

FOREWORD BY GENNAROSE NETHERCOTT
BESTSELLING AUTHOR, *THISTLEFOOT*



MEDIA KIT

BECOMING BABA YAGA Trickster, Feminist, and Witch of the Woods

by Kris Spisak

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

BECOMING BABA YAGA

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“With *Becoming Baba Yaga*, Kris Spisak presents a robust work of scholarship. Baba Yaga is a wily shapeshifter, nearly impossible to pin down—but Spisak miraculously transforms alongside her, ever keeping up.” —from the foreword by GennaRose Nethercott, bestselling author of *Thistlefoot*

When darkness, fear, and instability inundate our daily lives, folktale figures like Baba Yaga speak to the dichotomy of our existence—the hope and the horror, the magic and the mundane. At once an old hag and an enchantress, a demon and wish granter, a feminist and nothing more than a fairytale, Baba Yaga is an endlessly complex folktale character.

Becoming Baba Yaga provides an in-depth look at the Baba Yaga mythos and history through Slavic folklore. Filled with historical and cultural context, analyses, and the stories themselves that add depth to the conversation. A comprehensive resource for anyone hoping to learn more about this ambiguous character and how her multifaceted presence still ripples through the present day, *Becoming Baba Yaga* is as thoughtful as it is illuminating.

Spisak explores Baba Yaga’s connection to nature as an Earth goddess and as an herbalist. She also delves into the Shadow Self and Baba Yaga’s aspect as a trickster and places her in a modern context as not merely a witch of the woods but also as an archetype and force for finding your own path. *Becoming Baba Yaga* shares how she is both a force for good as much as evil and a feminist before her time.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kris Spisak earned her bachelor’s degree in English from the College of William and Mary, her master of liberal arts from the University of Richmond, and did further graduate work in fiction through the University of Iowa. She taught





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college writing courses at schools including Virginia Commonwealth University before stepping away from the classroom to pursue her own writing work. Kris has been spotlighted in *Writer's Digest* and *HuffPost* for her work as an editor and author dedicated to helping other writers. She is the author of *The Baba Yaga Mask* (a novel) and *Get a Grip on Your Grammar*. Kris fully believes that well-written words and well-told stories have always changed the world and that they will continue to. She can't wait to tell you her next story.

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BECOMING BABA YAGA

SUGGESTED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

- Why should anyone care about Baba Yaga?
- Do you have any family history with Baba Yaga tales?
- Your family is Ukranian, but isn't Baba Yaga a Russian witch?
- What's one of the most fascinating historical secrets about Baba Yaga?
- What is often overlooked when examining the horror aspects of Baba Yaga?
- How is Baba Yaga relevant to modern life?
- How has an old witch transformed into a feminist figure?
- Our world can be scary sometimes. Why turn to dark stories when life is stressful enough?
- You've said Baba Yaga's not a life coach but that by examining her stories we can become better versions of ourselves; what do you mean by that?
- You've written about grammar; you've written fiction; now you've written a nonfiction exploration of an old folktale character. How does it all tie together?

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Kris Spisak earned her bachelor's degree in English from the College of William and Mary, her master of liberal arts from the University of Richmond, and did further graduate work in fiction through the University of Iowa. She taught college writing courses at schools including Virginia Commonwealth University before stepping away from the classroom to pursue her own writing work. Kris has been spotlighted in *Writer's Digest* and *HuffPost* for her work as an editor and author dedicated to helping other writers. She is the author of *The Baba Yaga Mask* (a novel) and *Get a Grip on Your Grammar*. Kris fully believes that well-written words and well-told stories have always changed the world and that they will continue to. She can't wait to tell you her next story.

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Q&A with Kris Spisak about *Becoming Baba Yaga*

Why should anyone care about Baba Yaga?

We live in a moment when stories surround us. So much flashes before our eyes or screams for our attention that we begin to tune it out. But a character who has held humanity's ear for hundreds if not thousands of years? Oh, Baba Yaga has staying power, and her presence ripples into our modern life in ways we don't always notice. She appears as a code name in *John Wick*, as the name of malware infecting computers, in *Hellboy* comics, and in *Puss in Boot's* latest DreamWorks adventures. Pop culture seems fascinated with this little-known Slavic witch, yet the world hardly knows the depths of her tales.

Folktale traditions can be difficult to explore, because how does one capture the whispers at bedtime or tales told back and forth among friends, all of which have been built upon centuries and centuries of tellers? But this is an ancient Eastern European woman who leans into her complexities and has lessons to teach us if we dare to pay attention. There is good; there is evil. Then there is Baba Yaga. Whether we define her as a witch, a trickster, or a goddess, she defies all stereotypes and preconceptions, and isn't a character like that exactly what we need right now?

Do you have any family history with Baba Yaga tales?

When my grandmother was a little girl and took a shortcut through the Ukrainian woods, she kept her head down. Baba Yaga, the witch of the Eastern European forests, was real to my grandmother. As a child, she knew without a doubt in her mind that Baba Yaga preyed upon the young, especially those who didn't listen, those who broke the rules, those who lived by their own internal compass. What was an imperfect girl to do?

My mother was born across the ocean from Baba Yaga's woods but not her influence. The old magical woman's presence lingered on in threats about straying into the darkness, in sharp words about manners and obedience, yet whether because my mother was the picture of well-mannered perfection or because the woods near her Winnipeg home weren't nearly as deep, Baba Yaga remained familiar, though less a cause for alarm.

As for me, I always considered the old witch a good tale, an echo of my Ukrainian roots not so different from kolomyka circle dances and traditions of pysanky eggs at Easter. She was simply there, on the periphery. Stories linger as much as any other tradition.

Your family is Ukrainian, but isn't Baba Yaga a Russian witch?

I love speaking to this question, because yes, Russian folktales are Russian, but there are so many Eastern European cultural traditions beyond Russia. Folktales, like any other artform, have twisted, stretched, and shaped themselves into different forms in different places, and there are deep historical roots to Baba

Yaga, as a character, outside of Russia as well as within it. Oral storytelling traditions have never yielded to country lines.

Baba Yaga tales are well known in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, and she often extends into the folktale traditions of other Eastern European countries as well, including Poland. While her name shifts slightly and minor details about her moving house and exploits vary from region to region, versions of her are known in Slovakia, Hungary, Moldova, and beyond.

What's one of the most fascinating historical secrets about Baba Yaga?

There was a 1788 comedic opera titled, *Baba Yaga*, designed for Catherine the Great's royal court. Before the final curtain, Baba Yaga remained the sole character in the spotlight and closed the show with a solo about a better world that could come to be.

Terror. Hideousness. Hope. Possibility. Yes, this is Baba Yaga, the witch, the motivational enchantress, sharing a lesson and an optimism for audiences to take home. The more you dig into her stories, the more unexpected she becomes.

What is often overlooked when examining the horror aspects of Baba Yaga?

Baba Yaga's role as a gatekeeper between life and death can lend itself toward the frightening, but she was also seen as a guider of souls. According to the tales, Baba Yaga is there when someone died to bring them to another place, but also there, much like a midwife, when a baby is born. This place of transition between life and death, as well as her frequent role of controller of time, are glimpses of her weight in Slavic storytelling so much more than the simple macabre.

How is Baba Yaga relevant to modern life?

Not just a one-dimensional witch of classic Disney creation, Baba Yaga is frequently an active player in saving lives—well, some of them (she still might try to eat you)—but beyond her darker moods, she's also someone who feels wanderlust; she's a tiny house enthusiast, an advocate of herbal remedies, and a woman who is always stronger and more capable than most others ever acknowledge. Modern ideas with a dark, Slavic twist, no?

How has an old witch transformed into a feminist figure?

You could also ask how an earth goddess transformed into a horrific witch, because that's part of Baba Yaga's story too.

Our world can be scary sometimes. Why turn to dark stories when life is stressful enough?

An exploration of Baba Yaga's history and her ongoing mystery is something we all need right now, whether we want to tuck into one of her fantastical tales, the facts behind them, or the questions they raise in our own daily lives.

When we were children, speaking about monsters and big bad wolves gave us bearing in our own lives, a way to confront our fears. There were parallels, but they seemed distant when approached via stories. Yet folktales were not always just for children. Within them is hidden context that can enrich even our contemporary lives. Consider it a challenge. Turn off the news. Encounter Baba Yaga instead. You may be all the better for it.

You've said Baba Yaga's not a life coach but that by examining her stories we can become better versions of ourselves, what do you mean by that?

Baba Yaga is known to punish those who come upon her, but she's also known to make their most desperate wishes come true. The difference is often a matter of the individual. If someone is horrible to her, then she will be horrible back. If someone consistently acts with kindness, bravery, and determination, this ancient old woman, can transform their lives. Whether a whispered morality tale at bedtime or a refresher in the midst of our hectic schedules, Baba Yaga reminds us of the potential that arises when we are our best selves.

I played with this idea in my novel, *The Baba Yaga Mask*, where Baba Yaga tales were whispered between two adult sisters as a code of bravery as they embarked on a wild journey across Eastern Europe to find their missing grandmother; yet now to tackle Baba Yaga directly in nonfiction is an honor and a challenge I have loved every second of.

You've written about grammar; you've written fiction; now you've written a nonfiction exploration of an old folktale character. How does it all tie together?

Everything I do comes back to the idea that well-written words and well-told stories can change the world. This is true in your professional communications, a fiction writing pursuit, or that family story you always wanted to capture, but this idea is also alive within examinations of tales that have impacted history and continue to do so. We are the tellers of tales. We are a part of storytelling history. Discovering the depths of old stories only empowers our own journey—written or otherwise.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kris Spisak earned her bachelor's degree in English from the College of William and Mary, her master of liberal arts from the University of Richmond, and did further graduate work in fiction through the University of Iowa. She taught college writing courses at schools including Virginia Commonwealth University before stepping away from the classroom to pursue her own writing work. Kris has been spotlighted in *Writer's Digest* and *HuffPost* for her work as an editor and author dedicated to helping other writers. She is the author of *The Baba Yaga Mask* (a novel) and *Get a Grip on Your Grammar*. Kris fully believes that well-written words and well-told stories have always changed the world and that they will continue to. She can't wait to tell you her next story.

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Sample Article:

How Baba Yaga Collides with Mindfulness & Modernity

By Kris Spisak

Sometimes, a scratchy voice whispers in our minds—niggling, grousing, goading us on. We could call it self-doubt. We could call it trepidation. We could call it the worst of our thorn-laden anxieties, blocking the sunshine and strangling our best intentions. Or does the internal murmur come from somewhere deeper, our evolutionary self-preservation instincts, forcing us to reckon with the darkness to manifest the wherewithal of the light.

How can learning about the history and evolution of a Slavic witch transform into a mindfulness practice? Well, stories and artistry simmer in the blood of humanity, and they linger for far more than their entertainment value.

My Ukrainian heritage is alive when my family creates *psyanky* (Ukrainian Easter eggs), using folk art motifs hundreds if not thousands of years old. But these eggs are so much more than lovely decorations. They are fluent in creative metaphor: affirming aspirations, making wishes, and telling stories. In my novel, *The Baba Yaga Mask* (dual-timeline fiction, Wyatt-MacKenzie Publishing, 2022; Tantor Audio, 2023), the nuances of Slavic folk art and folktales shape the characters' journeys in both the present day and World War II-era Ukraine. I've also discussed the focused intentionality of *psyanky* in countless writing and editing workshops, but introducing the storytelling traditions of Baba Yaga elevates these same conversations to a place even more probing and riddled with the macabre.

Baba Yaga is a character well known in Eastern Europe for millennia, her tales continually transforming like the cultures around her. Her fabled chicken-legged hut was likely inspired both by Siberian food storage houses raised on stilts to keep out scavengers and the raised coffins of ancient shamans, laid to rest in the plane between the earth and the sky, between here and everything after. Her physical attributes echo both ancient goddesses and archaic serpent-tailed foes. Within her stories, we find spiritualism, savagery, and soul-searching guided by treacherous candlelight.

- Baba Yaga consistently demands the best from the protagonists she encounters. If they come lacking respect, bravery, integrity, or a strong work ethic—four essential traits she always requires—she may well eat them for supper, yet those who meet her high standards will gain an ally like no other. May we all aspire to such qualities.
- She insists upon dignity amid witch hunts and horrors, remembering both her civility and her stubborn sense of self. May we all be as comfortable in our own imperfect skin and as determined to meet the world on our own terms as this witch confronted by mobs, wolves, and firebirds.

- When she smells human blood with its frailties and flaws, she doesn't condemn. Instead, Baba Yaga offers challenges for self-improvement. May we all face our trials with the formidable will and determination she inspires.
- Baba Yaga's frequent question – "Have you come to do deeds or run from them?" – allows for a new perspective. May we ask this question of ourselves daily and discover the difference that transpires.

A believer in feminism, tiny houses, natural medicines, and the power of saying "no," Baba Yaga is a modern force with an ancient Slavic twist. Her stories can entertain, horrify, or inspire. And they can linger on our minds far after the telling.

For we all know the power of stories. Whether as children or adults, who wants to be preached at or drilled? Wouldn't we all rather gather round the firelight for the simplest and most profound rendition of a familiar tale? A story that makes us reexamine the world in which we live and the way we exist within it?

Baba Yaga gives us horror and hope, yet this ancient woman of the woods also gives us the tools for mental fortitude and mindfulness. She gives us the reminder that niggling doubts and fears can be advantages—humanity's edge for flourishing and survival—as long as we listen, consider, give the old witch a respectful nod, then still move on with our day. Her iron-forged teeth and ferocious tongue can terrify or empower. I choose empowerment, especially with my own ongoing research and continued storytelling.

So just for a moment, close your eyes. Listen to the sound of your breath as it enters and fills your body. Feel the release of tension as you exhale. Unlocking the wisdom of maidens, mothers, and crones enables our greater potential. Academic queries can be heroes' quests like any other. As for me, my Ukrainian blood hums. I've listened and learned, and I'm all the stronger for the journey.