges without easy solutions. When we sat down to visit in fall 2022, however, much of the discussion focused on the avenues that Fipps explores in her writing, avenues that can lead young readers out of darkness and despair and into a more hopeful, encouraging future. Fipps explores two such paths, storytelling and safe places, in both of her verse novels, *Starfish* (2021) and the recently released *And Then, Boom!* (2024).

We met up in Topeka, Kansas, at the end of a busy day at the Literature Festival, a celebration of books for young readers along with the authors who write them and the young people who read them, held annually on the campus of Washburn University. Having spent the better part of a day talking to a conference room full of young readers, answering their questions, and autographing their books, Fipps sat down with me to talk about a wide range of topics related to her work, to the field of young adult literature, and—given that her first novel had recently been recognized as a Printz Honor book—the impact of awards on her work as a writer.

During our conversation, we spent time considering the role that storytelling and safe places can play in the lives of her characters and her young readers. Fipps is an engaging and intentional conversationalist, someone who has clearly thought deeply about the struggles that her readers face and who has spent time considering the ways in which young people can best face and surmount these challenges, build on positive relationships with the support of friends and family, and move forward into the better times that will open up before them in the future. As the following conversation will reveal, the work that Fipps started in *Starfish* continues in her second verse novel, *And Then, Boom!*

The following interview has been lightly edited for concision and clarity:

**Kienholz:** Your debut novel was recognized as a Printz Honor book—that’s an amazing accomplishment. How did that recognition from the Printz Committee impact your work as a writer?

**Fipps:** You know, I really don’t think you can ever let an award affect your work, whether you get one or you don’t get one. I think you do the work, and if you get an award you get an award. And if you don’t, you don’t. The work doesn’t change because what you do as a writer is important to you for a reason, and it is your talent, it is your gift, it is who you are. And you’re going to do that whether it sells one book or a thousand or a hundred thousand or a million, and so if you let what critics say or what award committees say dictate your work then that’s, I think, a dangerous zone to be in as a Creative.

**Kienholz:** The novel *Starfish* opens up with what I termed a call to action: “So when the world tries to make you feel small, starfish.” How do you characterize the argument you’re making with this novel?

**Fipps:** There are over 7.7 billion of us on this planet, and it’s fair to say that at least once in everybody’s lifetime someone has made you feel small about something, whether it was how you looked or an idea or a belief or religion or your gender or whatever. I think that there’s a universality to being made to feel small and the fact that you need to really realize you have a right to be seen, to be heard, to be noticed, and take up your space in the world. So, it *is* a call to action.

**Kienholz:** *Starfish* is written in verse, so I’m wondering if you have noticed that the novel’s readers respond to a particular poem or two in an interesting or surprising way to you. So, in other words, is there a poem that sticks out in your mind that they [your readers] really react to in a way that maybe catches or caught you off guard?

**Fipps:** You know, it’s very interesting to see what resonates with a reader. Some of the poems that I would think are the ones that should resonate the most, don’t always. But then another one that seems just more *quiet*, if I had to describe it, is something that really hits someone. And I think that’s the beauty of all words is you never know what’s going to hit. It depends on the person. The reader is just as much a part of the book as the writer, and I think that’s the cool part.

**Kienholz:** The power of telling one’s story is an idea that many writers for young adults seem interested in exploring. In *Starfish*, this idea enters the novel when Ellie proclaims, “I plan to become a Storyteller and a poet to help people feel what it’s like to live in someone else’s skin.” What’s your sense of the importance of Storytelling in the lives of young readers, and why did you decide to include that issue in this novel?

**Fipps:** I think there are lots of reasons why it’s important, one of which is just empathy building, in general. I think that we don’t always do a good job as a society—and I’m not just talking about Americans, I’m talking worldwide—in getting people to understand that we are all different, but

different isn't bad. It's just *different*. And to understand where people are coming from—we have wars over people not understanding each other. If you think of all of the bad things in the world—mental health issues, abuse, violence, crime, addictions—everybody's struggling with different things that happen in the world, and yet we're all in the world together, so we need to be understanding. I think empathy is huge, and I think once you start listening to other people's stories (A) you find commonalities you never realize you had and (B) you find what I call transferable stories like, "You got made fun of because you're really tall. I got really made fun because I was really fat." So maybe your experience was different, but we both know how that feels and how that hurts. I think the other thing is it shows you that it's important to come from a place of understanding [rather] than a place of judgment.

**Kienholz:** In *Starfish*, it appears to me that Ellie has a number of safe spaces, and I'm thinking here of Dr. Woods' office, the library, or swimming pool, where she can, depending on the place, explore emotions, utilize her talents or simply relax enough to be herself. What is it about *safe spaces* such as these that you think is crucial for a young person?

**Fipps:** Especially because of the pandemic I think that the world just doesn't seem like a safe space anymore, in general. And I think ...even before that it didn't always seem like a safe space.... Just because you are four years old or 12 years old or whatever, doesn't mean you're spared from some pretty bad things. So, I think that it already felt like an unsafe world, especially if you have disfunction in your home or schools on drills all the time for shootings—that can't feel like a safe space. And then you have random shootings in neighborhoods. You have riots. You have all these different things that make the world feel unsafe. We all have to have a safe space somehow, even if it's an escape into your mental mind.... Some creatives, their safe space is to create and to go into writing or to music or to art, or somebody else's safe space is to go for a really long run. But there has to be a safe space mentally and/or physically for all of us in the world no matter what our age because you have to feel safe or your body is going to be in this hyper-vigilant state all the time and your mind is going to be there, as well.... If you really think about it, you guys have a safe space. I have safe spaces. We all do. We all do, where you just feel like *I'm OK here and I don't have to worry about anything here*.

**Kienholz:** I know you've got a background in both journalism and libraries. I was wondering how those parts of your work life influence your writing.

**Fipps:** Journalism affects my writing the most because I just learned a lot of skills being a journalist. I can write cold, is what I call it—writing cold. Writing blocks don't happen because they couldn't happen when you're a journalist. You're on deadline, so you just learn to work around them. I have an exceptional ear for dialogue. As soon as I hear something in conversation, I'm like, "There it is. That's it – right there." And just being really succinct because you only had so much space. So, you write tight when you're a journalist. You also learn to get to the heart of the story fast. As a journalist, they call it the nut graph. You just want to get right there. You have the lead to get their interest, and the nut graph is like, "Okay, this is what this is all about." And you just learn how to pre-digest it for the reader.... Editing as I write also helps me. A lot of writers don't do that, and it's not bad. It's just because of my journalism. So, I think it really helped my career in a lot of ways. And then what's interesting on the library side is just every day when you go into work and you see kids running into a library saying stuff like, "I can't believe my book is finally in. I can't wait to read that." And the *excitement* they have about reading ... when we have programs based on books or we have authors come in and they get excited about it, it's like they're engaging with the reading. They're not just reading it anymore and it takes it to a new level. And so, I think that just spawns and encourages me as a writer.

**Kienholz:** What do you find to be uniquely challenging and particularly rewarding about writing for young readers?

**Fipps:** First of all, you have to be really good as a writer because they do not tolerate mediocrity. You know ... as an adult if you go and spend \$27.00 for a book or \$15.00, you're like, "I don't really like it but I'm going to finish reading because I paid for the book." No, kids don't do that. They'll just toss it aside because it's often a library book anyway or they'll have a sibling who will pick it up and read it. But, no, they don't tolerate it. If it does not get and keep their interest, they're out, and so it's a challenge to not have any of those what I call *down moments* in a book or *marshy middles*, as we call them. It's like you're always pushing yourself to make sure they don't stop reading. You want cliffhangers. In poems you want enjambment. You want to keep them going and going. And then they're just still real and authentic. They haven't got to that place where they hide who they are yet. Just like some of the kids here today, they're telling me some of their stories afterward. We had the Q&As, and they would come up and they would tell me very personal things that were going on in their life and how it resonated with them, and adults don't do that. They might like your book, but you'll never hear from them [an adult]. A kid likes your book, they are emailing you. Sending you cards. They are just who they are, and they are so much more "real" than adults are. And so, the work is a little more difficult because you really have to get and keep their attention ... And knowing that it's going to stay with them—you know how really good books stayed with you? And they stay with you your whole life. Knowing that you can do that to a kid is pretty amazing.

**Kienholz:** What are a few things that young readers need today from books—from their reading lives?

**Fipps:** I think they need it [reading options] in more formats. This generation, and I see it just increasing in future generations, don't *just* want to pick up a book. They want to pick up a book that has prose or a graphic novel or they want a mix.... They like that because it's speaking to different parts of them and it's using their creative side. It's using their intellectual or cerebral side. And I think that we're going to see more and more books in different formats rather than in standard prose. I think we're going to see a lot more tough topic books because kids need tough topics books because they are *living* tough topics. And I think we're going to see more diverse books – not only will the characters be more diverse, but I think the subject matter will keep becoming more diverse.

Just as in her debut novel *Starfish*, the main character in Fipps' *And Then, Boom!* navigates perilous situations and circumstances (namely, persistent hunger and periodic abandonment) through a combination of support from friends and family and through the utilization of safe spaces and storytelling. Joe, the protagonist in Fipps' second novel, is a 12-year-old who lives with his grandmother (*Grandmum* in this telling—she is from England) because his mother abandons him when she gets, as Joe describes, the Itch, a tendency to walk away when life gets difficult. When his grandmother suddenly passes away, his absentee mother returns to his life, albeit temporarily, bringing more chaos and confusion than stability and comfort. Though Joe's story ends on a note of optimism and hope and the promise of new beginnings, as does Ellie's story in *Starfish*, he ends up relying on friends and neighbors (who become like family) to help him get to that place of safety where he can move confidently into his life.

Along with those friends and neighbors, Joe relies on the availability of safe places to get him through the more challenging and dangerous spaces in his journey. As Fipps noted in the interview, safe spaces help prevent young people from living in a "hyper-vigilant" state, and these places of refuge and rest factor heavily in both of her novels. In *And Then, Boom!*, Fipps sets the stage for the inclusion of these safe spaces when she dedicates the novel "To every kid who...hungers for

a safe space away from stormy people popping in and out of your life.” In the story itself, Fipps introduces a number of these safe spaces for Joe, including a garden, a cubby underneath some steps, and a clearing in a grove of trees. As Joe himself notes when his beloved dogs are scrambling for safety in the midst of a storm, “They’re trying to find a safe spot, / just like I always do.”

Safe spaces don’t only exist organically in the world of Fipps’ novels, but her characters also create them. During our conversation, Fipps alluded to the power of storytelling in the life of young readers in terms of its ability to engender and encourage empathy in readers, and she noted that creative people often create their own safe spaces through the acts such as storytelling. As noted in the interview, Fipps’ character Ellie dreams of being a poet—a storyteller—to help others feel what it is like to be in another person’s skin. Likewise, in *And Then, Boom!*, the main character creates his own safe space and makes meaning out of the chaos in his life through storytelling. In Joe’s case, the storytelling takes the form of doodling—storytelling in picture form—in response to those chaotic moments he faces in the course of trying to live his life. Taken together, the two books serve as a call to action for readers who might need a safe space in their lives, even if they must create that space out of the stories that they tell themselves and others.

While storytelling and safe places collectively serve as connective tissue in Fipps’ novels, readers will note a third, related, concept woven into both books, serving as another important link between the two stories: Through her fiction, Fipps sends the clear message to her young readers that, no matter how desperate situations may seem, they will never have to face their challenges without the support of others. In *Starfish*, Ellie finds the resilience she needs not only in herself, but also in those who surround her with support and a belief that it is enough for her to simply be herself—others such as her father, her friends, and her therapist. And in Joe’s case, he learns that he can lean on the support of his teacher, his buddies, and a new foster family in order to navigate his darkest moments. Taken together, Fipps’ two novels strike a delicate balance between heartache and hope, a combination that serves as a much-needed reminder for her readers that when they reach out for help to navigate life’s troubled waters, they will never have to face the world alone.

### Author Biography

Kevin Kienholz is a professor in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Emporia State University, where he works primarily with preservice middle and high school English teachers. He joined the faculty at ESU in 2000 after having taught English for seven years in his home state of Oklahoma. He can be reached at [kkienhol@emporia.edu](mailto:kkienhol@emporia.edu).