

**MARIE SHEAR**

282 EAST 35 STREET # 7N  
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK 11203-3925  
718 / 469-2382

**WRITER / EDITOR**

MARIE SHEAR

282 EAST 35 STREET #7N  
BROOKLYN, NEW YORK 11203-3925  
718 / 469-2382

December 28, 1999

Dear George:

I feel like the Ghost of Hanukkah Past. Or Brigadoon, rising from the mists of Scotland once a century. I've been out of touch with nearly everyone during the ten years I spent caring for my mother and uncle-- who have since died--practicing the family values that sundry sons of gingriches preach.

I remember you fondly as a gentleman and scholar, literally. I've never mispronounced "banal" since you corrected me, with perfect tact, over lunch at the university.

How does emerital life suit you? (There's probably no such word. But there should be. I also advocate the contraction "amn't" and "the mind's ear" and "the mind's nose" as figures of speech.) Do you speechify, tour, consult, admonish? If you plan to visit New York City, I'd be delighted to meet you for lunch.

A batch of the deathless prose that has helped make me a widely-unheralded wretch is enclosed, for your dining and dancing pleasure.

Whatever professional momentum I had before my mother became disabled has gone. If you know anyone who may want to pay absurdly inflated sums of money for my services, don't hesitate to mention my name in Paducah, as the song hath it.

May 2000 prove refreshing and rewarding for you and for those you cherish.

Warmest regards,

  
enclosures

Dean George Gerbner  
234 Golfview Road  
Ardmore, PA 19003-1002

# EQUAL WRITES

by Marie Shear

Quick! What's wrong here?

• Senator Gary Hart, running for President, says, "[T]he issue in the 1980's is not whether Rosa Parks rides in the front or the back of the bus, but whether her son can own and operate the bus company..." (*New York Times*, March 19, 1984)

• During a concert Pete Seeger cues his musicians by saying, "Key of G, men... ah... and Carol." (Record album, "Precious Friend")

• At a panel discussion of careers in computing sponsored by NOW-New York City, a female panelist calls the audience, which is 95% female, "you guys." (April 1984)

• The *New York Times* calls Gloria Steinem "Ms.'s Miss Steinem," calls an Illinois voter "Mr. Hellyer's wife... Miss Rivait," and calls the Deputy Attorney General of the United States "Mrs. Dinkins" on one day, "Miss Dinkins" on another. (May 10, 1984, March 20, 1984, April 10 and 29, 1984)

• Addressing the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, President Reagan says, "I happen to be one who believes that if it wasn't for women, us men would still be walking around in skin suits carrying clubs." (*Life*, January 1984)

• After Barbara Honegger, a government official, deplores President Reagan's record on women's issues, Thomas DeCair of the U.S. Justice Department calls her a "low-level Munchkin." (*Life*, January 1984)

If you can't spot the flaw in each recent case, you need *Without Bias*, a handy guide to identifying and correcting stereotypes in the white-collar workplace. *Without Bias* embraces not only words and images but many other kinds of communication common to business, academia, government, and the media, revealing the prejudice in their language and illustration, their nonverbal communication, and their face-to-face meetings. Communication prolongs the life of those prejudices. To break that vicious cycle, *Without Bias* describes the threadbare insults that communicators should avoid and supplies more civil alternatives to them.

In the first of two chapters about sexism, Loisanne Foerster discusses common offenses and respectful substitutes. Anecdotes make the humiliation induced by sexism poignantly clear. A California businesswoman speaks of "little demeaning statements that... bore into my soul like water torture." A Louisiana attorney remembers that "I was in a meeting, fighting for a program I had originated. I laid out my plan point by logical point, countering each negative statement with positive proof that this project would be good for the com-

pany. I supported my statements with facts, figures, and precedents, and won my case. Later, a former opponent complimented me. 'Honey,' he said 'you think like a man'." (Foerster, past coordinator of IABC's Committee on Women in Business Communication, is credited with conceiving *Without Bias* and developing the original manuscript. Many of the book's other credits are confusing: it is hard to know whom to credit for what. The first edition, published in 1977, was edited by Judy E. Pickens, Patricia Walsh Rao, and Linda Cook Roberts.)

In another chapter, Mary Munter reverses the roles, satirically assuming that everyone important is female and reproaching us for patronizing males: "The term 'my boy' is insidious. It implies that men are both dependent and chattel. Furthermore, it unnecessarily emphasizes their sex (male), rather than their function (clerical)... Do not assume that any man within reach of a copy machine, a coffee pot, or a telephone is a secretary."

Ageist clichés are skewered: old people are doddering nuisances; everyone must be labeled by age, despite its frequent irrelevance to the matter at hand; ads and television programs omit or caricature older people. As correctives, *Without Bias* calls for realistic portrayals of both the problems and achievements of elderly people, especially older women.

Young people, too, are stereotyped by ageism, "either as pampered cherubs or as problems from the moment they are born." Children of varied appearances—perhaps wearing braces or special shoes—should be shown in photos and artwork. We are even urged to show girls who wear glasses. (Hallelujah.) When articles are being written, children's own opinions should be solicited. The authors are alert to the streak of sexism within other types of prejudice: "Stories about single, pregnant young women often fail to address the men involved. The double standard of blaming the female still prevails." "Forget blue for baby boys and pink for baby girls." However familiar, the advice is essential; I know that artists for a major publishing company were still drawing pink girls and blue boys for elementary school textbooks as late as 1983. (Maybe it's genetic.)

Turning to ethnic and religious slights, *Without Bias* lists shopworn adjectives habitually visited on members of eight different groups and tiresome formulas to be avoided: "No retiring, quiet job for her. Betty Wong has chosen a dynamic career as..." "Jose Rodriguez, a steady and even-tempered worker..."

Subtle condescension toward disabled people is outlined. Stories about blind typists become clichés. Statements such as "Though both are deaf, they are an incredibly intelli-

gent couple" still occur. A wheelchair may belong in a photo for an article about architectural barriers, but not in a photo for a story about the user's work as an executive.

Pictures illustrate the clout of the people they show—and the powerlessness of the people they leave out. After describing the messages conveyed by certain poses, the authors recommend that the traditional visuals showing "young, slim, white, athletic specimens" who are VIPs be replaced by more diversified portrayals in an organization's films, slides, and cartoons. *Without Bias* doesn't just advise us to minimize stereotypes in the pictures that follow a publicity event, like a ribbon cutting by a "beauty queen"; it urges that the stereotypes be avoided in the first place, when the event is being planned.

In that same vein, Linda Cook Roberts' chapter on bias at conferences, workshops, and other business meetings is particularly useful. Few guides cover the subject. Yet these occasions send powerful messages through registration forms, training materials, speeches, flip charts, the choice and garb of the hospitality committee, the selection and introduction of speakers, the accessibility of meeting sites, and the nature of the entertainment. If these messages demean women or others, "a communicator risks losing a segment of the audience... [and losing] credibility with employees, government compliance agencies, and the public." A management that permits "girlie" images at a trade show, for instance, confuses "harmless fun" with "the severe embarrassment and damaged morale of the professional women present." To prevent insults, Roberts recommends that a formal meeting code be circulated during the planning stages, not only within the organization but to outside speakers and consultants. The sample code she includes gains in wide applicability what it lacks in specific detail.

*Without Bias* also offers some short case histories to illustrate methods for management to use in developing and monitoring unbiased communications. It reviews pertinent legal requirements in the United States and Canada: "[F]ederal contract-compliance officers may inspect these... media to see if... protected groups are presented in a non-discriminatory light." Communicators who ensure equitable treatment of women and other groups are therefore "doing their employers a large favor" by lessening the likelihood of lawsuits, poor publicity, and consumer boycotts.

Such references to the legal significance of unbiased communications bring us full circle. From the first, feminists and others have maintained that words and images are not some decorative fancy, or some cuddly but optional piece of equipment. No, biased communications have political and economic implications. They mirror the inequitable policies behind them, and they demonstrate that many of the white men who hold power intend to hold onto it.

☆

Another recent guide, narrower in scope than *Without Bias* but somewhat more thorough, is "Guidelines for Bias-Free Publishing," a greatly expanded version of McGraw-Hill's 1974 handbook about sexism, which became the most widely distributed and quoted publishing guidebook of all. While the new guide is officially meant for McGraw-Hill authors and staff to use when preparing text and reference books, it can help almost anyone correct stereotypical language and artwork about women, minority groups, and disabled people.

Unlike *Without Bias*, "Guidelines" does not address ageism or oral and nonverbal forms of communications, and the section on disabled people is skimpy. McGraw-Hill does, however, offer more thoughtful discussion of the nature of stereotypes, more comments on criteria for spotting them, and more substantial advice about avoiding them. It is also more smoothly written.

Style accounts for part of the difference. To one reader, for instance, the distinctions among terms like "Latino," "Hispanic," and "Chicano" may seem authoritative in "Guidelines" and thin in *Without Bias*;

## BOOKS AND RESOURCES REVIEWED

**Without Bias: A Guidebook for Nondiscriminatory Communications**, 2nd edition, International Association of Business Communicators. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982, 200 pp., \$14.95 paper.

**"Guidelines for Bias-Free Publishing,"** McGraw-Hill. Hightstown, NJ: 1983, 38 pp., \$2.00 paper.

**"What Do I Do When I Meet a Person in a Wheelchair? A Guide to Wheelchair Etiquette,"** Schoitz Medical Center, Waterloo, IA: no date, leaflet, single copy free.

**"Truth about Aging,"** by Mary E. Spencer. Washington, DC: National Retired Teachers Association and American Association of Retired Persons, 1979, 24 pp., single copy free.

**"Media Guide to Gay Issues,"** National Gay Task Force. New York: no date, leaflet, 25'.

**Words and Women: New Language in New Times**, by Casey Miller and Kate Swift. Garden City, NY: Anchor, 1977, 200 pp., \$3.95 paper.

**How to Avoid Sexism: A Guide for Writers, Editors and Publishers**, by Merrielyn Kett and Virginia Underwood. Chicago: Lawrence Ragan Communications, 1978, \$10.00 paper.

**The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing**, by Casey Miller and Kate Swift. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1981, 144 pp., \$3.95 paper.

**The Nonsexist Communicator**, by Bobbye Sorrels. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1983, 208 pp., \$16.95 hardcover, \$8.95 paper.

another may find the former discursive and the latter easier to apply. You may well want both guides. Despite some overlap, they complement one another.

Three other current guides can supplement the first two.

While it's not specifically aimed at writers or teachers, an unpretentious leaflet called "What Do I Do When I Meet a Person in a Wheelchair?" implicitly suggests "dos" and "don'ts" to use when preparing prose, pictures, lectures, and the like.

More information about ageism appears in Mary E. Spencer's "Truth about Aging," on which *Without Bias* draws. The pamphlet includes ageist passages and recommended substitutes, along with handsome photos. Other groups victimized by invidious clichés might use this as a model when developing guidelines of their own.

"Media Guide to Gay Issues" discusses distortions and omissions in news coverage of lesbians and gay men—a topic which neither *Without Bias* nor the McGraw-Hill "Guidelines" covers. This short but skillful leaflet also suggests some story ideas.

Literature like this ought to grow. More extensive, authoritative guides to all kinds of stereotypes are needed. A thorough treatment of anti-lesbian gibes, for example, would point out that they often do double duty, simultaneously slandering the lesbian and the uppity straight woman for their wit and grit. Indeed, every group whose members are habitually derided can benefit by instructing the public at large about biased words and images. Let a hundred flowers bloom.

☆

Challenges to sexist words and images are no new thing. Nearly fifteen years ago, the second wave of feminists began arguing that biased language reflects and perpetuates sexism. Yet it is maddening to see how few of the old injunctions, like the warnings about "girl" and the use of ridicule, are superfluous today. Reread a 1973 social studies guide by Burr, Dunn, and Farquhar, with its succinct dissection of scruffy slurs like "women as luggage," or reread Hogan's remarks on the female scatterbrain in the corporate press, and you conclude that women are forever explaining the obvious to the ineducable.

The broadest, liveliest survey of sexist usage—how it works, where it's found, and why it matters—is *Words and Women*, by Casey Miller and Kate Swift. This contemporary classic explains the origins, pervasiveness, and perniciousness of such usage in more depth than handbooks have room for, and it's written in English, not Scholarspeak. What-

## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS:

Marie Shear of Brooklyn, NY is a writer and editor by trade, a satirist and musical-comedy lover by temperament, and a feminist by necessity. Professional and popular journals have published her articles and reviews about women and communications. Her article, "Solving the Great Pronoun Problem: Twelve Ways to Avoid the Sexist Singular," contains a guide, discussion and illustrative examples.

## CLASSIFIED

"Solving the Great Pronoun Problem: Twelve Ways to Avoid the Sexist Singular" contains a 12-point guide, discussion and illustrative examples. To order, send \$4.00 and SASE to Marie Shear, 282 East 35th Street, Brooklyn, NY 11203.

ever handbooks you pick to cover the mechanics, pick *Words and Women* to cover meaning.

For clear advice on drafting, consider *How to Avoid Sexism*, by Merriellyn Kett and Virginia Underwood, first. In addition to covering offensive usage, Kett and Underwood analyze practical writing techniques that can help us use words without belittling women while at work on campus, in a news organization, or in the business world. "[B]e on the lookout for the singular noun whose function is to describe the 'typical' person, then pluralize it on the spot because the pronoun *he* will be attracted to it like fleas to a dog. Trying to pick them out of the memo which has already been typed... will be as frustrating as it is expensive." By comparing sexist passages to smooth revisions, the authors show us ways to remove bias, but not pith, from a sentence like this: "A conservative is someone who can endure the suffering of others for the sake of his own principles." Kett and Underwood unwisely dismiss the best formal salutation—"Ladies and Gentlemen." But like Miller and Swift they argue persuasively for the singular *they*—a solution so obvious that it is regularly decried by critics who consider popularity synonymous with illiteracy.

In the latest Miller and Swift book, *The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing*, misogynistic absurdities culled from formal and informal usage are woven together with commonsensical wit. Why, for instance, would anyone term the Pap test "a boon to mankind"? Skewed descriptions and parallelism are covered, along with familiar topics like false generics, the presumption of maleness, and that damned "girl." Despite its title, the *Handbook* offers less specific drafting advice than Kett and Underwood. But John Simon savaged Miller and Swift for writing it. That's recommendation enough.

(A fourth reference work, an extensive manual and leader's guide called *The Nonsexist Communicator*, by Bobby Sorrels [Persing], treats a broad range of business writing. It contains a long glossary and exercises for drafting and role playing. These may prove useful. Unfortunately, the work is poorly organized and windy, and the quality of the drafting advice doesn't match the author's admirable intentions.)

Whenever people take superficial note of nonsexist usage while ignoring or rejecting its implications, contradictions abound. To see this schizophrenia at work, consider the general stylebooks that news organizations issue. Although they have begun including references to sexism, they prohibit some slights only to reinforce other venerable bias.

A *Washington Post* style guide, for instance, advises staff members to "write and edit with a sense of equality, appropriateness and dignity for both sexes." But it allots only about four pages out of 232 to sexism, forbids most uses of "Ms.," and sanctions much standard bias on the specious grounds that nonsexist language is "awkward or artificial."

Scattered references to sexism in a United Press International stylebook warn that "treatment of the sexes should be even-handed." "Weather forecaster" and "reporter" are substituted for "weatherman" and "newsmen," and countries and ships are called "it," as they should be, not "she." The correct name of the National Organization for Women is emphasized. Yet many illustrative examples use the false generic "he," and "man" and "mankind" are retained. UPI staff members are offered irreconcilable admonitions: "Do not presume maleness in stories, but use a masculine pronoun to refer to a word that may be either male or female."

*Newsday* has a split personality, too. The two pages on sexism in its style guide announce that both sexes "should be dealt with on an equal basis and treated with the same respect, dignity and seriousness." Journalists are instructed to avoid condescension, stereotypes, and false generics and to omit "irrelevant references" to marital status. But they are told to use "*mankind*, not *humankind*..." to define the human race, and "Miss" and "Mrs." are retained.

According to the paradoxical Associated Press stylebook, "women should receive the same treatment as men in all areas of coverage," including references to marital status. But then incongruous, intricate rules for "Miss," "Mrs.," and "Ms." are promulgated, and male-marked words are accepted. Wire-service inconsistencies of this kind, and the "short-sighted and frightened males" responsible for them, have been widely condemned by media women.

*The New York Times* is particularly perverse. Its stylebook is laden with mugwumpery: elaborate distinctions between "comedian" and "comedienne"; a requirement that ships, but not countries, be called "she"; confusing directives about "coed"; the acceptance of "councilwoman" and the rejection of "chairwoman." Best of all, there are 24 paragraphs on "Mrs." and "Miss"—a remarkable tangle of Byzantine niceties and exceptions to exceptions. Moreover, in practice even apt admonitions like the injunction against "girl" are often disregarded to this hour, under the aegis of executive editor A.M. Rosenthal, who has scoffed at critics of the paper's sexism.

As Alan Alda once said in another connection, "Logic is not the strong point of sexism." That's why we need books devoted to fair communication, books like *Without Bias*. They offer timely advice, not just to professional communicators—writers, editors, teachers, librarians, photographers, or managers—but to everyone who wants an educated eye and ear. Regardless of whether we earn a living by creating words and images, we all consume other people's words and images. At the very least, we ought to equip ourselves to act as allies of the unbiased communicator. Together, communicators and consumers should be able to hoot the Abe Rosenthals off the stage. □

© Marie Shear 1984

#### A GUIDE TO THE GUIDELINES

Papers and pamphlets on nonsexist usage began cropping up in the early 70s, peaked in quantity around 1975-76, when at least fifteen appeared, and continued into the late 70s. Some guides were free-standing brochures or sheets of notes; others were incorporated into longer works. Many came from publishing houses; others came from women's groups, educational periodicals, journalists, the corporate world, professional and religious organizations, and government agencies. Pragmatism rather than purity inspired some guides, like those prepared by a giant bank which had been sued for employment discrimination against women.

Early nonsexist alternatives were proposed by Faust, Merriam, Miller and Swift, Orovan, Densmore, Farquhar, Burr and Dunn, among others. A typical pamphlet from Scott, Foresman—the first from a publisher—urged that women's achievements be respectfully and consistently recognized, and charted sexist phrases and paragraphs alongside nonsexist alternatives. At a journalism convention in Washington, NOW distributed guidelines that analyzed the tone, language and trivialization in news coverage of women and the women's movement. Macmillan issued a sound guide to bias against women and six minority groups in words and art, which stands up well today.

#### Choosing a Guide

A good guide to unbiased communication will cover offensive words and images related to:

- male pronouns
- titles
- trivialization
- terminology
- tokenism
- the presumption of a male, white, physically perfect, young, slender, straight universe
- typecasting
- tone
- personification
- invidious inconsistencies
- ridicule & jokes
- caricature & cliché
- condescension
- male-marked words
- veiled slurs
- omissions

The guide should supply "do's" and "don'ts" by suggesting fair substitutes for biased passages and pictures. A glossary of unbiased synonyms for biased terms should be included. A discussion of stereotypes during business and professional events like meetings is helpful.

—Marie Shear

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Alexander, Rodney and Shapery, Elisabeth. *The Shortchanged: Minorities and Women in Banking*. New York: Dunellen, 1972.
- American Psychological Association. "Guidelines for Nonsexist Language in APA Journals." Publication Manual Change Sheet 2, June 1977.
- Associated Press Stylebook and Libel Manual. New York: Associated Press, 1977. (The 1976 Associated Press Broadcast News Style Book does not discuss bias at all. It uses male pronouns for the typical news source and typical radio listener and calls staff members "AP men" and "newsmen." It also says, "We are newsmen and proud of the title.")
- Bernstein, Paula. "Just one word can put a 'girl' down." *Daily News*, May 12, 1975.
- Billingsley, Patricia A. and Johnson, Neil A. "Nonsexist Use of Language in Scientific and Technical Writing." Technical Memorandum 21-78. Maryland: U.S. Army Human Engineering Laboratory, Aberdeen Proving Ground, July 1978.
- Burr, Elizabeth, Dunn, Susan and Farquhar, Norma. "Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in Social Studies Textbooks." Los Angeles: Westside Women's Committee, 1973.
- Cohn, Ellen. "The Liberated Woman." *New York Sunday News*, January 26, 1975.
- Densmore, Dana. "Speech is the Form of Thought." Pittsburgh, KNOW, March 1970.
- Deutsch, Arnold R. "Does your company practice affirmative action in its communications?" *Harvard Business Review*, November-December 1976.
- "Editorial and Graphic Criteria for Content and Illustration." Lexington, MA: Ginn, January 29, 1974, revised October 5, 1981.
- "Editorial Guidelines." Garden City, NY: Newsday, 1976.
- "Equality in Print: A Guide for Editors and Publishers." Chicago: Chicago Women in Publishing, 1978.
- "Fair and Balanced Treatment of Minorities and Women." Cincinnati: South-Western, 1976.
- Farquhar, Norma, Burr, Elizabeth and Dunn, Susan. "He' Is Not 'She'." Los Angeles: Westside Women's Committee, December 1972.
- Faust, Jean. "Words That Oppress." Pittsburgh: KNOW, April 1970.
- "Glossary of Substitute Terminology." New York: Task Force on Equality of Women in Judaism of the New York Federation of Reform Synagogues, September 1976.
- Glueck, Grace. "McGraw-Hill Bars Sexism in Nonfiction." *The New York Times*, September 12, 1974.
- "Guidelines for Creating Positive Sexual and Racial Images in Educational Materials." New York: Macmillan, 1975.
- "Guidelines for Eliminating Sexism in the Media." National Conference on Women and Media. Distributed at 1975 [More] convention.
- "Guidelines for Equal Treatment of the Sexes in McGraw-Hill Book Company Publications." New York: McGraw-Hill, [1974].
- "Guidelines for Improving the Image of Women in Textbooks." Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman, 1972.
- "Guidelines for Multiethnic/Nonsexist Survey." New York: Random House, 1976.
- "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language." APA Task Force on Issues of Sexual Bias in Graduate Education. *American Psychologist*, June 1975.
- "Guidelines for Nonsexist Use of Language in NCTE Publications." Urbana, IL: National Council of Teachers of English, no date.
- "Guidelines for Richard D. Irwin and Dorsey Press Authors for Equal Treatment of Men and Women." Homewood, IL: Richard D. Irwin, March 1978.
- "Guidelines for the Equal Treatment of All Employees in Bank of America Internal Communications." San Francisco: Bank of America, 1975.
- "Guidelines for the Positive and Equal Treatment of the Sexes and of Minority and Ethnic Groups." New York: American Book, 1977.
- "Guidelines for the Treatment of Women in the Media." "... To Form A More Perfect Union..." Washington, DC: National Commission on the Observance of International Women's Year, 1976.
- Hogan, Pat. "Sexism in the Corporate Press." *Journal of Organizational Communication*, Winter 1973.
- "Media Women Object to Inconsistent Use of Mrs./Miss/Mr. in New AP-UPI Stylebook." *Media Report to Women*, November 1, 1976.
- National Federation of Press Women. "Guidelines to Eliminate Sexism in the Media." *Press Woman*, January 1976.
- The New York Times Manual of Style and Usage*. New York: Times Books, 1976, reprinted 1982. (The previous edition, *The New York Times Style Book for Writers and Editors*, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1962, contained no index entries at all for "sex," "sexism," "woman," or "women.")
- "Policy on Racism and Sexism." Peoria, IL: Charles A. Bennett Publishing Company, no date.
- Rutherford, Millicent and Alter, Lance. "Do the NCTE Guidelines on Non-Sexist Use of Language Serve a Positive Purpose?" *English Journal*, December 1976.
- "The Sensitive Listener of the 1980's." New York: American Federation of Television and Radio Artists, no date.
- Shanahan, Eileen, et al. "Proposed Styles and Policies for the Elimination of Sex-Bias in the Media." Washington, DC: Washington Press Club, no date.
- Shear, Marie. "The Chairone of the Board: A Note on the Semantics of Sexism." Unpublished essay, January 1977.
- "Social Fairness in Textbooks." LaSalle, IL: Open Court, no date.
- "The Treatment of Sex Roles and Minorities." New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston (College Department), 1976.
- "The Treatment of Sex Roles: Guidelines for the Development of Elementary and Secondary Instructional Materials." New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975.
- "Treatment of Women and Minority Groups." Lexington, MA: Ginn, 1975.
- The UPI Stylebook*. New York: United Press International, 1977.
- U.S. Bureau of the Census. "Removal of Sex-Stereotyping in the Census Occupational Classification." *Statistical Reporter*, October 1973.
- The Washington Post Deskbook on Style*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1978.
- Wendlinger, Robert M. & Matthews, Lucille. "How to Eliminate Sexist Language from Your Organization's Writing: Some Guidelines for the Manager and Supervisor," in Jongeward, Dorothy and Scott, Dru. *Affirmative Action for Women*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1973.
- Whitman, Alden. "The Times Issues a New Manual of Style." *The New York Times*, February 2, 1976.
- "Wiley Guidelines on Sexism in Language." New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1977.
- "Women and the Media: Newspaper Guidelines." New York and National Capital Area chapters of NOW. Distributed at [More] journalism convention, May 1973.
- "Words That Offend: Sexism in Language." Tallahassee, FL: Commission on the Status of Women, State of Tennessee, no date.

## Solving the great pronoun problem:

### 14 ways to avoid the sexist singular

By Marie Shear

*Marie Shear is a free-lance writer whose work has appeared in more than 30 publications. She wrote "Equal Writes," a survey and bibliography of guides to unbiased communication, and "Fixing Rotten Writing," which received an award from the International Association of Business Communicators. Her column on the media appears regularly in New Directions for Women. Shear lives in Brooklyn.*

Consider the sex of the squirrel. Any squirrel. Is it a she or a he? I never gave the matter a thought until one Saturday morning a couple of summers ago. Then I heard a radio news report that a squirrel had precipitated a power blackout somewhere in New York — by running up an electrical wire, gnawing through a cable, or something — frying its furry little carcass in the process. The newscast called the squirrel "he." I was intrigued. Had a reporter been to the morgue, or wherever wayward squirrels go when they fry, to check the corpse's sex?

Of course not. Like lots of other organizations and individuals, the radio station had assumed that anything worth mentioning is male, until proved otherwise. That assumption creates The Great Pronoun Problem.

Male pronouns are supposedly the hardest form of sexist language to overcome. Purists insist that *he*, *his* and *him* are indispensable when the person in question is unidentified or archetypal. In apocalyptic terms, they warn that nonsexist alternatives are ostentatious and politicized. The purists sound like 15th-century cartographers warning Columbus about the sea monsters.

Despite the humbug, we *can* solve The Great Pronoun Problem. Nonsexist usage, like all first-rate writing and speech, requires skill placed in the service of an educated eye and ear. But we needn't exaggerate the difficulty. Practice is necessary. Genius is not.

Here are six general guidelines and 14 specific methods that, with a little practice, should enable you to correct the pronoun problem while you continue writing as accurately and gracefully as you did before. Soon after

that, you should be able to avoid the problem in the first place.

- **First, forget "company manners."** Don't save nonsexist language for special occasions that require formal prose. Incorporate it into memos, letters, reports and conversations. A double standard is hypocritical. Besides, people who treat nonsexist pronouns like "company manners" don't develop enough skill to use them smoothly and swiftly.

- **Ignore the ridicule.** Biased gentlemen and occasional ladies ridicule the advocates of nonsexist usage, picturing us as zealots who would mutilate English and impose thought control. They fume at a single use of *he* or *she*, wrongly claiming that nonsexist language is monotonous. Yet they overlook the real monotony in sexist prose like this, from *Esquire* magazine: "When a three-week-old baby hears *his* father's voice, *his* face elongates, *his* shoulders hunch, *his* eyebrows shoot up, *he* becomes still with anticipation — all signs *he* is expecting some excitement [*italics mine*]." The same critics argue that unbiased prose is imprecise, oblivious to the farcical inaccuracy of a former senator's statement that abortion is "strictly a matter between the patient and *his* doctor." Such language isn't noble or neutral. It is toxic. Unless you yearn to teach remedial kindergarten, ignore the sniping and get on with your work.

- **Keep it simple.** Don't make a federal case out of it. Look for the simplest deft solution to the particular problem. There's no need to draft an ingenious revision, combining 10 of the 14 methods below, if a single, obvious technique — like using the plural — will do the trick.

- **Consider the context.** Context helps determine which method is best. For example, if there is a lot of repetition immediately before and after a sexist sentence, you won't want to repeat the noun in it.

When you change from singular to plural, check the words that any pronouns refer to. If it's no longer clear whether *they* or *their* means the new plural or an old one, consider making the old plural singular. It's simpler to do than it sounds. In Problem M below, if you make "consumer" plural, make "stores" singular. Then you retain clarity and contrast.

## Writers

• **Avoid / slashes — and dashes** — Several proposed remedies for sexist pronouns are forced or fussy. Don't use them.

*He/she* and *his/her* are visually distracting when they are read silently. Read aloud, they are hiccups. So are *s/he* and *(s)he*.

*He (or she)* and *his — or her* — and *he, or she*, are patronizing. Parentheses, dashes and commas treat women as a coy afterthought.

Don't alternate *he* and *she* from paragraph to paragraph, either. As you write and revise, you will inevitably shift paragraphs around for reasons unrelated to sexism. It is distracting to keep readjusting the alternation while you work.

The exclusive use of *she* is occasionally recommended, on the grounds that it includes the word "he" and that turnabout is fair play, anyhow. Despite its ironic charm, the idea is intellectually indefensible. It slights the largest minority in the United States: males.

Coined pronouns seem synthetic. Even I don't use the ones I invented about 15 years ago. No one else's inventions stand any better chance of winning the popular acceptance already enjoyed by *they*, *their* and *them*.

• **Enjoy the fringe benefits.** The fresh eye you cast upon pronouns may also spot cluttered or muddy language nearby. Cleaner, crisper writing can result. For instance, you cut half the verbiage when you change "a tenant needs a roof over his head" to "a tenant needs shelter." Similarly, you lessen the tedium in "his employees, his guests or members of his family" when you substitute "his or her employees, guests or family members." In Problem F the two words "without notice" replace an 11-word sentence. Thus you have removed repetition and added pace. Enjoy these fringe benefits. Bad writers write badly, with or without sexism. But competent writers who eliminate sexism write as well as before, and some write better.

**The methods:** These 14 ways to avoid sexist pronouns are listed in random order.

1. Add the female: *she* or *he*, *hers* or *his*, *he* or *she*, *his* or *hers*.
2. Use the first person: *I*, *me*, *my*, *mine*, *we*, *our*, *ours*.
3. Use the second person: *you*, *your*, *yours*.
4. Move the noun.
5. Repeat the noun.
6. Use a new noun — instead of a pronoun or as a synonym for an old noun.
7. Use the plural — one of the easiest, handiest methods.
8. Delete the pronoun.
9. Use a new pronoun; *it*, *its*, *this*, *that*.
10. Use an article or conjunction: *a*, *an*, *the*, *but*, *and*.
11. Use *who* with or without a noun: *who*, *anyone who*, *someone who*, *whoever*, *no one who*, *one who*, *any* (noun) *who*, *a* (noun) *who*, *the* (noun) *who* — helps emphasize a single individual.
12. Rewrite — the most work and the least often needed.
13. Use the passive — be cautious; the incompetent use it verbosely; the cunning use it evasively.

14. Use *they*, *their*, *them* — the simplest, most sensible method of all.

**Examples:** Often, any one of several methods will solve a given problem. Pick the solution that fits the context and your own writing style and personal preferences. Sample solutions follow. You'll find many others. (Numbers refer to the methods.)

**Problem A:** "The tenant must not keep gasoline or other explosives in *his* apartment."

**Solutions:** *I* must not keep. . . in *my* apartment. (2)

*You* must not keep. . . in *your* apartment. (3)

*Tenants* must not keep. . . in *their* apartments. (7)

The tenant must not keep. . . in *the* apartment. (10)

*Gasoline*. . . must not be kept in *the tenant's* apartment. (12)

**Problem B:** "Any damage to the plumbing resulting from misuse by the tenant, *his* employees, *his* guests, or members of *his* family may be repaired by the owner at the tenant's expense."

**Solutions:** Any damage by the tenant *or her* or *his* employees, guests, or family members. (1)

Any damage by *me* or *my* employees, guests, or family members. . . at *my* expense. (2)

Any damage by *tenants* or *their* employees, guests, or family members. . . at the tenants' expense. (7)

Any damage by the tenant or *anyone whom the tenant allows into the apartment*. . . at the tenant's expense. (11, 12)

**Problem C:** "The crime victim receives no information from the police to whom *he* reported the crime, has no outlet for *his* anger, and receives no compensation for *his* injuries."

**Solution:** Crime victims receive no information. . . to whom *they* reported. . . *have* no outlet for *their* anger. . . *their* injuries. (7)

**Problem D:** "If the buyer asks that the closing be postponed, *he* must pay any expenses caused by the delay."

**Solution:** If the buyer asks that the closing be postponed, *she* or *he* must. . . (1)

If *you* ask. . . *you* must. . . (3)

*A buyer who* asks. . . must. . . (8, 11)

*Any buyer who* asks. . . must. . . (8, 11)

**Problem E:** "If the highest bidder defaults, *he* will lose *his* deposit. In that case, however, *he* will not be liable for any amount in excess of *his* deposit."

**Solutions:** If the highest bidder defaults, *she* or *he* will lose *her* or *his* deposit *but* will not be liable for any amount in excess of *the* deposit. (1, 8, 10)

If *the*. . . defaults, *the bidder* will lose *the* deposit *but* will not be liable for any amount in excess of *this* deposit. (12)

If *the*. . . defaults, *she* or *he* will lose *that* deposit *but* will not be liable for any *additional* amount. (12)

**Problem F:** "The tenant must not damage *his* apartment *himself* or let anyone else do so. The owner or *his* employees may enter the apartment to make emergency repairs to protect *his* property. *He* does not

(Continued on next page.)

**Millions of people have been using *they*, *their* and *them* as third-person singulars all along. They are eminently sensible.**

**Shear**

(Continued from preceding page.)

have to notify me that *he* is coming."

**Solution:** The tenant must not damage *this* apartment or let anyone else do so. The owner or *the owner's* employees may. . .protect *this* property *without notice*. (12)

**Problem G:** "An owner is unlikely to discover that *his* tenant is bankrupt. Furthermore, even a bankrupt tenant needs a roof over *his* head."

**Solution:** An owner is unlikely to discover that *a* tenant is bankrupt. . .tenants need a roof over *their* heads." (7, 10)

An owner. . .*a* tenant is bankrupt. . .needs a roof overhead. (8, 10)

An owner. . .*a* tenant is bankrupt. . .needs *shelter*. (10, 12)

**Problem H:** "Hold the cat in your lap and let the leashed dog sniff *his* future friend. The cat will probably arch *her* back and hiss, ready to defend *herself*."

**Solution:** Hold the cat in your lap and let the leashed dog sniff *its* future friend. The cat will. . .arch *its* back. . . to defend *itself*. (9)

**Problem I:** "The attorney-client privilege does not apply when the client seeks *his* attorney's aid in committing a future crime. The attorney argued that *his* client should receive a light sentence because *he* was ignorant of the law."

**Solution:** The attorney-client privilege does not apply when the client seeks *an* attorney's aid. The attorney argued that *the defendant, who* was ignorant of the law, should receive a light sentence. (6, 10, 11)

**Problem J:** "I agree to pay my rent to the owner without *his* having to ask for it. The owner may sell the building. If *he* does, I will pay my rent to the new owner."

**Solution:** I agree to pay my rent without *the owner's* having to ask for it. If *she* or *he* sells *the building*, I will pay my rent to the new owner. (1, 4, 12)

**Problem K:** "The bank will send a letter to the new client, welcoming *him*, or to the existing client, congratulating *him* on making good use of the bank's services."

**Solution:** The bank will send a letter *welcoming the new client or congratulating the existing client* on. . . (12)

**Problem L:** "Don't let *him* begin work on your house before *he* provides you with insurance."

**Solutions:** Don't let *work* on your house *begin* before *the contractor* provides you with insurance. (6,8)

Don't let *the contractor* begin work on your house before *providing* you with insurance. (6, 8)

**Problem M:** "The consumer is deeply antagonized when stores fail to answer *his* complaint letters. Every consumer deserves the most courteous treatment we can give *him*."

**Solution:** The consumer is deeply antagonized when stores fail to answer complaint letters. Every consumer deserves *our* most courteous treatment. (8, 12)

**Problem N:** "If the doctor keeps you waiting half the afternoon, send *him* a bill for your wasted time. Don't pay *his* bill until *he* pays yours."

**Solution:** If doctors keep you waiting half the afternoon, send *them* a bill for your wasted time. Don't pay *their* bill until yours *has been paid*. (13, 14)

**The simplest solution of them all:** Millions of people have been using *they*, *their* and *them* as third-person singulars all along. They are eminently sensible. As a reformed pedant, I don't say that casually. Until a few years ago, I agreed with the columnist who called the singular *they* "grammatically repulsive." I scorned people who used it, considering them fundamentally uncouth — like public smokers. But I've seen the light.

Many word-watchers endorse *they*. During the last 10 or 15 years, they have alerted us to its surprisingly long and respectable history. Valuable scholarly discussions by Ann Bodine and Rosa Shand Turner teach us that *they* was widely accepted in written English until the end of the 18th century, when grammarians began attacking it. So *they* isn't some new, sloppy corruption of "correct" English, but rather a return to venerable usage. George Jochnowitz concludes that it is wrong, even astounding to consider *they* incorrect for formal writing when it predates *he* and is nearly universal in colloquial and spoken English.

Do pronouns matter? President Ronald Reagan thinks so. He calls Christians *we* and calls everyone else *they*. In contrast, Jimmy Carter talks about the typical presidential candidate *himself* or *herself*.

Way to go, Jimmy. ■

Copyright © 1981, 1985 Marie Shear

# NEW DIRECTIONS FOR WOMEN

Volume 22, Number 4

\$3.00

July-August 1993

## media watch

### Ageism in Advertising The Same Old Story

The sweet-faced woman with the shining hair looks as dewy as a silent-film star in her prime. But no smile plays upon her lips. Her eyes turn sideways, as if she is embarrassed to meet our gaze.

What sorrow burdens her heart? Has her home burned down? Has she only three months to live? Has her dachshund been shredded by an errant lawnmower? No, no, and no. She is suffering because she is nearly THIRTY YEARS OLD and she is NOT MARRIED.

We are looking at one of the nation's most memorable advertisements, a masterly blend of fear-mongering, ageism, and sexism guaranteed to implant a sense of impending doom in a woman's psyche.

Below the wistful maiden, a large caption reads "Often a bridesmaid but never a

bride." The sentences that follow strike like poisoned arrows: "Edna's case was really a pathetic one. Like every woman, her primary ambition was to marry. Most of the girls of her set were married—or about to be. Yet not one possessed more grace or charm or loveliness than she. And as her birthdays crept gradually toward that tragic thirty-mark, marriage seemed farther from her life than ever...That's the insidious thing about halitosis (unpleasant breath)...And even your closest friends won't tell you."

This ad, from a 1924 issue of Collier's magazine, is part of a Listerine campaign that lasted for several decades, sold lots of mouthwash, and embedded the saying "Often a bridesmaid but never a bride" in the American vernacular, where it remains to this day.

Almost 20 years after the Collier's ad, its slogan was flipped upside down in an urbane lyric by Lorenz Hart. He must have known that Broadway theatergoers all knew the slogan and would therefore laugh at his witty inversion.

Nearly 70 years later, the ad retains the power to shock. It leaps off the wall and into your gut when you visit an exhibition of print and TV ads, at The One Club in Manhattan, called "Ninety Years of Wom-

en's Images in Advertising." Sure, contemporary viewers can feel wryly amused by the ad's blatant scare tactics. We can analyze them, noting that the woman's intellect is not listed among her assets. We know that no generalization fits "every woman"; that female ambitions come in the plural, not in a singular aversion to singleness; that 30 merely follows 29 and precedes 31; and that women who do yearn for a mate don't always have a yen for men. We can scornfully dismiss the words "pathetic" and "tragic." But the ad still unsettles your giblets.

Its descendants, innumerable ads and commercials of the 1990s, convey similar messages with greater subtlety. Because consumers are more sophisticated now than in the 1920s, sly new ways to manufacture insecurity are conjured up, ways to make us feel bad about our looks, ages, and relationships—or lack of them. Thus pressured, we often try to ease our anxiety by buying the sponsor's product. Fear still sells.

Occasionally we hear a healthy voice. In April, having examined a fifty-something woman, a gynecologist sent her patient out into the sunny spring day with the advice: "These are the best years of your life! Have fun. The ball is in your hands."

Yet one gynecologist is no match for the media. Current film and TV casting, advertising, and jokes about the older woman in the commercial who falls and cannot get up all peddle the same poison as the mouthwash ad of 1924. For every

woman who hears wise counsel, millions are bombarded by frightening messages that women who aren't married or young are disgusting failures.

Daily life reinforces media messages. A college-age employee in a photocopy shop tells a middle-aged customer "I'd rather die" than be as old as she is. A twentysomething pedestrian barrels along the wrong half of the sidewalk, expecting the woman approaching from the opposite direction to zigzag out of his way; when she unexpectedly stands her ground and admonishes him to "watch where you're going," he retaliates by flinging the words "you old bag!" at her as he zigzags angrily around her and storms away.

How are we to persuade ourselves that women are valuable regardless of age or marital status? For openers, we should embrace and elevate, or else supplant, the word "spinster." Phrases like "dried up old spinster" neither improve the older woman's morale nor inspire younger women to respect her and to face their own futures optimistically. We've finally replaced the term "broken home" with "single parent household." How about calling the perennially single woman a "solitaire"—as in sparkling diamond?

OK, spinsters—we're on Tiffany Time! Pass the Lavoris. ▲

*Marie Shear is a Brooklyn-based writer and editor whose work has appeared in more than 40 magazines and newspapers.*

# No news is good news

by Marie Shear

**Slick Spins and Fractured Facts: How Cultural Myths Distort the News**, by Caryl Rivers. New York: Columbia University Press, 1996, 250 pp., \$24.95 hardcover.

**B**EFORE THE INVENTION of moveable type, when I was in graduate school at Brooklyn College, the social scientist Alfred McClung Lee taught me two memorable lessons: human decisions determine the contents of *The New York Times*, and what the *Times* omits is often more important than what it publishes. Until then, I had assumed that the *Times* was created daily by some eternal force, like whatever produced the Grand Canyon. And it had never occurred to me to notice what *wasn't* there. I figured, as Jerry Seinfeld would later remark, "that no matter what happens in one day, it exactly fits in the newspaper"; but Seinfeld's irony would have escaped me.

Lee's lessons were just the tip of an iceberg. Caryl Rivers, a professor of journalism at Boston University, reveals what's underneath. *Slick Spins and Fractured Facts* offers an apt, wide-ranging examination of the media failings that are bolstering stereotypes and hastening our nationwide plunge into cruelly bigoted policies. Skipping polemics and abstractions, Rivers explores the relationships among news, political propaganda and public opinion. *Slick Spins* doesn't aim to provide novel theories or detailed research. Yet it can teach the reader who consumes print and broadcast news unwarily to develop a critical eye and ear, whether that

reader is an autodidact or a Ph.D. And it will sharpen the perceptiveness of the reader who is already a seasoned media watcher.

Two or three dozen small errors and awkward turns of phrase in the book should have been caught during copy-editing, and the type used for footnotes is too delicate for comfortable reading. Such flyspecks aside, *Slick Spins and Fractured Facts* is stimulating and pithy. Even before I finished it I got better at spotting what is really happening, or not happening, in the latest articles and broadcasts. Retrieving a discarded front-page *Times* article about the laundrywoman who donated \$150,000 to a Mississippi university, I sensed its warm, fuzzy subtext for the first time: this unlettered, selfless woman proves that diligent po' folks have happy endings; without Caucasians or the government helping one whit, an 88-year-old black woman ends up wearing French silk shoes.

*Newsweek* presents its report on sleazoid politician Dick Morris, who got caught with his head up his fly, as a tale "of a powerful man brought down by a woman." Ri-i-ight. Delilah made him do it. *The New York Times* trumpets, "Yet Another Sex Difference Found: Gaining Relief From a Painkiller." Thanks to Rivers, I now note that the researchers studied fewer than fifty people, and that the scientists

who warn against exaggerating the role of sex hormones are buried in the article's twenty-seventh and last paragraph. Another *Times* piece, about an African American who had been a highly successful Cadillac dealer, explains that consumers' changing taste has undermined hundreds of auto dealerships. But the subhead blames him: "As Glory Fades for Cadillacs, a Failed Dealer Sues G.M." See? These people are inept.

Despite the media's reputation as a wolf pack at worst, or at best as a watchdog protecting us against villains, Rivers writes, "a more apt animal metaphor...might be Garfield—fat, cynical, slovenly, hanging on the screen door by his toenails for lack of anything better to do, thinking *Bored. Bored. Bored. I'm so bored I could scream!*"

ABC's David Brinkley has since proved her point. Right after the last election, he called President Clinton "a bore [who] always will be a bore." For decades, Brinkley has been sneering indiscriminately at politicians. He has struck me as contemptuous of public officials who do their honest best, indolent about nailing malefactors, and arrogant enough to believe that the first goal of politics and policy is to entertain journalists. (Journalists, understandably fed up with indiscriminate hostility from civilians, don't help matters by wearing buttons like those reportedly sported by some members of the press covering the 1996 Dole campaign: "Yeah. I'm the Media. Screw You.")

The consequences of the media smugness that Rivers astutely condemns are seen in the case of columnist Joe Klein. After lying repeatedly about his anonymous authorship of *Primary Colors*, Klein wasn't sacked by *Newsweek*. Instead, he used its pages to defend the odious Dick Morris, then shifted to another table in the media clubhouse, becoming Washington correspondent for *The New Yorker*.

**R**IVERS ARGUES THAT print and broadcast media are circulating politically slanted, historically absurd, scientifically sloppy and statistically insignificant "news." Based on thirty-odd years of experience as a journalist and critic, she sees no media conspiracy meant to reinforce the nation's selfishness and parochialism. Rather, media flaws spring automatically from the shared preconceptions of journalists—usually upper-middle-class, suburban, white Protestant men—who think their own perspective is objective and universal. Well-intentioned though these men often are, they are oblivious to "the daily struggles and the little terrors of getting by" that many Americans endure.

When Rivers became a journalist in the 1960s, she recalls, her colleagues frequently came from the working class and felt some compassion for grassroots people. Today's editors and reporters commonly identify with the wealthy and powerful, sharing their dinner-tables and perks. "In newsrooms all across the country interest in the powerless and the wretched is waning." Editors and reporters are joining millions of other Americans in kissing them off "as whiners, wimps and pseudovictims."

That kiss-off is exacerbated by right-wing extremists, whose myth-making is heedlessly magnified on the air and in print. The myths Rivers dissects may be familiar to readers who are veteran media watchers. But *Slick Spins* is no rehash, unsubstantiated thumbsucker, or abstruse

pontification in the guise of scholarship. It unifies analysis and interpretation, cogently buttressing them with the findings of other authorities.

A batch of the myths zap women, of course. We are simultaneously ditsy Doras—contemptibly weak madonnas awash in raging hormones—and Medusas—psychobitches, Lady Macbeths and megalomaniacal whores. These antithetical forms of character assassination have trapped Hillary Rodham Clinton and Professor Anita Hill in a crossfire. Coverage of the women's movement has ranged from trivialization to trashing, and feminists are still caricatured. Would you want your daughter to marry a strident, hairy, neurotic, sex-starved, militant, freakish, ugly, man-hating harridan?

When gender, race and class intersect, myth-mongering gets more complex. The same media which Rivers says fabricate trends—ostensibly finding that educated white women who work outside the home are careering toward coronaries—tell America that women of color and women who are broke should quit being parasites and obtain paid employment. Appalled, she says:

The picture of the poor—welfare mothers in particular—that has emerged from the media as I write has been one that is so savage, so lacking in compassion, that it takes my breath away.... So what if white-collar crooks make off with millions, and the welfare queen bilks us out of a couple of thou? *She's* the one we'd like to throttle.... [W]e hate welfare mothers. (p.199)

Inflaming public biases, many news organizations peddle the fictions that welfare created the black underclass and that single-parent families are pathological.

Rivers reviews the horde of white racist slanders that infest journalism. The African American woman appears as a slut, her brother a demonic criminal. Asian Americans become cunning invaders or the model minority, playing the violin with one hand and acing the math exam with the other. Hispanics are illegal aliens or violent drug pushers. People of color are employable only when standards are lowered. White murderers who blame their crimes upon black men are presumed to be truthful. When facts don't match a stereotype, a news organization can fake 'em, as *Time* magazine altered a cover photo to make O.J. Simpson look more sinister. The African American who reviles his own kin, like Clarence Thomas, is lionized alongside the white woman who dismisses date rape as piffle.

Rivers knows that the media don't operate in a vacuum. We would not have mean, supine news organizations, she observes, without fuel from affluent right-wing propaganda mills; without public ignorance of American history regarding poverty, immigration and crime; without white male paranoia over multiculturalism and affirmative action; and without politicians diverting attention from the real causes of the nation's problems and the real costs of addressing—or aggravating—them. Put all this together and it constitutes a vicious circle, a *Slick Spin* cycle. "The laziness of pack journalism allows cultural stereotypes to multiply like bacteria on the locker-room floor," Rivers concludes. "Your best bet, if you'd really like a glimpse of the press at work, is just to put the Friskies out on the porch." ♦

© Marie Shear 1997

## CONTRIBUTORS

**MARIE SHEAR** is a writer and editor by trade, a satirist and musical-comedy lover by temperament, and a feminist by necessity. Her work has been published by more than forty newspapers and magazines. Her column, "Media Watch," appeared in *New Directions for Women* for eight years; syndication inquiries are welcome. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

## CLASSIFIED

### PUBLICATIONS

*Solving the Great Pronoun Problem: 14 Ways to Avoid the Sexist Singular* contains a 14-point guide, discussion, and illustrative examples. *Equal Writes* reviews guidebooks about unbiased communication, explains how to choose one, and supplies a bibliography. To order send \$5 plus a long, stamped, self-addressed envelope for each article to the author: Marie Shear, 282 East 35 Street #7N, Brooklyn, NY 11203-3925.

To the Editor:

Woe is me. Another sob story about poor uprodden apartment hunters who fork over \$3,000 a month to rent a basement in Manhattan.

Two or three Brooklynites may wonder why The Times wastes newsprint on such snobbery. But most of us don't care. We're too busy picking hayseeds out of our teeth with our box cutters.

MARIE SHEAR  
East Flatbush, Brooklyn

CY

Progressive Populist 11/98

Too Much Testosterone

A familiar, dreary sensation grew as I looked through *Progressive Populist* for September, the first issue of my new subscription. Sure enough, 24 of the bylined names were male; eight were female. (Three others could have been either.)

If I want to OD on testosterone, I can read the op-ed page of the *New York Times*. Or almost any other periodical.

You are redundant. Suffering succotash!

MARIE SHEAR  
Brooklyn, NY

THE NEW YORK TIMES, SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 30, 1997

LETTERS

'BROOKLYN SOUTH'

Clichés About Women

To the Editor:

In praising "Brooklyn South" ["The Badge, the Nightstick and an Entire Universe," Nov. 16], Fen Montaigne overlooks the program's treatment of female cops as unstable, inept and needy. On duty, they cry or are grabbed by criminals; male officers must comfort and rescue them. In bed they plead for reassurance. Steven Bochco and his colleagues are peddling wimpy-woman clichés that were stale back when Eve exclaimed, "Hey, the snake set me up!"

MARIE SHEAR  
Brooklyn

Letters

BABY PIGEON SIGHTED!

John Tierney's chronicle of nesting pigeons is a fine example of Mother Nature saying "Gotcha!" ("Baby Pigeon Sighted! Urban Mystery Solved!" July 23). It is easy to see, for this reader at least, that he is on his way to becoming an explorer of all the biotic world.

Ultimately, Tierney will contract a case of what the naturalist E. O. Wilson calls "biophilia," the ineffable and natural sense that human beings are intimately related to all species, animal and plant alike.

A. LINDSAY PRICE  
South Haven, Mich.

Tierney's paean to pigeons omits crucial information. He refers to the squab's being male 15 times. How did he find out? Did the hatchling's feathers but-ton left over right?

MARIE SHEAR  
Brooklyn

A rare thing, pigeon praise. So rare, I was inspired to evoke the other side of the encomium. Consider this: Why doesn't anyone ever see a dead pigeon?

FRANK HEFTER  
New York

The New York Times Magazine

AUGUST 13, 1995

Laura Flanders, *Real Majority, Media Minority*, Common Courage Press, 1997, 293 pages, \$16.95.

Pete Hamill, *News Is a Verb*, Library of Contemporary Thought/Ballantine, 1998, 102 pages, \$8.95.

Pete Hamill is a lover. Affection for newspapers shines from the pages of his essay *News Is a Verb*, a plaint about newspapers' current sorry state and a prescription for improving their prognosis.

Hamill thinks most papers have become dumb and irrelevant by wallowing in trivia, mayhem and bathos. He is angered by the stupidity of publishers who treat readers like simpletons, putting the Spice Girls on page 3

### Seeing the Sisters

and the cuts in library funds on page 28.

First-rate papers aren't too somber to run sassy, light-hearted features, he says. But he detests sloppy, febrile coverage of toothy interns and dead princesses and is deliciously scornful of the editorial servility that lets some vanity-ridden fat cat trump up publicity at will.

Hamill wants newspapers to help create "better cities, better citizens, and a smarter, more humane country." So he tells editors to live in the city and immerse themselves in its grassroots lore, instead of commuting to suburbia. They must foster ties to the immigrants who are revitalizing urban America and reach out to female colleagues and readers. It's a pleasure to hear that newspaperwomen are "very much like the women who buy newspapers: smart, tenacious, brave, skilled, full of humor and irony."

After nearly 40 years in the business, Hamill is one tough-minded mensch. Unless they respect readers and cultivate immigrants and women, he warns, newspapers "will just keel over and die." To Hamill, solid journalism isn't only an ideal. It is a survival strategy.

Laura Flanders, too, wants sound journalism instead of "wildlife reporting." *Real Majority, Media Minority* contains 55 of her articles and radio interviews. Most were prepared for Fairness & Accuracy In Reporting (FAIR), the

media watch group whose women's desk Flanders directed until recently.

By blending criticism of TV and print with original reporting, and by suggesting leads for other journalists to pursue, Flanders demonstrates that bigfoot journalism marginalizes and stereotypes females. Stories are missed or distorted on nearly every issue—economics, aging, foreign affairs, rape. "The trouble with these habits of coverage is not only that they are racist, classist and sexist, but that they are terribly inaccurate."

Take health issues. Flanders says journalists often "frame" breast implants as a problem for long-suffering manufacturers, not women. Menopause becomes a train wreck. Female genital mutilation, a pandemic, gets less space and airtime than Lorena Bobbitt's butchery. News of Gulf War syndrome largely overlooks its effects on women.

Even where mainstream journalism does not slight women, says Flanders, it often lists rightward. To balance conservative analyses and pundits, she says, liberals must develop feminist media and promote sympathetic talk show hosts and columnists. (Me. ME. M-E-E-E-E, please.)

(NOW recently began brainstorming about a Feminist Communications Network. To take part by completing an FCN survey, contact NOW at 1000 16th Street NW, Washington, D.C., or [www.now.org/nnt/05-98/fcn.html](http://www.now.org/nnt/05-98/fcn.html).)

"Reporting on the world as if women matter is not only right—it's good journalism," Flanders writes. "[A]t FAIR, we don't believe in women's issues. What we call for is reporting that covers the world as it is—more than half populated by women" who are extraordinarily diverse.

Flanders and Hamill know that you can't get the story straight if you don't see the sisters. All others please copy.

*Marie Shear, a member of the New York Local, has written or edited for more than 40 publications and for publishers, nonprofits, business and government.*

Copyright © 1998 Marie Shear

NEW YORK LOCAL

VOL XVI, NUMBER 7

JULY/AUGUST 1998

\$1.00



# POETRY

Jason Salzman, *Making the News: A Guide for Nonprofits & Activists*, Westview/HarperCollins, 1998, 289 pages, \$19.95.

Timothy Saasta, *How to Tell and Sell Your Story*, Center for Community Change: Part 1, 1997, 63 pages, \$10.00; Part 2, 1998, 48 pages, \$10.

Tari Susan Hartman and Mary Johnson, *Making News: How to Get News Coverage for Disability Rights Issues*, Advocate Press, 1993, 165 pages, \$10.95.

OK. We know that much mainstream news is fevered, fluffy and faux. What can we do about it?

Grassroots activists can start making their own news. These manuals show advocates how to pursue news coverage with professionalism, tenacity and sass, integrating media strategy into any long-term campaign for substantive progress. The pragmatic activist needs "a willingness to cater to the often warped priorities and short attention span of the news media," Jason Salzman writes. "Taking advantage of free media is a powerful tactic to change the world."

All these manuals use clean, unman-nered prose, skipping the cuteness that mars many how-to books. The most comprehensive of the batch—detailed, handily organized and adaptable to nearly any issue—is by Salzman, a Greenpeace alumnus who co-founded Rocky Mountain Media Watch.

*Making the News* explains how to plan and stage a media event, how to identify relevant audiences and the particular media that reach them, where to hold a press conference, and when *not* to hold one.

Salzman covers anecdotes, cartoonists, conservative clothing, credibility, data, daybooks, editorial writers, etiquette, the first question to ask any reporter, leaning forward, letters to the editor, media lists, news releases, persistence, photographers, pitching ideas, public access cable, reporters' needs, sound bites, stunts, symbols, thinking like an assignment editor, timing, training-spokespeople, wearing a pig snout, and wire services—a com-

pendium of sound counsel for fighting the fat cats even if your only troops are three people in penguin suits.

The other guides focus on specific issues. *How to Tell and Sell Your Story*, which concentrates on poverty and affordable housing issues, is strongest when analyzing the public hostility toward inner cities that has been engineered by conservatives who blame poverty on the poor. Even an inner-city organization that cannot afford focus groups must learn how to market ideas, Timothy Saasta says. Otherwise it may be perceived as advocating handouts to parasites. Fresh, effective arguments and skillful framing should reflect the nation's

cultural undercurrents and morality, as right-wing marketing does. A useful article about two dozen organizations that help activists with media work, written by Iris

Rothman, strengthens the 1997 guide.

Disability activists Tari Susan Hartman and Mary Johnson see the media confining people with disabilities to sob stories instead of putting their struggles in a civil rights context. Advocates cannot "win the hearts and souls of 'this nation for the cause of disability rights" without hard, intelligent media work that establishes people with disabilities as autonomous authorities on their own lives.

*Making News* shows how activists can promote disability culture and pride through the media, educating journalists about the need for personal attendants and enforcement of the Americans with Disabilities Act—not nursing home incarceration and pity-party telethons. *Making News* is rooted in a burgeoning movement to replace paternalism and passivity with clout.

Salzman and company can help us use the media for fun and nonprofit. Liberals can't match the money of the radical right. So we'd bleepin' well match their savvy, or else voracious zealots will keep controlling bodies, destroying privacy and overturning elections.

I know I'm preaching to the choir here. Say amen, somebody.

*Pursuing media for fun and nonprofit*

Copyright © 1998 Marie Shear

NEW YORK LOCAL

**national WRITERS UNION**

**poetwriters**

VOL XVI, NUMBER 10

NOVEMBER 1998

\$1.00

# Meet *Brill's*

**national  
WRITERS  
union**

\$1.00

DECEMBER 1998

VOL XVI, NUMBER 11

NEW YORK LOCAL

## reading writing Marie Shear

*Brill's Content*, vol. 1, nos. 1-5, Aug. 1998—Dec. 1998/Jan. 1999. \$15.95/year.

Blowing 76 trombones in its prepublication promotion, *Brill's Content* didn't just vow to embarrass journalists into doing their jobs properly. It vowed to be "as much a revolution as it is a magazine." Four issues later, has it lived up to its brassy overture?

The first issue earned huge publicity with "Press-gate," publisher Steven Brill's damning 30-page indictment of reckless journalism early in the Lewinsky mess. The rest of that issue and the four subsequent ones have offered a smorgasbord of media criticism.

Readers who don't care about online brokers or phony letters published by teen magazines have many other topics to choose from: articles on Barnes & Noble's book-buying decisions, digital TV, Microsoft's PR tactics and baseball broadcasters' lack of independence. The accuracy of TV newsmagazine segments on consumer safety has been charted, supplemented by tips to help viewers judge similar segments for themselves.

*Brill's* can be reproachful when it condemns *Time* for sensationalism at the expense of a dead man. But *Brill's* gives credit where it's due. It challenges selective sourcing by a major science writer in one issue, then applauds her newspaper's investigation of a giant hospital chain in another. Regular features salute first-rate journalism. Ted Koppel and *Nightline* are acknowledged for promptly apologizing for an error.

Up front each month, *Brill's* promises candid, prominent corrections of its own errors and lists four ways to reach its ombudsman. Disclosure statements reveal ties between the magazine and what it's covering. Cozy personal or financial links within the chattering classes aren't unusual; openness is.

When *Brill's* is right, it's right. Soon after it warned that the new editor of *Glamour* might lower that magazine's quality, she dropped its column on politics and added astrology. When *Brill's* is wrong, it likens Matt Drudge to Tom

Paine. More sensibly, it points out Drudge's ties to the right wing and finds that 32 percent of the Drudge stories checked by *Brill's* were untrue or never happened. Drudge himself is given the last word: "Screw journalism!" he says.

Handing people enough rope for other unassisted suicides, *Brill's* gave Kenneth Starr room for a ponderous, footnote-ridden rebuttal to "Press-gate" and let Don Hewitt answer criticism of *60 Minutes* with a sarcastic personal attack on the critic. Ted Knight fans must have chortled

### *Has Brill's lived up to its promise of "revolution"?*

through the interview with Dan Rather; its ample quotes reveal a gasbag.

*Brill's* editors can nod off. An article about privacy on the Net, written by an opponent of government regulation, fails to quote a single privacy activist or proponent of regs. Silly spots crop up.

Yet *Brill's* does manage to rock the boat occasionally. One piece raises, in passing, the question whether male journalists who abuse their wives or commit adultery—while they're judging politicians' private lives—should be outed. If a judge dismisses charges against a celebrity, Steven Brill argues, that news should be played as conspicuously as the accusations were. Revolutionary? Nope. But it is a voice for reform. An attractive design, with few jumps, makes the text appealing without the visual confetti of magazines that try too hard to look hot.

In theory, people who learn how the nonfiction media function can become less choleric, more effective critics. *Brill's* readers are eager students, its ombudsman says. In practice, any mettlesome media review faces formidable obstacles from the media themselves. Back in 1983, news organizations helped kill the National News Council. On *Meet the Press* this June, Tim Russert went at Brill like a chainsaw.

Will advertisers punish *Brill's* if it becomes really uppity? Will Steven Brill apologize to the *Columbia Journalism Review*, *American Journalism Review*, and *EXTRA!* for his magazine's boast, in a recent ad, that it has no competitors? Tune in tomorrow.

#### classified

"SOLVING THE GREAT PRONOUN PROBLEM: 14 WAYS TO AVOID THE SEXIST SINGULAR" contains a 14-point guide, discussion, and illustrative examples. "Equal Writes" reviews guidebooks about unbiased communication, explains how to choose one, and supplies a bibliography. To order, send \$5 & long SASE for each article to NWU member Marie Shear, 282 East 35 Street #7N, Brooklyn, NY 11203-3925.

Copyright © 1998 Marie Shear

## reading writing *Marie Shear*

Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays & the Birth of Public Relations*, New York: Crown, 1998, 306 pages, \$27.50.

The aroma of red herring arises from two recent news reports—one that the U.S. military has been “hollowed out” for lack of funds, the other that a Manhattan tenant pays only \$99 per month for rent. A whiff of those stories suggests that a monstrous increase in Pentagon spending and a fresh assault on NYC rent regulations are afoot. Whether they know it or not, the fishmongers behind these stories are indebted to Edward L. Bernays, a public relations pioneer.

Bernays (1891-1995) emerges from Larry Tye’s biography, *The Father of Spin*, as a cunning propagandist who changed what Americans bought and thought without their noticing the manipulation. Bernays sold bacon, beer, and Calvin Coolidge with oblique methods still used today: seemingly spontaneous letter-writing campaigns, ostensibly impartial experts and public-spirited front groups, charitable tie-ins, and targeted mailings. Sixty years ago, he advised a politician to stay on message.

During a career that spanned four generations and relied heavily on the uncredited expertise of his wife, Doris Fleischman, Bernays served hundreds of clients as diverse as the Waldorf and

Woolworth, promoting Ivory soap-carved contests, federal highway construction, and the military takeover of Guatemala. That propaganda war on behalf of United Fruit, Tye writes, set the pattern for subsequent U.S. campaigns over Cuba and Vietnam. Bernays propounded theories about the engineering of public consent in books that became classics. He continued making speeches and inflating his reputation past the age of 95.

Tye says he “uses Bernays’ life as a prism to understand the evolution of the craft of public relations and how

### *Deboning the Fishmonger*

it came to play such a critical—and sometimes insidious—role in American life.” He promises “a book about democracy

in the era of the spinmeister.” The prism-premise promise is appealing, but Tye doesn’t deliver. *The Father of Spin* feels superficial. It offers few detailed case histories of Bernays’ campaigns and contradicts itself by both accepting and rejecting Bernays’ pose as the originator of PR.

Nowadays, a United Duck Lovers League can be a facade for manufacturers of maddeningly noisy “personal watercraft,” and oil companies imply that they drill off shore just to make the fish happy. Bernays would chuckle. Reading this may help keep us from being snookered by his heirs.

*Copyright © 1999 Marie Shear*

### classified

“SOLVING THE GREAT PRONOUN PROBLEM: 14 WAYS TO AVOID THE SEXIST SINGULAR” contains a 14-point guide, discussion, and illustrative examples. “Equal Writes” reviews guidebooks about unbiased communication, explains how to choose one, and supplies a bibliography. To order, send \$5 & long SASE for each article to NWU member Marie Shear, 282 East 35 Street #7N, Brooklyn, NY 11203-3925.

# When the House is not a home

by Marie Shear

**24 Years of House Work...and the Place is Still a Mess**, by Pat Schroeder. Kansas City, MO: Andrews McMeel, 1998, 244 pp., \$24.95 hardcover.

**Representative Mom**, by Susan Molinari with Elinor Burkett. New York: Doubleday, 1998, 291 pp., \$23.95 hardcover.

**Framing A Life: A Family Memoir**, by Geraldine A. Ferraro with Catherine Whitney. New York: Scribner, 1998, 224 pp., \$24.00 hardcover.

**Seasons of Her Life: A Biography of Madeleine Korbelt Albright**, by Ann Blackman. New York: Scribner, 1998, 398 pp., \$27.00 hardcover.

**Barbara Jordan: American Hero**, by Mary Beth Rogers. New York: Bantam Books, 1998, 414 pp., \$27.50 hardcover.

MISS PAT SCHROEDER. When she and other Congresswomen were photographed in profile, climbing the Capitol steps to demand that the Senate let Professor Anita Hill testify about Clarence Thomas, the photo became my own Iwo Jima image. For a generation, Schroeder has been planting the feminist flag. She is the most heartening figure in this cluster of recent books by or about contemporary American political women: three memoirs and two biographies. Cumulatively, the books reflect the traits, experiences, limits of—and limits upon—women who play with the grownups.

Schroeder (D., CO), the dean of women in the US House of Representatives until 1997, is the only woman in the group to call herself “a bleeding-heart liberal.” In *24 Years of Housework*, she skims through her years in “an overaged frat house,” starting in 1973 as one of fifteen women out of 435.

Hostility and ridicule from male members (who deserved the pun) did not stop her. Despite death threats, Schroeder says, she advocated women’s rights, research on women’s health and sane military spending, while opposing nerve gas and apartheid. Staunchly pro-choice—partly because of her horrifying, nearly fatal experiences with childbirth—she recalls that she was stunned when male colleagues told her that she should have had a hysterectomy. Gung-ho for families with real live children, not abstract or hypocritical “family values,” she worked for sex education, better contraception and help for infertile couples and adoptive parents.

Schroeder’s tonic wit has entered the political lexicon. It was she who christened Ronald Reagan the Teflon President. When sceptics asked how she could be a politician and a mother simultaneously, she retorted, “I have a brain and a uterus, and they both work.” Principled, angry, merry and combative, Schroeder battled the right wing: “Every day was a fight to survive and not sell out.”

While welcoming women’s support, she doesn’t spare the rod and spoil the sisters. She remembers how often she was depressed by shortsighted female colleagues who argued that she was pushing too hard on issues affecting women, children and families. Many Congresswomen elected in 1992 lasted just one term, she points out, because women didn’t bother voting in 1994. Urging women to enter politics as “serious full-time players,” she writes, “It can get lonely. Consider this a postcard from the front. Wish you were here.”

Back at ya, sister. The scarcity of liberal flag-planters and political wits like Schroeder is part of the reason why the two-party system is a fiction. I wish she were a senator, as she might be now, had Walter Mondale chosen her for Vice President in 1984, instead of a less experienced, less uppity Geraldine Ferraro. I wish she’d written a longer, more substantial book,

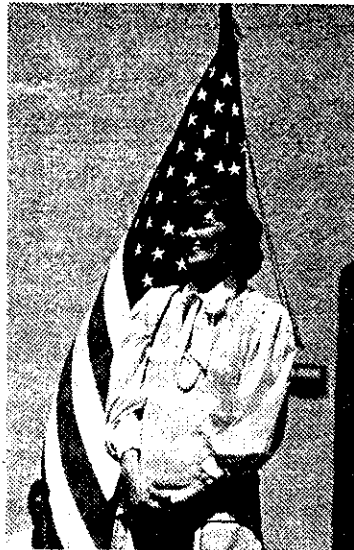
revealing how she managed to remain dauntless and teaching us about mischief as a survival tactic and English as a political lance. I also wish she’d spelled out why gadflies are indispensable as a counter to “pragmatists”: Ferraro, Susan Molinari and Barbara Jordan, whose House tenures overlap parts of Schroeder’s, all disdain “purism” and eagerly extol the value of compromise.

SUSAN MOLINARI (R, NY), youngest of these five women, was bred to politics by her father “even before I was out of feetic pajamas” on Staten Island, New York City’s most conservative borough. She spent seven years in the House, resigning in 1997 to take a short-lived job as a TV news anchor. *Representative Mom*, written with Elinor Burkett, shows “a young woman in a hurry” who liked being “the wisecass kid in that sea of Democrats” on New York’s city council. Running for the House, she wanted “to grind [my Democratic opponent] into the dust.”

Molinari resented being dismissed as a fluffy pawn of her father or of Newt Gingrich, then Speaker of the House. But when she defines herself, she zigzags. Being “entirely conservative on almost every issue but abortion,” she objects to conservatives calling her moderate. Yet she labels herself fiscally conservative and socially moderate. (That formula always puzzles me. If you “conserve” federal spending on food and shelter, do hungry or homeless people starve or freeze “moderately”?)

On women’s issues, too, *Representative Mom* is of several minds. Molinari swears never to keep quiet about women’s concerns, but wouldn’t mention abortion rights during her keynote speech to the 1996 Republican National Convention. She considers herself her party’s champion of women’s issues and criticizes Democratic Congresswomen for not fighting harder, only to complain about “Republican-haters” in the Congressional women’s caucus who “bashed men.” She condemns extremists “who use abortion and religion to hide their misogyny.... They are ‘pro-life’ and anti-everything else, from birth control to sex education and day care.” Then she gets mad because feminists want her to be strongly pro-choice.

Molinari exults at the Republican House takeover in 1994, the year when many female voters stayed home. The jubilation doesn’t last long. *Representative Mom* icily describes the infighting that turned her husband, a conservative Representative, into the scapegoat for an unsuccessful coup aimed at Gingrich, while denying that her narrative is payback to the couple’s enemies. (Gingrich’s obituaries were written prematurely last November. When he rises from the crypt, opponents should disinter Molinari’s gratifyingly acid portrait of his operatic self-indulgence.)



Pat Schroeder at a campaign stop. From *24 Years of House Work*....

Molinari’s departure from politics is probably temporary. Anyone who crows that she “crushed” an adversary is unlikely to be content as a footnote at the age of forty.

*Representative Mom* has too many clichés. *24 Years* has too little depth; Schroeder could have written a stronger book without descending to the wonkishness she wants to avoid. Readers are likely to prefer whichever book harmonizes with their politics.

Between those two breezy memoirs and two solid biographies lies an uneasy hybrid. *Framing a Life*, written with Catherine Whitney, is a loving salute from Geraldine Ferraro (D., NY) to her grandmother, mother and all immigrants whose sacrifices opened doors for their daughters. Her grandmother, Maria Giuseppa Caputo Corrieri, came to the US in 1890 and made a home for a family of twelve in a three-room apartment. Her mother, Antonetta Corrieri Ferraro, began work as a crochet beader at the age of fourteen. As a young widow, she literally bent to the task of making a better life for her only surviving son and her daughter Geraldine, holding two jobs, skipping on her sleep and food and becoming permanently bowed. Her “particular mix of iron and compassion [and] her native intelligence” allowed Geraldine Ferraro to become the family’s first female college graduate, starting her political journey.

If *Framing A Life* simply celebrated Italian American women, it would be an affectionate, modest gift for mothers and daughters to buy for each other. But when the book turns to Ferraro’s career, it’s not so hot. It scoots past her House years from 1979 to 1984 in two and a half pages. The vice presidential campaign was covered more informatively in her earlier book, *Ferraro: My Story*, written with Linda Bird Francke (Bantam, 1985).

To the reader who followed Ferraro’s unsuccessful 1992 and 1998 US Senate races in New York, *Framing A Life* seems oddly silent about some matters and disingenuous or bitter about others. It attributes all criticism of the financial ethics of Ferraro, her husband and her father to bias against Italians, and assails an estimable opponent, former Representative Elizabeth Holtzman. Instead of rehearsing old grudges, the book would have gained in logic and timeliness had it developed its brief reproach to xenophobes, thereby complementing the family tribute.

MADELEINE ALBRIGHT, Bill Clinton’s secretary of state since January 1997, is the highest-ranking woman in US history. She reached that peak after advising Senator Edmund Muskie, vice presidential candidate Ferraro and presidential candidate Michael Dukakis, and working with the national security council in the Carter White House, then acting as Clinton’s ambassador to the United Nations. Daughter of a Czechoslovakian diplomat’s family that fled Nazism, communism and likely political execution, Albright emigrated to the US in 1948 at the age of eleven. Successfully an exile, an ambassador’s daughter and a refugee, she adapted readily to American life.

In *Seasons of Her Life*, biographer Ann Blackman places Albright in “a bridge generation, a cohort of women wedged awkwardly between homemakers and careerists.” Marriage to the scion of a newspaper empire brought her love, social status and reactionary in-laws until her husband dumped her for a younger woman, Blackman tells us. Deeply wounded and fiercely ambitious—although flush—Albright rebuilt her life by teaching, running a small think tank, networking and creating a Washington salon.

Blackman sees Albright as a keen politician, able to explain foreign policy clearly to Capitol Hill and to the public at large, someone who cultivates conservative men like Senator Jesse Helms and laughs at their jokes like one of the boys. Analysts preparing to write about Clinton Administration foreign policy in the future are sure to consult Blackman’s work, which explores Albright’s roots in eastern Europe and investigates the controversy over her Jewish heritage. The secretary maintains that she did not know until recently that her parents were once Jews or that three grandparents died in the Holocaust. By probing historical and personal veins, Blackman illuminates the controversy without resolving it for me or, perhaps, for herself.

*Seasons of Her Life* notes some of Albright’s inconsistencies regarding women and overlooks others. She enjoys the personal camaraderie and professional loyalty of notable women like Ferraro and Hillary Rodham Clinton and of younger women inside government. She has mentored some women in the foreign service. As UN ambassador, she met regularly with all the other female delegates—six out of 185.

Yet, according to Blackman, some UN and State Department observers say Albright provides more lip service than real support to women here and abroad. As secretary, she called women’s rights “our mission” but chose men for most of the powerful jobs at State. Respecting Albright as she does, Blackman still acknowledges that she is generally detached from the women’s movement and claims to have encountered no sex discrimination in the workplace.

To see Albright on PBS on the fiftieth anniversary of her arrival in the US, fielding wide-ranging foreign policy questions with easy authority, is a consciousness-raiser. But when she tells the interviewer that being female is “an advantage” and then says, “I don’t think, frankly, gender matters” to a secretary of state, my eyeballs roll.

THE MOST IMPRESSIVE BOOK in the batch, *Barbara Jordan: American Hero*, is a major work. In Mary Beth Rogers, the late Representative has a reflective biographer seeking to understand her com-

plex subject and a writer who smoothly marshals the fruits of her research. An admirer but not an idolater, Rogers finds in Jordan ambition, intellect, courage, calculation, ego, deception, pride and patriotism. Jordan emerges from the page with an immediacy that leaves one with a new sense of loss over her death at the age of 58.

Literally embodying a double role as an African American and a woman, Jordan (D., TX) moved through territory in Texas and Washington that was controlled by southern conservatives who would have throttled her had she not known how to deal with alpha males. She maneuvered, too, through disparate claims from the black and female House caucuses. Having broken barriers in her own life, Jordan did not share feminist leaders' sense of personal urgency, through she supported the Texas and federal equal rights amendments and approved of *Roe v. Wade*.

Giving top priority to the needs of constituents, especially hardworking, elderly black women like her mother, and often voting with liberals, Jordan nonetheless disarmed and awed white businessmen and the troglodytes in the Texas senate, later repeating the process in the US House. Explaining her m.o., Jordan said, "I was not coming carrying the flag and singing 'We Shall Overcome.' I was coming to work..." She wanted to extend the federal Voting Rights Act and protect civil rights rulings by the courts. Rogers presents her as a consummate insider, who scorned liberals who would fall on their swords to avoid compromise.

Reaching the House in 1973, along with Schroeder, Jordan became one of sixteen black Representatives, four of them female. In a nation that dotes on pale, cute-looking women like Molinari, Jordan combined dark skin and large size with an arresting voice and meticulous enunciation to create a commanding presence that stirred admiration and fear. "[She] looks like she might be God," said a Texas lobbyist, "if God turns out to be a black woman."

The Nixon impeachment hearings before the House Judiciary Committee in 1974 made Jordan a national sensation as America heard her stately tones: "My faith in the Constitution is whole, it is complete, it is total." She would not idly countenance its subversion by the President. (A good summary of the Nixon impeachment hearings by the only other woman on the Judiciary Committee appears in *Who Said It Would Be Easy?* by Elizabeth Holtzman with Cynthia L. Cooper [Arcade Publishing, 1996]). A great orator, Rogers writes, had found "the subject of her soul"—a love of the Constitution—and had become a moral leader.

In 1978, Jordan declined to run for a fourth term. She felt restive and had for several years been living with multiple sclerosis, one of the grave illnesses that would affect the last twenty years of her life. She hid the health problems behind a veil of privacy and retired from public view.

Three years later she resurfaced, newly at peace with herself. "Humbled by illness, strengthened by solitude, unencumbered by political ambition, and reinvigorated by reading and reflection, she was stronger than ever," writes Rogers. She taught and spoke for "the left-out, locked-out, and forgotten." She denounced mean-spirited Republican policies, helped defeat Robert Bork's Supreme Court nomination, and advocated pluralism and national unity, traveling the country until she died in 1996.



Madeleine Albright with Maine senator Edmund Muskie, 1980. From *Seas of Her Life*.

**A**MONG THESE FIVE WOMEN, certain constants recur, hinting at the price women pay for public office and the limits we embrace or endure. All were firsts: the first woman to represent Colorado in the US House of Representatives, the first female secretary of state, the first nominated to a major party's national ticket. Before Jordan, no female African American had been elected to the House from the South.

Four were born between 1935 and 1940, Molinari in 1958. All were nourished by encouragement or mentoring from at least one parent or surrogate. All except Molinari earned a law degree or PhD. All have uncommon physical stamina, seemingly a sine qua non for notable achievement in nearly any walk of life, despite Jordan's serious disabilities and Schroeder's hepatitis C.

For the three who remain married, a husband's strong backing is vital. Molinari's husband sees her as a future US President. Schroeder writes, "Clearly, being treasured at home freed me to be strong and brave in public." Jordan rejected marriage as a distraction from politics, according to Rogers, and had no "soulmate" of either sex. The four others are mothers.

Their personalities range from formidable past witty to perky (but look out for sharp objects in Molinari's pom-poms). All five are equipped for the fray with inner steel, a strategist's eye and a zest for combat. Jordan's intense dignity served as armor, and Schroeder's antic streak may have staved off apoplexy in the face of calculated humiliations—like being forced to share a single chair with an African American Representative for two years: the despotic head of the Armed Services Committee "said that women and blacks were worth only half of one 'regular' member, so he added only one seat to the committee room and made Ron [Dellums] and me share it."

All the women have been trivialized and insulted. Despite conventional personal lives, most have been dyke-baited. Schroeder, who is 5'7" tall, is called "Little Patsy" by a shorter male opponent and variously labeled "Babycakes" and "baby killer." Others are called "Little Missy," "Mrs.," "Susie" and "Congressgirl" instead of "Representative," or are slammed with epithets: "witch," "snake," "whore." Jordan is called "nigger woman" by a white male legislator and "Aunt Jemima" and "Uncle Tom" by a black one.

In some eyes, these women are interchangeable. Molinari is mistaken for other petite blond Representatives or for a House secretary or clerk. During the Nixon impeachment hearings, I recall, TV anchors confused the two women on the 38-member House Judiciary Committee,

Jordan and Holtzman—a tall, heavy, sonorous black Texan and a short, thin, white, nasal New Yorker. Even today, gentlewomen on Judiciary hear the sissified "gentlelady" from the chair.

All the women except Schroeder advocate compromise. In words that Ferraro, Jordan, or Albright might utter, Molinari says, "[I]f you throw yourself on your principles on Tuesday, you're out of the loop by Wednesday."

Compromise. Ay, there's the rub. Will powerful men quit joking about abortion because Albright and Jordan laugh at their other jokes? Jordan, who voted with the Texas oil and gas industry and testified as a character witness for an odious former Nixon cabinet member, was lashed by praise from a pol who said "that nigger girl is the smartest member of the [Texas] senate." Ferraro criticizes the "stridency" of a NOW conference—which I attended and which was not strident at all—but when she runs for Vice President, CBS' Andy Rooney calls her "Ferrara." Although Molinari distances herself from the women's caucus, House Republicans let her rise only to the fifth-highest party rank before sliding the glass ceiling over her. Albright reorganizes the State Department along lines sought by Jesse Helms and reduces the International Conference on Women in Beijing to a photo op, but Serbians scream "bitch, bitch" at her when she visits eastern Europe.

Are women of any race ever really forgiven for not being white men? Is insider status illusory? Most of these five remained aloof from the women's movement whose battle contributed to their elevation, or blew hot and cold. Yet only Albright still holds office.

If we shun feminists, do we thereby gain entry to the treehouse whose door reads "NO GIRLS"? Or are we just out on



Barbara Jordan delivering the keynote address at the 1992 Democratic Convention. From *Barbara Jordan: American Hero*.

a limb, clinging, amid complaints that we have betrayed our unsung sisters for naught? Conversely, if we are principled aren't we isolated, left grubbing in the leaf litter at the foot of the tree, unable to climb at all?

Dilemmas aside, you have to love a Schroeder for fighting like hell for the sisters for a quarter of a century—and for wearing a rabbit suit to Washington's Cherry Blossom Festival. God bless her mixture of passion and gaiety. If I can't laugh, it's not my revolution.

Readers who want Schroeder back in the lists might write to her at the Association of American Publishers. Schroeder in 2000. Pass it on.

Copyright © 1999 Marie Shear

## CONTRIBUTORS

MARIE SHEAR is a writer and editor by trade, a satirist and musical comedy lover by temperament, and a feminist by necessity. Her work has been published by more than forty magazines and newspapers. Her column, "Media Watch," appeared regularly in *New Directions for Women*. This is her eleventh contribution to the *Women's Review of Books*. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

## CLASSIFIED

### PUBLICATIONS

*Solving the Great Pronoun Problem: 14 Ways to Avoid the Sexist Singular* contains a 14-point guide, discussion, and illustrative examples. *Equal Writes* reviews guidebooks about unbiased communication, explains how to choose one, and supplies a bibliography. To order send \$5 plus a long-stamped, self-addressed envelope for each article to the author: Marie Shear, 282 East 35 Street, #7N, Brooklyn, NY 11203-3925.

# Unhappy endings

by Marie Shear

**Last Rights: The Struggle Over the Right to Die**, by Sue Woodman. New York: Plenum Trade, 1998, 293 pp., \$26.95 hardcover.

**The Good Death: The New American Search to Reshape the End of Life**, by Marilyn Webb. New York: Bantam Books, 1997, 479 pp., \$24.95 hardcover.

**Freedom to Die: People, Politics, and the Right-to-Die Movement**, by Derek Humphry and Mary Clement. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998, 390 pp., \$24.95 hardcover.

THE RIGHT TO DIE will be a battleground for generations to come, as those of us who consider it essential to personal autonomy contend with critics who deplore it on religious grounds or fear it threatens people with disabilities and other vulnerable souls. The authors of these three books recognize that medical tyranny, which Marilyn Webb calls the sorcerer's apprentice, makes some people desperate to escape protracted suffering in the clutches of doctors who overtreat them against their wishes, yet shamefully undertreat pain or abandon patients in ghastly circumstances at the end of their lives. To varying degrees, all the books cover the debate's focal points: Quinlan, Cruzan, Kevorkian, Quill, Hemlock, Netherlands, Australia. They all report on court cases and political campaigns which have created a crazy quilt of state regulations that cripple the right to refuse unwanted treatment, even for patients who have executed living wills and health care proxies.

*Last Rights* is the work of a journalist troubled by the wretched last years of a beloved aunt. Aware of the "infinite complexities" of the right to die, Sue Woodman succinctly sketches the landscape—who's out there, on which side, doing what. She asks, "Can an advanced society...end prolonged suffering without compromising its ethical underpinnings?" *Last Rights* outlines the origins of the right to die in ancient Greece and the legal fights between modern pioneers and their adversaries here and abroad, which were triggered in 1976 when a New Jersey court allowed Karen Ann Quinlan's family to have her respirator disconnected.

"To my surprise, very few of the medical professionals I talked to could accept the fact that, deep down, someone might not be afraid of death," Woodman says. Physicians probably fear it as much or more than patients do, regarding it as a doctor's defeat, not a patient's right. They cannot let go. Yet unlike abortion, she says, death directly concerns everyone. Despite her personal terror at the subject, Woodman creates a forthright, even-handed picture of advocates and critics of the right to die.

*Last Rights* is the only one of these books to consider the connection between the right to die and women. Woodman notes that the women's health movement has stimulated their assertiveness as health care consumers. "Not surprisingly, many women harbor a lingering distrust of the medical establishment," she says, in the wake of DES, the Dalkon Shield and breast implants. She anticipates that veteran feminists will resist "a paternalistic medical profession telling them how they must die" as they age.

Marilyn Webb is another journalist whose work is informed by painful private experience—the deaths of her father and young sister long ago. During six years of research for *The Good Death*, Webb immersed herself in clinical literature and sat at deathbeds to learn how people really die and what activists, ethicists, spiritual counselors and palliative care specialists are trying to do about it. *The Good Death*

chronicles the nascent movement toward pacific "natural dying," akin to natural childbirth. At the other extreme, it describes horrible deaths, full of humiliation and fear, like the agonies of an AIDS patient whose doctor decided not to "waste good medicine" on him. A bureaucratic rat's nest makes hospice services rare, excluding people who are not terminally but interminably ill, Webb says. She interviews the families of seven Kevorkian patients and accompanies cardiologists on their icy march through an ICU. Right-wingers literally pitched their tents outside the hospital where Nancy Cruzan lay in a persistent vegetative state, reports Webb; the zealots were armed with blueprints of the building and were bent on inserting a feeding tube into Cruzan's body by force.

Mordant specimen though I am, Webb's case histories of dying individuals made me weep; so many people known to each of us have lived too long, suffering, and died too soon, thirsting for life. But when *The Good Death* turns to death's "unimaginable mysteries," it gets a tad icky for my taste—figuring as I do that if I'm moving toward "the light" it's probably an oncoming SUV. Other readers may find the passages about transcendent wonders moving, but grow restive at Webb's analysis of state medical boards' baleful role, analysis that engaged me.

By opening and closing *The Good Death* with stories of people who died peacefully amid their families—a 36-year-old woman and Webb's 96-year-old father-in-law—Webb creates an implicitly hopeful framework for it. But she is no Pollyanna:

What we are seeing now is the patient caught in the vortex of a heated, bloody battle—troops with conflicting interests fighting over the body in the bed...for physical and political control in sickness and at the end of life. The question still remains—two decades after Quinlan—who has the power to decide? (p. 188)

WHERE ASSISTED SUICIDE is surveyed by Woodman and allotted two chapters by Webb, it is explored in detail in *Freedom to Die*. Derek Humphry, author of the classic do-it-yourself suicide manual *Final Exit* and a founder of the Hemlock Society, and Mary Clement, who became an attorney at mid-life and who sits on Hemlock's board of directors, examine the history of the right-to-die movement in depth. They know that "physician-assisted suicide" and "the right to die" are misleadingly generous, although common, labels that cloak narrow realities. The "right to die" is unfortunately coming to mean only physician-assisted suicide (PAS). PAS, in turn, refers merely to a doctor's writing a lethal prescription under tight restrictions. PAS is no help to people who cannot ingest drugs unaided or cannot swallow, and the interminably ill are ineligible even for the prescription. Only Kevorkian has openly provided genuine physician-assisted suicide.

Humphry and Clement regard the right to PAS as "the second war over 'choice.'"

Victory, they say, would let mentally competent, terminally ill adults control their own bodies, despite fierce opposition from institutions like the American Medical Association and the Roman Catholic Church. Humphry and Clement see the cruelty in consigning patients to the un-tender mercies of doctors and hospitals unwilling to cede power and conscious that "dead patients generate no income." They object to church politicking, which they believe violates religious liberty and separation of church and state; they warn that the coalition between the Catholic hierarchy and evangelical Protestants bodes ill for death rights. *Freedom to Die* supplies ample information about pro- and anti-choice campaigns in California, Oregon and Washington. It contains the text of Oregon's splendidly named, but disturbingly limited, Death With Dignity Act and a handy chronology of key events in the movement's history.

But *Freedom to Die* is marred by overstatement, by a fluctuating voice and by a nasty assault on sick old people. Contrary to its claims, the medical community has not been "emasculated" in the last twenty or thirty years. Patients and families have not attained "the starring roles" in medical care, either: a major study cited in this very book reveals that doctors typically ignore patients' advance directives.

Chapters that analyze the subtleties of major appellate and Supreme Court rulings sound professional (despite a passing implication that *Roe v. Wade* was a "mistake"). But another, self-serving voice promotes Humphry, sometimes at the expense of accuracy. At least six references to *Final Exit* as a bestseller appear. Scores are settled within the movement, and Humphry is erroneously identified as Hemlock's sole founder five times. Ann Wickett, Humphry's second wife, is called a co-founder once, but it's in a paragraph saying her suicide helped defeat a right-to-die initiative, calling her emotionally unstable, and giving no hint that Humphry's behavior toward her was controversial at the time. (Wickett killed herself after their divorce and blamed her suicide upon him in a farewell letter.) In light of Humphry's past public statements about Wickett, many of them appalling, her slighting in *Freedom to Die* seems to fit a pattern.

To understand the assisted suicide movement, one must recognize that Humphry ranks with Kevorkian as a pioneer. But one ought not assess his work or character before reading more objective accounts than *Freedom to Die*. *Last Rights* helps here. Woodman avoids axe-grinding when she reports on conflicts within the movement. Addressing Humphry's treatment of his first two wives, she concludes that "the scandal still lingers."

Humphry and Clement attack elderly people as pampered parasites who are sucking the US Treasury dry, cossetted geezers whose "enormous political influence" lets them wallow in medical care, oblivious to the fact that they can "bankrupt the country." Like Ronald Reagan telling ugly fables about welfare queens, Humphry and Clement ask: "Should taxpayers be subsidizing the knee operation of an eighty-seven-year-old woman who is one hundred pounds overweight, is in the early stages of dementia, and has high cholesterol and heart disease?" No endnote reveals whether such a case actually exists. The growing ranks of "elderly and infirmed [sic] patients eating at the subsidized table" are diverting billions in medical care from

"younger, more vital individuals" to "those who, from a medical standpoint, are lost causes." Cost containment, Humphry and Clement conclude, will be the primary impetus for PAS. They do say that choice, above all, is the basis for PAS, but such disclaimers throughout the book pale beside chapter 21's ruthlessness.

Compare that chapter to Marilyn Webb's proposals for policies that could make dying more civilized. They harmonize with the respectful humanism I see in the right-to-die movement. She says "the culture of dying needs to change" because outraged Americans are demanding it. She wants support provided during the last years of life, support governed by each patient's own definition of what "a good death" means to her or him. She recommends changes in medical training, regulations and government financing, "so that the chronically ill and the dying—including their beleaguered families—receive the money and attention they deserve."

What with military extravagance and corporate welfare, I doubt that the chief threat to the national economy is grandma, gumming too much groel and refusing to eat a cheaper brand of cat food. I am entitled to assisted suicide, and so is anyone else who chooses it, whether our miseries are terminal or interminable—real assistance, not help restricted to those who can pass through the eye of a needle at the far end of an obstacle course. People with disabilities, which means almost everybody sooner or later, are equally entitled to services under their independent control, 24/7, for as long as they choose, regardless of age, even if the cost reduces the Pentagon to the Rectangle.

**T**HE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN women and the right to die (which I discussed in "Death Control," in *The Women's Review of Books*, November 1997) remains an absorbing matter. In *Talking About People: A Guide to Fair and Accurate Language* (Oryx Press, 1997), Rosalie Maggio quotes a study of right-to-die cases made by Steven Miles. He finds that courts often grant men that right, regarding them as rational and mature, but dismiss women and their requests as immature and emotional. In *The New Republic* for June 24, 1996, Stephanie Gutmann says that many men seek Kevorkian's aid, then kill themselves before he has agreed to help. Marilyn Webb reports that the National Women's Health Network and the Older Women's League have filed briefs with the Supreme Court in support of assisted suicide.

Suicides publicly aided by Dr. Jack Kevorkian remain about seventy percent female, judging from the latest list on the website [www.finalexit.org/kevorkian.html](http://www.finalexit.org/kevorkian.html). The commonest patient—14 out of 93—was a woman in her fifties. When Sue Woodman spoke to Hemlock's New York City chapter recently, approximately 75 percent of the attendees were women. (The 93 patients in the website's "Kevorkian count," which runs

through September 1998, range in age from 21 to 89. Many patients were not terminally ill. Kevorkian says he has aided more than 130 suicides in all.)

The disproportionately female Kevorkian count stems, I believe, from the fact that women are likelier than men to be chronically ill or disabled, to be scorned by conventional doctors and to have had intimate knowledge, as caregivers, of the torment endured by people they loved. And women lack wives as unpaid caregivers. Humphry and Clement point out that proper pain treatment is least likely for patients who are females of all races, are old, or are males of color.

Writing in the Spring/Summer 1997 issue of *Resourceful Woman*, a publication of the Health Resource Center for Women with Disabilities, Barbara Waxman/Fiduccia has said that "men have worn to care for them" and that women with disabilities who seek suicide do so primarily because of isolation and poverty. Waxman/Fiduccia believes that feminists have abandoned women with disabilities and are being "paternalistic" (sic) in backing assisted suicide. She urges feminists to join disability and senior activists to fight for long term home care—excellent advice.

The US keeps balancing the budget on the backs of predominantly female groups: unpaid relatives and underpaid health aides providing long term care to disabled or chronically ill people of all ages, often at awful personal cost. Given the impact of sexism and ageism, it seems to me unremarkable that women accurately assess their grim futures and say, "Check, please!"

Although these three books overlap, it is easy to choose among them, depending on what you're looking for. As an introduction to the major events, players and issues in the right-to-die fight, *Last Rights* is a brisk, balanced survey, particularly appropriate for readers unfamiliar with the topic, and it has larger, more widely-spaced type than most trade books. Webb's work is the richest combination of emotion and fact. Breadth of reporting gives *The Good Death* complexity and weight; poignancy makes it the hardest to read and the most affecting. For depth of detail on the history of physician-assisted suicide, *Freedom to Die* is superior, especially for those who have already completed *Right to Die 101*, although its footnote numbers are microscopic. But discount the message that the sun rises largely to smile upon Derek Humphry's countenance. And when you reach chapter 21, don face mask and rubber gloves to limit its toxic effect.

Disclosure: I have been a Hemlock Society member since the 1980s. In 1997, Derek Humphry sent me the names of several books which I later cited in "Death Control." I have no other ties to him or to his critics. —M.S.

Copyright © 1999 Marie Shear

# The Women's Review of Books

Vol. XVI, No.9

June 1999

74035

US \$3.00/Canada \$4.00

## PUBLICATIONS

*Solving the Great Pronoun Problem: 14 Ways to Avoid the Sexist Singular* contains a 14-point guide, discussion, and illustrative examples. *Equal Writes* reviews guidebooks about unbiased communication, explains how to choose one, and supplies a bibliography. To order send \$5 plus a long, stamped, self-addressed envelope for each article to the author: Marie Shear, 282 East 35 Street, #7N, Brooklyn, NY 11203-3925.

## CONTRIBUTORS

MARIE SHEAR is a writer and editor by trade, a satirist and musical comedy lover by temperament, and a feminist by necessity. Her work has been published by more than forty magazines and newspapers. Her column, "Media Watch," appeared regularly in *New Directions for Women*. This is her twelfth contribution to *The Women's Review of Books*. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

## sounding off

*Continued from page 2*

y  
g  
-  
-  
n  
e  
at  
."  
i's  
er

duress: to earn degrees and publishing credits that would otherwise be denied them by argot-nauts higher up the food chain. The argot-nauts miss the irony in W. S. Gilbert's lyric: "If this young man expresses himself in terms too deep for *me,* Why, what a very singularly deep young man this deep young man must be!"

People who teach, work in the media, or comment on popular culture should learn that altisonant verbiage incarcerates signification.

*Copyright ©1999 Marie Shear*

W12-6-99

**national  
WRITERS  
union**

# between the lines

**NEW YORK LOCAL**

**VOL XVII, NUMBER 11**

**DECEMBER 1999**

**\$1.00**

**M... 1**

**... Local**

## Stamp out Scholarspeak!

It's not just Murdoch and Disney who are rotting our brain cells. It's Scholar-speak.

Consider a recent book about women's images in advertising by an author who will be tactfully unnamed here. Her ideas are engaged by academic jargon. She writes: "Each chapter...privileges a particular lens through which to read the convergent discourses and performative tropes." "[I] posit that hysteria is a viable analytic for investigating contemporary postmodern conditions within which representations of reality—illusions—are the only reality." Marx used fetishism "to critique the atheological sacrality" of something else. No, not Groucho. Take two viable analytics and call me in the morning.

Does sophisticated thought demand obscure language? In an op-ed essay in *The New York Times* last March, Judith Butler, who chairs the rhetoric department at the University of California at Berkeley, contended that "some of the most trenchant social criticisms [are] often expressed through difficult and demanding language." Scholars may employ it, she writes, to "help point the way to a more socially just world."

But Patricia T. O'Conner's refreshing handbook *Words Fail Me* (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1999) counters: "No subject...is so complicated that it can't be explained in clear English." Dismissing those who "tart up [their] writing with authoritative-sounding twaddle," she

continues: "The subject—particle physics, perhaps—may be over our heads, but the writing should never be." In a similar vein, *The Women's Review of Books* instructs reviewers "not to write in such a way that non-academic readers will feel excluded." The editor wants to reach the entire feminist intellectual community, not academics alone. In *Fire with Fire* (Fawcett Columbine, 1994), Naomi Wolf deplores feminist theory "couched in...an exclusive and elaborate professional jargon amount-[ing] to pig Latin."

"See Spot run!" prose, infested with adorable anecdotes, makes my inlays ache. Yet the extremes of bloviation and condescension leave ample room for grown-up writing in between. Whatever the nominal subject of a school or college course, its subtext, when Scholarspeak is required reading, is that books are cadavers. A student raised by an adult who loved words, and who therefore read the likes of S. J. Perelman and P. G. Wodehouse by the fourth grade, won't mistake obfuscatory tomes for books in general. Students unvaccinated by Perelman and Wodehouse may shun books once their formal education ends. Then who'll read what *we* write?

As O'Conner recognizes, high-flown lingo may mean that the writer is too lazy to think clearly and write cleanly, or is cloaking skinny substance in bulky jargon. Others write Scholarspeak under

*Continued on page 4*

NWU NATIONAL OFFICE  
113 University Place  
(near 13th Street)  
6th floor  
New York, NY 10003  
Phone 212-254-0279  
Fax 212-254-0673  
Email [nwu@nwu.org](mailto:nwu@nwu.org)  
Website <http://www.nwu.org/nwu/>

NEW YORK LOCAL OFFICE  
275 Seventh Avenue  
9th floor  
New York, NY 10001  
Phone 212-929-2241  
Fax 212-807-6245

Email [nwuny@nwuny.org](mailto:nwuny@nwuny.org)  
Grievances: Call Local Office for  
Grievance Officer referral.

## between the lines

(ISSN 1087-8173) (USPS 013-608)

Published monthly except August by  
National Writers Union  
New York Local

275 Seventh Avenue (9th floor)  
New York, NY 10001

Phone: 212-929-2241 Fax: 212-807-6245

Josh Cherry, Organizer

Office hours: Mon. to Thurs. 12 to 4

Susan E. Davis, Editor

Email: [sedav@erols.com](mailto:sedav@erols.com)

Luis Alvarenga, Assistant Editor

Marie Shear, Contributing Editor

Cassandra Cook, Layout

New York Local Steering Committee:

Abby Tannenbaum, Chair

Russell Miller, Treasurer

Tom Hilliard, Secretary

Paul Becker

Betsy Feist

David Goldman

Ann Lewinson

Amy Rothman

James Waller

Copy deadline for January: December 17

Subscription: \$8.00 per year

Address all correspondence to

*Between the Lines*

c/o Local address

Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to

*Between the Lines*

275 Seventh Avenue (9th floor)

New York, NY 10001

**Weikart Tax Associates** n. Tax professionals,  
specializing in tax advice for writers since 1978.

**Writers n. pl.** 1. Persons who write, especially as  
an occupation. 2. Members of National Writers

**Union** 3. Clients of Weikart Tax Associates

### Weikart Tax Associates

(212) 822 - TAXX

#### Tax Specialists for Writers

Struggling Artist Rate: \$200 for writers grossing 25k or less

*Jim Weikart \* Shelley Martin \* Curtis Arluck \* Dennis Beasley*

*Phil Benoit \* Jill Rick \* Richard Sklar \* Richard Prince*

# Brand illusions

by Marie Shear

**Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising**, by Jean Kilbourne. New York: The Free Press, 1999, 368 pp., \$26.00 hardcover.

**The Real Thing: Performance, Hysteria, and Advertising**, by Mady Schutzman. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1999, 216 pp., \$45.00 hardcover, \$19.95 paper.

JEAN KILBOURNE has been studying advertising and addiction for decades. Yet she reproaches herself: "...I still feel awful almost every time I read a fashion magazine. My belly is too round...my skin marred...my teeth not white enough, my nails not perfect." Lots of us know the feeling. Ads rarely show women who look like us—pear-shaped, multicolored, in all ages and sizes.

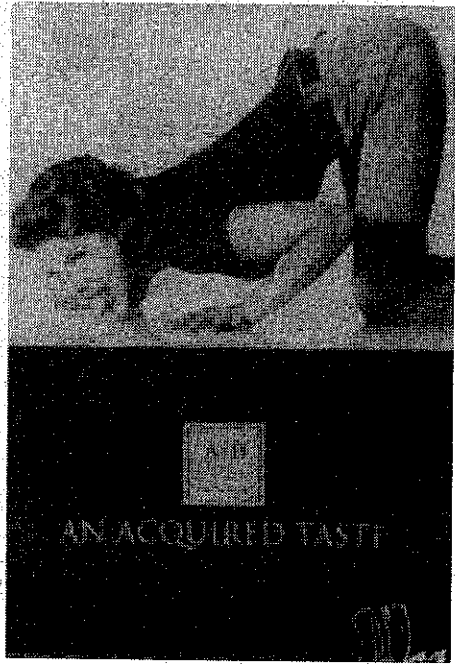
Kilbourne brings both professional and personal credentials to *Deadly Persuasion*. Her lectures and films began examining women's images in print and television ads in the sixties. An alcoholic who has been sober since 1976, and a smoker who quit in 1983, she is alarmed that canny, relentless ads promote addictions to children and to women and girls who are struggling to control their weight and repress their anxiety in a culture that prizes submissive starvelings.

Exploitation of women in ads is worse today than ever before, Kilbourne writes. Advertising fomenting insecurity and isolation, then offers alcohol, cigarettes, junk food and diet scams to deaden the pain it stimulates. Stifle your spontaneity and exuberance, say the ads, be virginal and sexy simultaneously, and you'll defeat your female competitors for male attention. To prove you're independent, buy stuff.

The women and girls most likely to challenge sexism are the very ones whose energy and anger are defused by ads. Less passive than their sisters, yearning to express their restiveness, they are taught by advertising to squander resources they could otherwise use to seek social justice and warm human relationships. "I loathe and fear the advertisers' cynical equation of rebellion with smoking, drinking, and impulsive and impersonal sex, the way they encourage all of us to confuse addiction with liberation, enslavement with freedom," says Kilbourne.

The corporate trivialization of feminism that reduces ERA to a laundry detergent, New Freedom to a maxipad and Day Care to a cold medicine is at least seventy years old. Because nicotine is the most addictive drug, cigarette ads are the most lethal lies. Women now get lung cancer at the same rate as men, and it buries more of us than breast cancer. "'Alive with pleasure!' says a cigarette ad, which certainly beats 'Dead with cancer!' as a slogan." My utterly unscientific impression is that many more students on a college campus I regularly visit are wearing cigarettes now than were similarly accessorized some years ago. (Incidentally, does the Right to Life movement ever picket tobacco companies?)

In a profitable symbiosis, tobacco ads complement the ads for diet schemes and for sugary, fatty foods sold as anodynes. Dieters are wonderful consumers, purchasing food and weight-loss products in an endless cycle. Millions of women and girls obsessively pursue the frivolous, unattainable goal of a thin body, Kilbourne writes, goaded by images of models so bony they do not menstruate. Advertising intensifies society's message that females



From *Deadly Persuasion*.

must be cut down to size, literally and figuratively. Fat people "are more scorned, shamed, and despised than ever before"; that bigotry "strikes fear into the hearts of most women." I think the vise has tightened. Yesterday's international sex symbol, Marilyn Monroe, is fat by today's standards. The actor who plays the popular TV nitwit Ally McBeal looks like a poster child for famine relief. No wonder women smoke: cancer is the diet that really works.

No zealot, Kilbourne enjoys print and television advertisements that are exciting, inventive and funny, confessing that she found a TV ad for BMW "so sexy, I longed for a cigarette ad afterward." She doesn't blame ads alone for demonizing fat women or causing binge drinking, teenage pregnancy and violence against women. The cumulative effect is what appalls her. Taken together, she says, advertising fosters an inescapable, poisonous environment in which sexist stereotypes, cynicism and self-hatred, and the search for quick fixes flourish. Feeling ironic and superior, consumers congratulate ourselves that we are impervious to ads, while the most skillful propagandists of the age—who usually ignore lesbians, women of color and women who are disabled or poor—inexorably teach young, white, heterosexual women that they are appetizing only when plucked, polished and painted.

Even children are targets. The irritating tendency of alcohol and tobacco addicts to die off leads advertisers to soften up kids to replace them, polluting classrooms with spurious "educational" materials. (Does McDonalds' nutrition chart place heart attacks atop the pyramid of food groups?)

Inspired by a passionate conviction that advertising threatens the mental and physical health of women and girls, *Deadly Persuasion* is a strong, non-pharmaceutical remedy for media illiteracy, safe and effective for the general public and students of all ages. Elementary-school pupils too young to read it might conduct media-monitoring projects that their teachers base upon the book. In fact,

Kilbourne thinks media-literacy education should start in kindergarten. That's none too soon: advertisers live by her witty aphorism, "[L]ife begins at consumption."

ALTHOUGH *DEADLY PERSUASION* contains too much repetition, Kilbourne does write in English. Mady Schutzman writes *Scholarspeak*. Trapped within the academic jargon of *The Real Thing* is a stimulating analysis of the roots of advertising messages and our reactions to them.

Schutzman tells us she performed a chapter of *The Real Thing* at a Performance Studies Conference in 1995, "amid the spectacle of helium-inflated latex gloves, crinolines made of plastic speculums that lit up like Christmas trees, and flying Day-Glo-ping-pong balls signifying schizophrenic turmoil." That sounds piquant. But the book is no burst of free-wheeling originality and enlightening juxtapositions.

Trouble starts with the preface's first paragraph. The methodological challenge, it says, was "how to simulate the culture of popular advertising iconography—a cryptographic [sic] and self-referential semiotic environment" and its "disjunctive polyglot of meanings." Schutzman wanted an "authorial voice [that] was more polyvalent....to convey and incite, through my textual strategy, the vertigo of hysteria's ever-shifting symptomology [sic]." But "vertigo was tempered" for the sake of "readability." The disdainful quotation marks around "readability" bode no good.

Hysteria, to Schutzman, is an inability to distinguish reality from illusion, which results in part from stereotypical and idealized images in advertising. Women consume, and are consumed by, ads, then "regurgitate in rage, histrionics, amnesia, and

paralysis." We try to embody the images until contrivance and sham pass for archetype. The barrage of contradictory messages—in which women are animalistic, dead, ludicrous, impotent, exalted, dreamy and debased—convinces us that we have no identity at all.

Schutzman thinks hysteria can be used politically, for resistance or healing, if we abandon the search for a cure: "If we don't find ways to tune in to the language of cultural madness that we are investigating, then we can never heal." She wants to explain how hysteria and advertising use the tools of drama to disable women, and how those tools can be adopted by radical feminists.

*The Real Thing* is not meant as a conventional history of twentieth-century print advertising. Like a deejay mixing and scratching records to create a fresh jangle, Schutzman samples gynecology and psychiatry; the rise of photography, which distributes "truly fake" images to a mass audience; the works of Darwin, Freud and Charles Dana Gibson, which inform today's images; the pressure on women to wear masks; the illusion of emancipation that allowed women to visit department stores and theatres; the growth of ad agencies; the alliance between art and high fashion in the 1930s; the dissemination of images of women who were labeled mentally ill; the role of mail-order catalogues; and vampirism, surrealism and streamlined styles.

There are striking tidbits. Medical researchers of the 1800s commonly chose female corpses for dissection. In the 1920s, the *Ladies Home Journal* cautioned readers that women who did not stay home to raise children were "aiding the red cause." (How comforting to know that sexists are environmentalists. They recycle their garbage.)

*The Real Thing* could have been a vivid interdisciplinary synthesis; kaléidoscopes delight us because their clarity lets the eye follow shifting patterns in brilliant colors. Schutzman can write clearly. "[W]e never find our identity, we just keep buying." "Consumers are most exploitable when they are not thinking too clearly, when they don't remember their last commercial nightmare, when they are wandering aimlessly through malls." The alleged prosperity of the Reagan era "can be viewed as a celebration of bigotry wherein American citizens were encouraged to exploit the poor, get rich, and not feel guilty about it." (Neatly put.)

Even intelligible deconstruction can unwittingly approach parody, though. Are eyelashes really "thick and furry pubic sheaths"? Maybe lipsticks really are phallic, but wouldn't it take a mighty steady hand to apply them accurately if they were shaped like uteri?

Occasional silliness, however, is a minor weakness compared to prose like this: "Those who practice poststructuralist writings/readings...privilege fluid, polyphonic, and surface positionings in their analyses." Hans Bellmer's work "foregrounds the sadistic component of scopophilia, where the sculptural and photographic effects disarticulate the female body into a sign of violence, possession, and masochistic pleasure." "Through presentification, an excessive presence compensates for a predominating absence." Wracked idioms do not help. Theories are purported, a woman is donned in clothing, a shift heeds issues, a notion is bestowed a status, advertising is astute to women's roles, and consumers "are all prey to how the fetish conducts its enchanting orchestration."

The problem is not that *The Real Thing* requires disciplined attention that only



From *Deadly Persuasion*.

lazy or simpleminded readers will begrudge it. The problem is that ideas cannot be assessed and appreciated by readers forced to concentrate, instead, on deciphering stupefying jargon and staving off puns that spring to mind, unbidden. Sister can you paradigm? Trope, trope, trope the girls are marching...

NOT SURPRISINGLY, *Deadly Persuasion* and *The Real Thing* cover some of the same topics. A book about advertising that overlooked sexism, skeletal models, the sexualization of children and the manipulation of psychological research would miss much of the story. Both authors know that empty, fearful people buy, then buy some more, and that ads



From *The Real Thing*.

tell women how to look and act. Kilbourne, whose book is the more generously illustrated, says she writes to kindle revolution: "We can redefine the crucial concepts—love, rebellion, sexuality, friendship, freedom—that advertising has corrupted, and take them back for our own health, power, and fulfillment." Schutzman also wants women to resist, yet it's not easy to follow her marching orders: "In our attempt to recuperate hysteria as a critical analytic, we must reinsert subjectivity into the vacated subjectivity of hysteria."

Many social ills that advertising exacerbates—racism, sexism and homophobia among them—are public health issues to Kilbourne. We must become media critics, she says, because huge industries are battenning upon an uncritical populace. In its

systemic approach, *Deadly Persuasion* wisely puts advertising into the context of overweening corporate power and of media suppression of information and opinion that could help the public to demand corporate accountability. Magazines that thrive on tobacco ads, for instance, are censoring the fact that tobacco kills over four hundred thousand Americans annually; TV journalism (an oxymoron, I think) rarely warns us off futile diets. "It is time for us to fight back," says the spirited final chapter. "We need coalitions, networks, conferences, public outcries. We need all kinds of people coming together..."

Ralph Nader, Jim Hightower, Michael Moore, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, and *Adbusters* should rally 'round the Kilbourne flag. (*Adbusters*, a Vancouver-based magazine, has been publishing petitions urging New York State to revoke Philip Morris' corporate charter, a wonderfully audacious idea.) We ourselves should rally 'round. And we'd better be quick about it, before acromegalic media conglomerates run by Murdoch and Disney turn us all into flatliners.

Conglomerates aside, we will not have media literacy, or any other kind, unless academics, universities and presses quit writing and publishing *Scholarspeak* and making students read and write it. People who teach and write about the media and popular culture should lead us out of the rhetorical rat's nest, not burrow deeper into it. While most professions need some specialized language, if professionals who analyze communications cannot communicate, who can? It is time to recuperate a hegemonic paradigm that valorizes the semantics of the quotidian.

Copyright ©1999 Marie Shear

Although feminists have been criticizing sexism in advertising for years, the situation is getting worse rather than better, as Marie Shear finds in a reading of Jean Kilbourne's *Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising* and Mady Schutzman's *The Real Thing: Performance, Hysteria, and Advertising*, p. 8.

## CONTRIBUTORS

MARIE SHEAR is a writer and editor by trade, a satirist and musical comedy lover by temperaments, and a feminist by necessity. Her work has appeared in more than forty magazines and newspapers. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.

## CLASSIFIED

### PUBLICATIONS

*Solving the Great Pronoun Problem: 14 Ways to Avoid the Sexist Singular* contains a 14-point guide, discussion, and illustrative examples. *Equal Writes* reviews guidebooks about unbiased communication, explains how to choose one, and supplies a bibliography. To order send \$5 plus a long, stamped, self-addressed envelope for each article to the author: Marie Shear, 282 East 35 Street, #7N, Brooklyn, NY 11203-3925.