

## Casey Geddes Miller (1919-1997): an appreciation

by Donna Allen , Paula Kassell

Casey Miller, the doyen of nonsexist writing, died on January 5, 1997 of chronic obstructive lung disease at her home in East Haddam, Connecticut.

Miller and her editorial and writing partner, Kate Swift, began their assault on linguistic sexism in 1970. Their involvement in the subject started during Miller's and Swift's first work together as copy editors of a 1970 sex education handbook for high school students. The author's use of "he" made it impossible to know whether it referred to both males and females or only males.

Then in 1971 they wrote an article subtitled "Desexing the Language" for New York magazine and in the first issue of Ms. in the spring of 1972. In 1972, they were asked by The New York Times Magazine to write an article on sexism in English. The piece, published under the title "One Small Step for Genkind," was a breakthrough -- the earliest substantive piece on linguistic sexism to appear in a large-circulation mainstream publication.

The immediate reaction took the form of ridicule and satiric wordplay. The title of a full-page essay in Time in 1972, "Sispeak: A Msguided Attempt to Change Herstory," was typical. But they had raised the issue, and now their other articles came out in The Washington Post and, over the years, in many additional national periodicals and in more than 30 anthologies and textbooks.

Their first book, *Words and Women: New Language in New Times*, was published in 1976 (re-published in fall 1991 with an introduction by Catharine R. Stimpson). With wit and unassailable logic, they demolished the use of "man" and male pronouns as including both men and women, among many other grammatical rules and terms. An example of the consciousness-raising style: "A tomboy is `a girl of boyish behavior,' according to one dictionary, `a young girl who behaves like a lively, active boy,' according to another. But why must a girl be defined in terms of something she is not -- namely, a boy?"

Also in 1976, the journal *Women and Language* was founded to record the growing body of research in the field as well as report of courses and conferences.

*The Handbook of Nonsexist Writing: For Writers, Editors and Speakers* came out in 1980 (Women's Press, Ltd., London. Republished in 1988, updated). More than a handbook that suggested nonsexist substitutes for long accepted terms, it offered a consciousness-raising history of language.

There were other important contributions, besides activities in local and state politics. Harper and Row asked them to take over the incomplete manuscript of Pauli Murray's autobiography at her death in 1985, essentially complete but needing parts rewritten, cutting, bridging and some reorganization for the book *Song in a Weary Throat*, and they then interested Carol Orr, director at the University of Tennessee Press, to issue it in paperback under the new title *Pauli Murray, the*

Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest and Poet.

In 1989, Casey and Kate were invited to discuss bias in English language usage at a conference of all state judges, from Supreme Court to probate. They spoke in plenary session and in an afternoon workshop at the annual meeting of 425 directors, editors and other press people of the Association of American University Presses in June 1990 on bias in standard English. They continued speaking on the subjects of sexist, racist, religious, ageist and other forms of prejudice in English to state departments of education, conferences, seminars and college classes.

Casey Geddes Miller was born on February 26, 1919 in Toledo, Ohio. She received a B.A. degree in philosophy from Smith College in 1940 and studied graphic arts at Yale. She headed the publications department of Colonial Williamsburg from 1947 to 1954, then became the curriculum editor of Seabury Press. During World War II she served in Naval Intelligence, working in cryptography.

A photographer as well as an author and editor, her photo essays have appeared in Nature and Science, National Fisherman, Antiques, and other publications.

Casey, with her brilliant mind and wide erudition, was a joy to her friends and beloved feminist colleagues. And all of society has benefited from the more than two decades of work of Casey Miller and Kate Swift. Speaking and writing have changed, profoundly altering how we think of women, of ourselves, and of all people. The world is richer due to Casey Miller. We celebrate her life even as we mourn her death.