

## BATTLE OF THE PRONOUNS: COLOSSAL

# SPECIAL REPORT:

Writing a children's book of riddles about dinosaurs may not seem an obvious arena for a clash over sexism. But during the final manuscript editing of *Tyrannosaurus Wrecks: A Book of Dinosaur Riddles* (HarperCollins) I fought the battle of the dinosaur pronouns.

Nouns were natural for most of the 146 riddles—mother or father scenes, fairy tale characters. For the 35 requiring a pronoun, in earlier drafts I used the masculine form. But my editor and I agreed that in the final version the feminine should get equal representation. A simple matter, we thought, wrapped up in a short phone call.

We couldn't have been more enormously wrong! Plaguing pronoun questions besieged us: What would support or offend various viewpoints? What would truly express our own convictions? What would aid or damage sales? And how much should a book mainly for entertainment defer to issues of social change?

We soon realized that each riddle had to be handled individually, and priorities kept changing and sometimes bashed head-on. The hostilities, and final truces, fell into three main camps:

1. *Entrenched Male Stereotypes*—almost impenetrable stereotypical male occupations or activities forced us to keep the male pronoun.

2. *Damaging Female Stereotypes*—the female pronoun would fortify stereotypes, so we capitulated to the male.

3. *Breaking Through the Stereotypes*—we stormed the pronominal bastions with either pronoun, neutralizing stereotypes of both genders and illustrating positive role or behavior changes.

### *Entrenched Male Stereotypes*

The *Entrenched Male Stereotypes* glared out at me, and one of the most glaring was cowboys. Only two cowgirls spring to mind. Annie Oakley and Dale Evans, and they weren't exactly typical ranch hands. The male had this area tightly roped off:

*Why was the Pentaceratops a good cattle rancher?*

*Because he had a lot of longhorns.*

And take those beings in shining armor. Do we ever question which sex the hardware hides? Maddeningly, again the male pronoun had to be used:

*What do you call a dinosaur who left his armor out in the rain?*

*A stegosaur-rust.*

To bring us current, there's the executive. This one really hurt, especially since so

many women today are successful (and with their own Dino's Club cards). But 98% of CEOs are still men, and despite a few eminent exceptions, most women climbing to the glass ceiling succeed only in windexing it. So again the male pronoun was firmly lodged:

*Where does the dinosaur company president sit?*

*At his Tyrannosaurus desk.*

### *Damaging Female Stereotypes*

The second pronoun problem involved the largest number of riddles. Damaging Female Stereotypes kept surfacing in an insidious array of common, apparently harmless situations. We felt forced to keep the male pronoun to blunt female stereotypes of foolishness, ineptitude, or weakness.

For example, that women talk too much: *Is it all right to ask a dinosaur lots of questions about the jungle?*

*Yes, it's one of his favorite topics of conversation.*

Or that women are bad drivers:

*Why is a dinosaur dangerous at the wheel of a car?*

*He's a back-feet driver.*

Or that women are tired all the time:

*What does a dinosaur do when he needs a rest?*

*He lies down on his riverbed.*

Or that women are sick a lot:

*When a dinosaur has an operation, where do his relatives stay?*

*In the wading room.*

I also reacted, with chagrin, to behaviors that echoed my traditional conditioning about what's "feminine." One was normal bodily functions, such as eating:

*What did the dinosaur senator say when he looked at a new law?*

*"Let me chew on this a while."*

A woman senator would have been wonderful (16% in the last election), but I couldn't stomach the thought of her undaintily masticating her memos.

Sleeping's indelicate by-product awakened the same response:

*Why didn't anyone sleep in the same room with Daddy dinosaur?*

*Because he was a Bronto-snorus.*

The issue of power reared up too. Women's "assertiveness" has finally been accepted, but my conventional reflexes recoiled from an unattractively "aggressive" female:

*How did the dinosaur senator always get his bills passed?*

*By throwing his weight around.*

The clincher, though, was that little word

# CLASHES IN A DINOSAUR RIDDLE BOOK

by Noelle Sterne

"weight." We women wrestle incessantly with the "right" body image that dominates our culture and wastes our energies. The male pronoun had to be used, first with blatant excess pounds:

*Why did the dinosaur go on a diet?*

*He weighed too much for his scales.*

And second in opposite situations, hinting at anorexia:

*Why did the doctor prescribe a new diet for the dinosaur?*

*Because he was a skeleton of his former self.*

But the most damaging female stereotype was the ancient stamp of woman as sex object, which insinuated itself into many riddles. In protest against antediluvian sexism, we kept the male pronoun.

Look at anatomy:

*How does a dinosaur fossil get ready for a school test?*

*He bones up all night.*

*What instrument does a dinosaur fossil play?*

*His trom-bone.*

The male pronoun may evoke sexual links, but they become worse with the female. A bawdily graphic picture surfaces with *her* boning up all night. And what about that instrument? If she were playing, could she be accused of barely disguised piccolo envy.

The feminine pronoun could also damage women's careers:

*Why was the dinosaur doctor so popular?*

*Everyone liked his bogside manner.*

I wanted no female doctor suspiciously well-liked because of her special skills near questionable places.

These decisions, reached often reluctantly, nevertheless angered me. By retaining the male pronoun, my editor and I appeared to endorse myriad multiple standards: men can engage in countless objectionable behaviors without the stubbornly damning labels that plague women.

Still, I worried—was I colossally oversensitive? Mores *are* changing—many women are excellent drivers (even cracking NASCAR) and doctors (and lawyers, electricians, dentists, and taxi drivers). More men admit to fatigue and weight concerns, especially in today's obesity epidemic.

But if my editor and I saw sexist whiffs, others might too. And even though this children's book is meant for fun, too many kids' television shows, toys, songs, movies, video games, and other books have sustained

sexism's pernicious health.

## *Breaking Through the Stereotypes*

However, certain riddles really did Break Through the Stereotypes. Some reversed women's traditional roles and others enlarged the possibilities for *either* sex in previously exclusive domains.

In one riddle, we countered woman as the perpetual sole food supplier:

*What did the dinosaur say as he lugged home the groceries?*

*"Oh, my aching Brachio-saurus!"*

But in another, the female won out, even with the hint of kitchen duties:

*How did the Stegosaurus liven up the party?*

*She spiked the punch.*

Okay, she made the punch, but she had the gumption to improve it, and with liquor, traditionally a male's job.

Woman's driving cruised with no sexist implications and the added bonus that she can, and does, pay her own way:

*What does a dinosaur pay when she drives over a bridge?*

*A reptoll.*

At least one occupation broke through entrenched activities for both men and women. With children's piano teachers stereotypically female, the male pronoun here was especially gratifying.

*What did the dinosaur piano teacher tell his students?*

*"Be sure and practice your scales."*

My own childhood male piano teacher, I recall, was quite as forbidding as any dinosaur.

The final two examples also gladdened my heart. In the first, woman is more than a body:

*What did the dinosaur say when she bought a new book?*

*"I can really sink my teeth into this."*

In the other riddle, a traditional role is reversed as a fine female speaks her mind:

*What does the dinosaur say to her sweetheart on Valentine's Day?*

*"I'm mud about you!"*

There's the saga of my dinosaur pronoun battle. Maybe it reopened some old wounds and left a few scars, but after the mud settled, the women's contingent held her own. Yet I await the day when our language finally fashions a third set of pronouns that serves both sexes with equal rightness. On that day, with a book of dinosaur riddles or any other subject, male and female pronouns will incite no fighting words, even from the most fossilized among us.

Writer, editor, and writing coach, *Noelle Sterne* has published fiction, essays, poems, and writer's craft articles in many magazines and online resources, with articles forthcoming in several publications, including *The Writer* and the 2008 *Novel and Short Story Writer's Market*. A short story about a middle-school boy won an award and was published in the 2006 *CrossTIME Anthology*. Current books include *First You Find Your Desk: Start Writing and Keep Writing with Less Agony and More Joy* and, especially for children's writers, *Give Great Children's Presentations*.

# Children's Book Insider

## At Presstime

### *Publisher Seeks Unique Books with International Appeal*

Milet Publishing publishes books that are nontraditional, international, one-of-a-kind books. Seeking board and picture books for ages 0-7, middle grade fiction for ages 8-12, and picture dictionaries and language learning books for children. Stories set in unusual locations, with unusual themes, that explore ideas and emotions are of interest. Picture books depend as much on the illustrations as the text to tell the story. Many books are published in both English and up to 15 bilingual editions. Sample titles include *Chameleon Races* by Laura Hambleton (board book); *Minutka: The Bilingual Dog* by Anna Mvcek-Wodecki (picture book, Polish-English); *Bella Balistica and the Indian Summer* by Adam Guilain (ages 8-12, multicultural fiction); *Monkey Business: Fun with Idioms* by Sedat Turhan, Laura Hambleton and Herve Tullet (language learning, ages 4-7). Query with story synopsis for board and picture books; send outline or synopsis and 2 sample chapters for longer works. Send with SASE to Editorial Director, Milet Publishing, 333 North Michigan Avenue, Suite 530, Chicago, IL 60601. For more titles, go to [www.milet.com](http://www.milet.com).

### **Bootcamp Coming to Bay Area**

**Children's Authors' Bootcamp**, led by CBI publisher Laura Backes and author Linda Arms White, covers all aspects of writing fiction for children including plotting, character development, dialogue, editing your work and submitting to publishers. Bootcamp will be in San Leandro, CA (just outside San Francisco) on **July 14-15** at the Hilton Garden Inn. Cost for the weekend is \$269 (includes lunches, snacks and handouts). For more information or to register online, go to [www.WeMakeWriters.com](http://www.WeMakeWriters.com). For questions, email [CABootcamp@msn.com](mailto:CABootcamp@msn.com) or call 303/747-1014.

### *Publisher Seeks Books with Educational Value*

Windward Publishing, a division of Finney Company, publishes books on natural history, science, and outdoor recreation. While primarily a nonfiction publisher, Windward will occasionally accept fiction with educational value. Most titles are in the picture book format, though Windward also accepts submissions for older nonfiction. Recent titles include *By the Light of the Moon* by Judie Olsson Kenago, illustrated by Kathleen Olsson (picture book about animals who come out at night); *Space Station Science* by Marianne J. Dyson (middle grade nonfiction, explains the systems needed to run the International Space Station); *My Little Book of Timber Wolves* by Hope Irvin Marston, illustrated by Maria Magdalena (picture book, follows fictional family of timber wolves during birth of five pups); *Storm Codes* by Tracy Nelson Maurer, illustrated by Christina Rodriguez (picture book based on an ice storm on the Great Lakes in November 1960, and the flags and whistles sailors used to communicate). Send a query describing the manuscript's market and age group, author background and qualifications. Attach a brief (less than one page) overview or synopsis. For books longer than a picture book, send a table of contents, introduction and 3 chapters. Send with SASE to Alan E. Krysan, President, Finney Company, 8075 215th Street West, Lakeville, MN 55044. For more titles, see [www.finney-hobar.com/windward.html](http://www.finney-hobar.com/windward.html). The company's also considering adding children's titles to its Ecopress imprint ([www.ecopress.com](http://www.ecopress.com))—books enhancing environmental awareness.

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