

THIS WEEK IN FICTION

## NELL ZINK ON GERMAN AND AMERICAN STEREOTYPES

*The author discusses her story “The Welfare State.”*

By Deborah Treisman

December 21, 2025

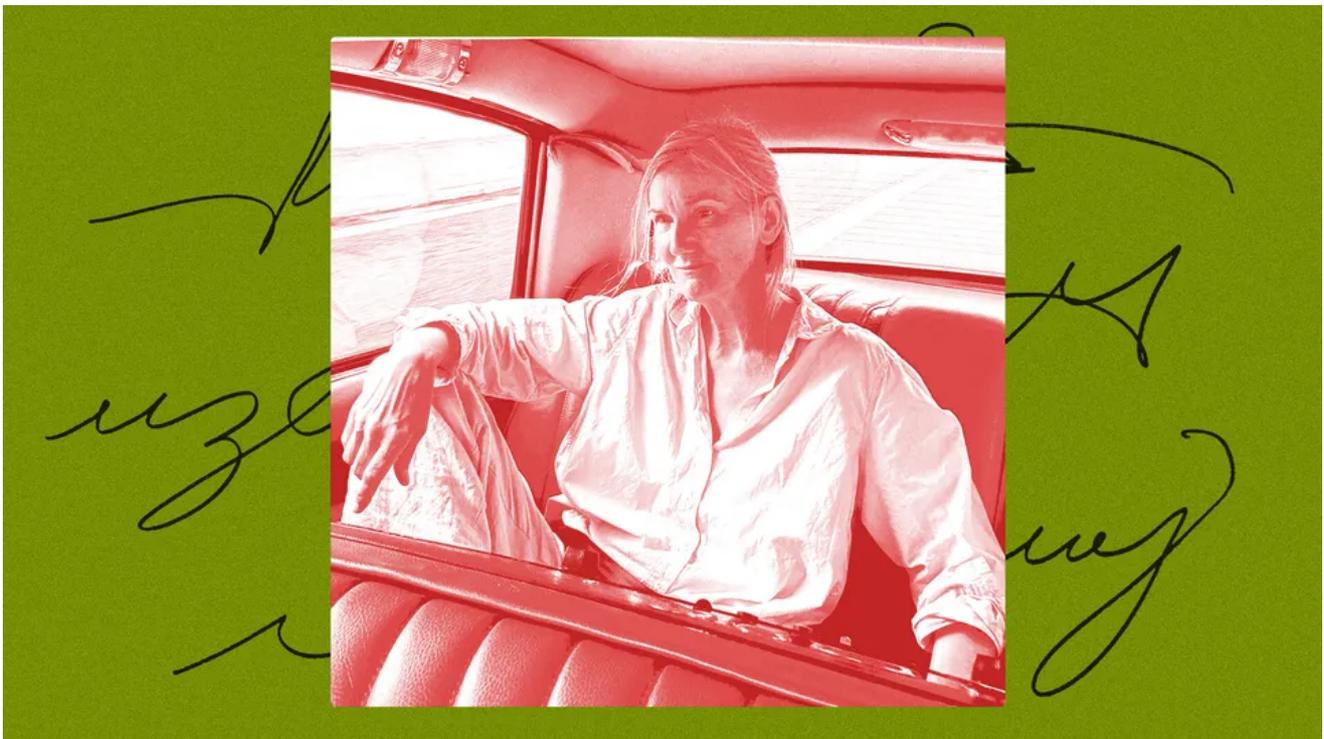


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**Y**our story “The Welfare State” follows two women who have been friends, living in the same small town in Bavaria, for two decades, as they take a walk along the peak of Mt. Niesen, in the Swiss Alps. The two characters are very different, both in background and in personality. What made this mountain peak the ideal spot for their differences to come to a head?

I should say up front that I don’t write this stuff. It comes to me unbidden, the way every sentence I speak does. Imagine if I had to search for the words among eighty-six billion neurons! I had to do that once when I went into a catatonic fugue state while defending my dissertation to a jury of stern professors, and once when I was on some really bad acid, and, believe me, it’s not how you get a reputation for being articulate. So they (the neurons) got together and decided that high ground in a rich, neutral country is the best place to set a summit meeting. They weren’t the first to come to that conclusion! Moreover—I must thank my friend Ian Christe, the great Swiss American heavy-metal critic, for both these points—Switzerland is so beautiful that there’s a subreddit devoted to exposing it as computer-generated art (“SwitzerlandIsFake”), and yet on every single hiking trail, no matter how harmless it looks on the map, there comes a moment when one wonders whether one is about to die.

**Julia is American, more rigid, less carefree and open than Vroni, who is German. This is, in some ways, the inverse of the usual stereotypes. Has your own experience proved those stereotypes wrong?**

My favorite stereotype is the one where Germans think Americans are prudish. I’ve lived in Germany since 2000, and I remember the first time I saw “Sex and the City” in the original. It was so gratingly vulgar. In Germany, I’d apparently been watching a bowdlerized edit, halfway to the Saudi version. I’d say that Vroni isn’t open; she’s an educated German with a head full of knowledge, unwilling to repeat herself. Americans like to talk about things they have in common. Given the current political and religious situations in the U.S., they can’t even make small talk with friends anymore—it’s more like micro-talk. Yet they will have the most intense personal conversations with strangers they’re sure they’ll never see again. Julia is not amused that Vroni felt free to marry a philanderer who loves kids, rather than someone hardworking and faithful, but her notions of women’s and children’s needs were

formed by her own experiences. The two of them occupy the same world, but they register it on different frequencies. I should point out that Vroni is from Catholic Bavaria, while Julia—like most American Wasps—is psychologically more of a Prussian. Catholics, like Orthodox Jews, believe that God wants your good deeds and the performance of certain rituals and isn't that interested in what goes on in your head. Martin Luther's big breakthrough was *sola fide*, the origin of today's dainty capitalist egos.

**The story implies that Vroni's carefree existence is possible because she lives in a "welfare state," where the government supports child care, education, housing, and so on, and thus there is less pressure to earn and climb in a career, and children can be somewhat left to raise themselves. Is that your take on life in Germany, too?**

Germany is a more patriarchal, more ageist, less free country than the U.S., but a little constitutional commitment to human dignity goes a long way. Unlimited education for all who qualify is crucial to maintaining the level of public discourse, as well as the quality of public services. By "less free" I mean, for instance, that federal law here mandates rent stabilization and even something resembling unionization. It's hard to evict or fire anyone, and wages in fields with vulnerable workers are regulated (along with payments to veterinarians, estate lawyers, and other potential extortionists). The lack of an open market gives workers leverage, and women often use it to reduce their hours in harmony with the short school days here, rather than to raise their income. Day care is sparse, because of stringent licensing requirements. But now I'm reminding myself of a German friend who warned an American friend's trans child against moving here because of Germany's "creeping fascism." If it's creeping here, what's it doing over there—galloping? Poor people struggle in Germany, but from a relatively comfy platform, child care aside.

**I don't want to give away the last scene of the story for anyone who hasn't read it yet, so I'll just say that it comes as a completely unexpected shock to Julia. Why do you think Julia fails to read the room, so to speak, and doesn't realize that her view of things isn't shared by those around her?**

She's always known that there's a disconnect between her and Vroni, but that's common enough in friendships, unless you socialize exclusively with like-minded people from your own milieu. The paradox is that, when you're not just nodding and smiling about unfamiliar emotions but truly trying to comprehend them, you're

probably forcing square pegs into round holes. If Vroni published a novel, of course, Julia would be off the hook. Any reader can buy access to literary writers' minds for the price of a library card and then give them one-star reviews for not being relatable. But Vroni's just trying to live her life. Because Julia cares about her enough to identify with her, she's torn between expressing her concerns and simply being a helpful friend.

**Should we take it as both literal and metaphorical that, on the mountaintop, Julia feels as if she were about to fall into an abyss while Vroni bounds around like a chamois, fully convinced of her own safety?**

Right now all my American pals who aren't retirement age are afraid of losing their jobs. They work in fields that are downsizing, like journalism, social work, and global-health advocacy. Many own guns, which they keep loaded and within reach when I'm sleeping in their homes, to my extremely amazed trepidation. Julia's first instinct is to fear the unknown, because life in America can be over so fast, both figuratively and literally. One little tax-evasion case goes against you, one mug shot for an alleged misdemeanor, and you're unemployable, at least if you have an unusual name like mine. In Germany, you can discreetly serve time for murder—generally fifteen years, with time off for good behavior—which cuts down on your motivation to take out as many people as possible in one fell swoop, before turning the gun on yourself. I say that Julia consumes news stories—which contributes to her anxiety—and happy-go-lucky Vroni doesn't, but the unpredictability in the U.S. is getting close enough to touch. My friends in Philly had a neighbor shot to death by a fourteen-year-old in front of their house, followed by a mass shoot-out between two teen cliques at the local dog run, and the weirdest thing happened when I was in Virginia in October: I was at an old friend's house way out in the woods, and someone came during the night and stole about fifty ripe tomatoes out of the garden. We were planning to can them the next day. I guess Americans are back to doing food heists like hobos.

**Tell me about the genesis of this story. Several months ago, I asked if you were writing short fiction, and very quickly there was a draft of a story in my inbox. Did these characters already exist in your mind? Had you been planning to write this narrative?**

In all my gallivanting around Germany since 1983, I've only ever met one sex worker, a charming dyslexic who had moved here from the Balkans, with her working-class parents, at sixteen. In the years after she flunked out of school, prostitution was still

nominally criminalized—the market hadn't yet been flooded with teen-agers on work visas in huge brothels—and she could make a living by meeting select clients in the afternoons. She said it compared favorably with her other options as an illiterate young woman, and I believe her. She wasn't a member of my social circle; I met her at a Prostitution Working Group meeting of the Baden-Württemberg Green Party. In the U.S. context, I can't talk or write about the backgrounds of the sex workers I've known without outing friends and colleagues. And far be it from me to imply that it's a less-than-ideal side gig. American sex workers are an even scarier organized affinity group than translators. (I mean scary in the social-media sense—I'm not saying that their wrath is physically hazardous.) One does not disparage their choices, or suggest that prostitution is perhaps not the oldest profession. (Historically, it has become common in times and places with dramatic wealth gaps and relevant limits on enslavement.) So there I was, intent on cranking out a short story overnight, preferably on an urgent topic that had been conveniently knocking around in my brain for eons, but without mentioning the topic itself, because who needs that can of worms. I asked the neurons, "What might a wild woman free from urgent economic pressures do with her life, other than fail to annoy me with stock rationalizations about how men traditionally package emotional labor as cash, and how dates with finance bros in New York are the same routine whether or not you're getting a thousand bucks and a late checkout with room service?"

**Your most recent novel, "Sister Europe," was published earlier this year. It's set in Berlin and takes place entirely in one night in the lives of its characters. Which do you prefer writing—novels or stories? Which do you prefer reading?**

I've written six novels since I started publishing, and three stories. I'd say the evidence speaks for itself. There are a couple of canonic stories that my B.F.F.s and I refer to at regular intervals: "Five Letters from an Eastern Empire," by Alasdair Gray, and "The Winter Journey," by Georges Perec. I admit I've never gotten through an Alasdair Gray novel. When people can't really write but have good ideas, I prefer that they keep it short. But my favorite authors write so well and copiously that I can happily keep going for eight hundred pages. I'm not counting Robert Walser as a short-story writer. I've read hundreds and hundreds of his miniatures, but, as he himself said, they're all vignettes from one big "*Ich-Buch*"—like Dr. Seuss's "My Book About Me by ME Myself," only longer. ♦