

WTE Column of Dec. 20, 2013. Editor's Headline: "Gender-Neutral Language Right Step for Humankind"

"Wyoming Wildlife" is published by our state's Department of Game & Fish, which targets outdoor enthusiasts like wildlife photographers, hikers, anglers, and hunters. For the twelve-plus years that I've been reading the magazine and admiring its gorgeous photographs, its staff has refrained from using terms like cattlemen, sportsmen, fishermen, using instead their gender-neutral equivalents: stock growers, hunters and anglers, etc. A commercial fishing entrepreneur might be described as a member of "the fishing industry" or engage in "commercial fishing."

A few months ago I joined an online group of writers who critique one another's work to better our chances for nationwide publication. Some write fiction, from realistic to escapist; others compose poetry; still others write essays. There are 27 of us, in countries ranging from Australia to Italy. All are women writers.

Since joining, I've beaten the drum for gender-neutral language, which, I'm certain, is an editorial criterion. A case in point was an Australian writer's book review of a novel written by an Aussie male. The reviewer asked for a critique that might enable her to submit the review to a national magazine.

"It would help if you replaced sexist terms with gender-neutral ones; i.e., 'policeman' should be 'police officer'; 'the timeless mystery of man's relationship with the land' should read 'the mystery of human interaction with the land'," I commented.

I added the thought that a mother's teaching her son "love and fine values" was unconvincing, suggesting the writer "unpack this."

I came under fire for a "teacherly" stance on "political correctness" to experienced writers. Several women said they felt that, generally speaking, women did not object to phallogocentric language.

I replied as follows:

Yes, I'm devoted to non-sexist language and, yes, you may deem my stance dogmatic; however, U.S. newscasters and journalists have used gender-neutral language for at least 25 years—I'd be surprised if it were any different in Australia, England, or Canada—and, by and large, essayists, creative writers, and script writers have followed suit. While Americans generally like to talk of "our founding fathers," an editor changed my use of the term to "our founders."

On the other hand, when I first arrived in Wyoming, the state's sole woman representative to the U.S. Congress signed her email to me—I kid you not—"Your Congressman, Cynthia Lummis."

When you think about it, "old-growth forest" is more precise and descriptive than "virgin forest"; "firefighter," more precise and descriptive than "fireman"; ditto for "mail carrier" and,

yes, “police officer.” (In the U.S., the police are “peace officers”—a contradiction of terms, some observers would say.)

“Dr. Smith, Chair of the Department of English” is as accepted today as Smith’s “chairing” a meeting.

An inanimate object like a ship or a skyscraper is not a “she” or a “he” but an “it.” That’s not an opinion; it’s a matter of observing closely. Navy or marine personnel might disagree with me on the subject of ships, maybe on the basis of tradition or other emotional grounds, but this would be far from thoughtful reasoning.

When I first proposed writing a column for the local paper, Editor Eckhardt handed me a copy of The Associated Press (AP) Stylebook. It differs in key aspects from the Handbook of the Modern Language Association (MLA), which I used while teaching college-level writing; however, both manuals are in accord on non-sexist language. Under “man, mankind,” AP advises refraining from duplicate phrases like “a man or a woman” or “mankind and womankind ” and resorting instead to “humanity,” “a person,” or “an individual.” Last time I checked, which was a few years ago, the MLA Handbook contained a humorous essay, “The Great Manhole Cover Debate”—actually, come to think of it, the title may have been “The Great Genderhole Cover Debate.”

To the review writer I explained, “What I found disconcerting about your review/your author was not so much the author’s lauding of masculine virtues (which may or may not be reminiscent of some gay writers’ glorification of maleness) but the suggestion that the protagonist did not learn to read and write from his supposedly devoted (and presumably Australian-European) mother. Perhaps the author made plausible the dissonance; to me, it was a huge obstacle to suspending disbelief, even given that the action takes place in the 1940s outback.”

I mentioned Bruce Chatwin, a gay writer of decades ago, whose best-known work, “The Songlines,” I admired despite his phallogentric language.

Another member emailed she thought Chatwin’s book “misguided hogwash.”

“While I agree that the author’s writing falls apart midway through the book, his depiction of aborigine songlines as phenomenal feats of memorization is to the point and, as far as I can tell, factual,” I emailed back.

The dispute was shelved in favor of pressing work but, I suspect, it’s not forgotten.