

MY MINNESOTA A weekly profile featuring some of our state's most interesting people
Read past profiles at startribune.com/myminnesota.

The question at her recent book launch was a bit overwhelming: How has writing changed your life?

But former St. Paul legislator, kindergarten teacher and children's-advocate-turned-first-time-novelist Kathleen Vellenga answered with her usual aplomb:

"Instead of watching the world go by in retirement, I am part of it," she said. "And I have someone to talk to: my characters."

Vellenga might be new to the publishing game, but she's an old pro at reinventing herself. She was the second of four girls growing up on the plains of Nebraska and South Dakota, and both her father and grandfather were preachers.

Grandfather Tom Osborne was also a homesteader, state senator, rancher and newspaper editor, not to mention the namesake of her first cousin, the former Nebraska Corn-

huskers football coach.

But her family roots twist further back. When her dad died 15 years ago, Vellenga found a history of the Plymouth Colony and learned her eighth great-grandmother, Elizabeth Tilley, had sailed over on the Mayflower.

With details sketchy, she created a narrative of a teenage girl on the Mayflower in 1620 whose life intersects with a young Wampanoag woman whose tribe first encountered the settlers.

After 10 years, six trips to Plymouth, Mass., endless research, weekly writing groups, classes at the Loft

Kathleen Vellenga
St. Paul, 75



My Minnesota

A novel twist in the life of a former legislator

Literary Center in Minneapolis and summer writing courses in Madison, Wis., Vellenga's novel, "Strangers in Our Midst," was recently published by Anoka-based Forty Press.

Although the story takes place nearly 400 years ago, she's woven in many of her

own experiences. After graduating from Macalester College in 1959, Vellenga taught kindergarten and worked with young impoverished mothers and babies at a pilot project clinic in Ramsey County.

One young African-American mother whose distrust

slowly turned into a lifelong friendship filters into her Wampanoag character's acceptance of the young settler. Elizabeth's marriage at 15 to a 29-year-old rekindled memories of writing statutory rape laws as a state House member from 1981 to 1994.

Vellenga was the first non-

male, non-attorney, non-Catholic, abortion-rights-supporting House member elected to her Macalester-Groveland neighborhood seat. She's lived in the same house since 1966 with her husband of 54 years, Jim. They have three children and six grandchildren.

She was going to write a memoir about her legislative days, but many of the programs she pushed for were being whacked by the Pawlenty administration when she began writing. So she veered off into historical fiction. "The only other fiction I've written were letters home to my mother," she said.

Her post-Legislature career as leader of the St. Paul Children's Initiative didn't hurt, either.

"All that grant writing is really telling stories," she said. "Every grant writer would like to be writing fiction."

CURT BROWN

Reprinted by permission of the Star Tribune (Minneapolis, MN).