

SR Staley is the author of four novels, most recently *St. Nic, Inc.*, an adult re-imagination of the Santa Claus myth, an action/adventure story that has been compared in pace and style to Clive Cussler and Tom Clancy with layers of social commentary similar to *Animal Farm*. Reviewers have said the “story sparkles like the North Pole on a sunny day” (Tallahassee Democrat) and is a “fast paced thriller that explores government overreach, technology’s role in society, and what it means to ‘do good’.” (Scholars & Rogues). *St. Nic, Inc.* can be purchased through the Little People of America (LPA) web site ([www.lpaonline.org/fiction-with-dwarf-characters](http://www.lpaonline.org/fiction-with-dwarf-characters)), at all major on-line booksellers, and through local bookstores. NOTE: The availability of *St. Nic, Inc.* through the LPA website should not be interpreted as an official endorsement by the LPA, its Board, or its staff.

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1. Santa Claus is one of America’s most cherished children’s myths, and scores of variations exist on the tale. Why prompted you to write a book about Santa Claus?

*My story’s origin begins with the question every parent dreads: Do you believe in Santa Claus? As parents, we worry over how our children will react to the “truth” that Santa Claus is a myth. The overwhelming majority of our kids, of course, do fine. They may feel a period of betrayal and a sense of injustice, but they get over it. I think, however, many people underestimate how difficult this conversation is for parents and adults. We perpetuate the myth because we believe in its spirit and the core value of giving as an unconditional act of generosity. In this way the values are very secular. We are afraid that if our children realize that the myth is not real, the value of the principle is somehow degraded. I believe strongly in the importance of unconditional giving and charity. I think its a critical element of any sustainable society or community. As a novelist and storyteller, I wanted to reinvigorate this idea for adults. That’s why *St. Nic, Inc.* is not a children’s book. It’s a story with characters that gives us the space as adults and parents to believe if we choose to believe.*

2. Little people figure prominently in the story. In fact, the climax hinges on the role of little people. In popular culture, little people are commonly associated with elves of myth. Is this why you included them as characters?

*Ironically, the common cultural tag of little people with elves is why they almost didn’t appear in the story at all. I completed the manuscript in 2000, and I didn’t know any little people personally at the time. *St. Nic, Inc.* is intended for a mainstream audience. So, as I began mapping the Santa Claus myth over the contemporary, reality-based world I was creating, I was trying to create practical analogues that would also be consistent if a North Pole operation actually existed. I purged fantasy elements from the back story. Elves didn’t figure into it, in the same way that the story doesn’t have reindeer, or flying sleighs, or a rotund Santa Claus (who is sometimes referred to as a “jolly old elf”). So, the early drafts tried to avoid little people altogether because I thought little people and elves would be conflated, detracting from the contemporary and reality-based setting I wanted to create.*

### 3. So, how did little people end up in the story?

*All my novels grapple with the problems of diversity, tolerance, ethnicity and social justice in some substantive and meaningful way, although always in the context of the story; they are not lectures. In The Pirate of Panther Bay, for example, Isabella is an escaped slave who captains a pirate ship. She has to deal with her own identity and coming of age as a woman in a violent, male dominated profession (pirating) and the racism that pervaded the plantation and extraction economies of the world during the 18th century. So, as I began to continue to think through the mythology of elves and Santa Claus, I began to reflect on little people and dwarves. For some reason which I still don't completely recall--writing is a process, not a moment in time--I became particularly annoyed by the fact little people were almost always depicted in stereotyped roles in popular culture, particularly movies--munchkins, elves, what have you. But I knew that little people have the same abilities and capabilities as average-sized people. Why didn't we see more of that? So, I began to revise my thinking about little people and elves and thought this might be an opportunity to address issues such as inclusiveness, fairness, prejudice--social justice--through my story. So, the book has several passages that directly confront conventional stereotypes about little people and contrast them with the "reality" of the North Pole in St. Nic, Inc. I am particularly fond of a coffee shop scene in Chapter 10 between an average sized person and a little person, and a very poignant dialogue between two average-sized people on dwarfism and human dignity in Chapter 24.*

### 4. Artistically, how was this accomplished?

*A few passages make a big deal about the stereotypes, but this is mainly used as a tool to establish the fact these are stereotypes. Breaking these stereotypes down is fairly easy in the context of story. My little people are in everyday professions--software engineers, attorneys, shopkeepers, baristas, doctors, nurses, security guards, and even volunteer soldiers working along side average sized people as equals. These roles are pretty normal under conventional standards, so it's relatively easy to show the short-sightedness and narrowness of perspectives that use only the lens of physical stature to relate to people.*

### 5. Did writing about dwarves and dwarfism change your perspective on their role in society?

*I have certainly become more sensitive to the problems they face. I was fortunate to have someone who happens to be a dwarf enter my life as a colleague and now friend. She and her husband have helped refine my understanding of the everyday challenges and the toll of being "different" plays in how they view themselves and their role in the larger community. In one sense, my perspective hasn't changed much: I still believe people deserve their dignity as individuals, not limited to groups or categories that inevitably diminish the qualities that make them human. But I also know my story likely has weaknesses because, as an average-size person, I don't walk in their shoes. I can never completely comprehend their lives. So, for example, while I spent a lot of time purging fantastical elements from my story and building my characters who happen to be little*

*people into fully actualized beings, I didn't realize that simply having so many congregate in one place--the North Pole--may unintentionally promote a myth that a place actually exists where little people live separately from mainstream society. While life in my North Pole is purposefully mainstream, and little people are still a statistical minority, I have become aware since the publication of the book that these myths are stubbornly deep rooted and sometimes defy common sense.*

6. So, do you see *St. Nic, Inc.* as serving an advocacy role for little people?

*I'm not sure I would go that far. I certainly hope it is used to help broker a broader discussion about the value of tolerance, diversity and voluntary exchange that is inclusive rather than exclusive. This is a fundamental lesson of economics, and it's built into the North Pole world that frames *St. Nic, Inc.* And I hope that I have captured the very real emotional toll experienced by little people from mainstream cultural ignorance and prejudice. The little people in my story are not superheroes or romanticized. They are complicated, layered, and flawed, everyday heroes, heroines and villains. An important value for me as a storyteller is to avoid creating overly simplified or glorified characters. So, I have little people that are just awesome people, and others that are enormously scared and wounded. That's normal for any group, or individual, that experiences discrimination with any intensity. Little people are central to the story in *St. Nic, Inc.* because they reflect the range of personalities and abilities in the broader society. As people, and humans, they mirror the average-sized world.*

7. What role do you see for yourself in raising awareness about dwarfism and little people?

*I certainly don't consider myself an expert on dwarfism or the world in which little people live on a day-to-day basis. I am an average-sized person, and my perspective is framed fundamentally by my personal experiences. Until very recently, I have had very little direct experience with the prejudices and trials faced by little people. Nevertheless, I have learned a lot about little people and dwarfism since writing *St. Nic, Inc.* and, by coincidence, I now have very good friend who is a little person. She and her husband (also a little person) were enormously helpful to me as I was taking my characters into more emotionally vulnerable stages of their personal relationships. So, now the issues surrounding the challenges, obstacles and opportunities faced by little people are as much personal concern as one of professional interest. I believe the issues that the characters in *St. Nic, Inc.* face are as much about the search for human dignity and personal respect as any other story, and I hope I can be part of that larger discussion. In this way, *St. Nic, Inc.* doesn't reflect a departure from my other books about pirates, bullying, and school violence. On the contrary, it remains an integral element of my journey as a writer and novelist.*