

Kate Swift, Writer Who Rooted Out Sexism in Language, Dies at 87

By [William Grimes](#)

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Kate Swift, a writer and editor who in two groundbreaking books — “Words and Women” and “The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing” — brought attention to the sexual discrimination embedded in ordinary English usage, died on Saturday in Middletown, Conn. She was 87.

The cause was stomach cancer, her grandniece Corin R. Swift said.

Ms. Swift turned her attention to the issue of sexist language when she and Casey Miller, her companion, formed a professional editing partnership in 1970 and were asked to copy-edit a sex education manual for junior high school students.

The stated goal of the manual was to encourage mutual respect and equality between boys and girls, but Ms. Swift and Ms. Miller, who died in 1997, concluded that the author’s intent was being undermined by the English language.

“We suddenly realized what was keeping his message — his good message — from getting across, and it hit us like a bombshell,” Ms. Swift said in a [1994 interview](#) for the National Council of Teachers of English. “It was the pronouns! They were overwhelmingly masculine gendered.”

The partners turned in a manuscript with suggestions that sex-identifying singular pronouns be made plural, or that pronouns be avoided altogether, and that word order be changed so girls preceded boys as often as the reverse.

“The publisher accepted some suggestions and not others, as always happens,” Ms. Swift said. “But we had been revolutionized.”

Now, they wrote in the preface to their first book, “Words and Women,” “everything we read, heard on the radio and television, or worked on professionally confirmed our new awareness that the way English is used to make the simplest points can either acknowledge women’s full humanity or relegate the female half of the species to secondary status.”



Kate Swift Credit...Betsy Huston

Ms. Swift and Ms. Miller went on to write two attention-getting essays on the subject in 1972: “Desexing the English Language,” which appeared in the inaugural issue of Ms. magazine, and “One Small Step for Genkind,” which was published in The New York Times Magazine. “Words and Women: New Language in New Times” followed in 1976. An updated version was published in 1991.

The book illustrated the implicit biases in spoken and written English, highlighting the time-honored phrases “all men are created equal” and “land where our fathers died,” the persistent identification of women by Miss and Mrs., and the journalistic habit of describing women as divorcées or blondes, who might be pert, dimpled or cute.

Some of the authors’ proposals gained traction. Many newspapers, textbooks and public speakers avoid “fireman” and “stewardess” nowadays. Other ideas fell by the wayside, notably “genkind” as a replacement for “mankind,” or “tey,” “ter” and “tem” as sex-neutral substitutes for “he/she,” “his/her” and “him/her.”

Barbara Peabody Swift, known as Kate, was born on Dec. 9, 1923, in Yonkers, to a journalistic family. Her paternal grandfather, J. Otis Swift, wrote a daily nature column,

“News Outside the Door,” for The New York World and its successor, The World-Telegram, for 40 years. Her father and mother were both newspaper and magazine journalists.

She grew up in Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y., and attended Connecticut College before earning a journalism degree from the University of North Carolina in 1944. After working as a copy runner in the NBC newsroom, she enlisted in the Women’s Army Corps as a writer and editor for the Army’s information and education department.

She was a writer for the Port of New Orleans, an editorial assistant at Time and a news writer for the public relations department of the Girl Scouts of America before becoming a science writer on the public-affairs staff of the Museum of Natural History in Manhattan in 1954, serving as the press liaison for the Hayden Planetarium. In 1965 she became the director of the news bureau of the school of medicine at Yale.

She lived in East Haddam, Conn., and Georgetown, Me. Her marriage ended in divorce. She is survived by a brother, John, of Georgetown, Me., and a half-sister, Marguerite Swift of Flagstaff, Ariz., and Georgetown.

Although Ms. Swift and Ms. Miller followed up their first book with a style guide, “The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing,” in 1980, Ms. Swift insisted that she had no interest in policing the language.

“We just wanted to give people the background, to make them aware of what was happening right underneath their noses,” she said of the handbook. “We didn’t want to tell people, Do This or Don’t Do That!”