

Sexing the Mad Cow

by Fred Stenson



I don't feel like an authority on human gender. I can guess gender in humans with fair accuracy, but I'm less good at spotting the inequalities that exist because of it. Nor is that my sly way of dismissing gender politics. When women tell me they are not equals in their workplaces, I tend to believe it.

But because of this lack of authority, because I'm not a victim of gender-based oppression—nor, I hope, a gender offender—I want to get off that subject and deal instead with non-human gender issues, which I think are often neglected.

I have many, many editors in my life. I work *with* them, but it feels more like I work *for* them. They have natural-born authority that I automatically bow to and then later rankle against, reduced to my 13-year-old self, who is never far away. Anyway, one of my editors recently asked me (with reference to a piece of my fiction), "Can a calf be a bull?" Of course I chortled away, seizing the rare opportunity to feel superior. In cow country, that's a question like,

heifer and remains one until she has her first calf. That's when she becomes a cow.

During the BSE crisis, my wife, Pamela, asked me if we ever had any mad cows on our farm. I assured her that all our cows were sane.

Note, I said "cows." If the question had been about "mad cattle," I don't think I could have made the same assertion. All of our bulls seemed insane. For the majority of the year they grazed and lazed in kingly torpor. When introduced to the cows come summer, their time of glory, they immediately started digging at the earth with their hooves, bashing heads with other bulls, roaring, coveting, fighting like mad. They were, in short, excessively lust-mad and violent, which is what we often mean by insane when describing human behaviour.

But back to the gender language issue. At least part of the confusion people have comes from there being no common non-gendered word for an individual cow or bull, which is why we get in the bad habit of saying cow for both. So let's fix that before

"How many wheels are there on a bicycle?" But, on longer and kinder reflection, I realized that cow gender, for urban folks, is a quagmire of misleading clues.

All this became topical with Alberta's one-cow outbreak of BSE, better known as mad cow disease. We all know the awful results for ranchers. (If the Book of Job were a modern text, Job would be a rancher.) And I hope no one will think I'm trivializing the subject when I say it should be mad *cattle* disease, darn it! Cow is not singular for cattle. It means an adult female. Mad cow disease, as a name, implies only females can get BSE, which of course isn't true.

So here's your primer. A young male bovine is a bull, until castrated, when it becomes a steer. A young female is a

continuing. Bovine is a nice word, but is more commonly an adjective than a noun. “Bovo” has a good sound, but in Spanish, it would be male (Bova would be female). So how about “Bovex”? I’ll ask my caucus to put it to a vote. Passed. Unanimous. Bovex it is.

Very quickly now, I will move on to the sexing of landforms. Recently, I was at a Historical Society of Alberta conference where an item of significant interest was the Alberta government’s determination to name a piece of Kananaskis Country after ex-premier Don Getty. This follows the precedent of Don Getty’s naming a big chunk of the same valley after Peter Lougheed. Both these acts violate a long standing historical site-naming principle, which says, “Don’t name places after living people.” At the Society’s banquet, an award was given to Marie Dorsey of Edmonton for, among other things, her part in the successful battle to have Mt. Eisenhower restored to its original name of

Castle Mountain. And good for her.

I strenuously support this principle and the struggle to keep another chunk of K-Country from being named for another living ex-politician. But, under my current topic, I want to consider the gender aspect of such naming. Once a mountain or a valley is named after a man or a woman, it is in a way male or female forever. This is not as God intended. Because men’s names are chosen more often than women’s names, the country is rendered male. Children growing up might think there’s an inherent maleness to mountains or to wilderness in general. This won’t do.

Rather than come up with parity in the gendering of landforms, how about we just stop sexing the mountain altogether? If we must name landscape features, let’s stick to description and give the job to people with good words at the ready. Hire poets. They can probably use the work.

Fred Stenson’s new novel, *Lightning*, will be published this fall.