

PATRICIA LAWSON
I'M A DORK

A WHILE BACK I HAD A DISAGREEMENT with one of my students, and as it was taking place, I sensed the student was thinking, *Here before me is an example of extreme dorkiness*. The argument took place in my little cubicle at the community college. As it accelerated, I noticed that across the hall my colleague, Chloe Martindale, was listening intently.

A woman in my children's literature class named Estelle Seaton had come in to explain why she needed to "call my attention" to the hurt she felt because I had chosen fairy tales with an "ocean full of wicked stepmothers." She listed Cinderella's stepmother, Hansel and Gretel's, Snow White's, but above all the evil stepmother we had just encountered in the Charles Perrault version of "Sleeping Beauty," an ogress who wants to eat her own grandchildren along with their mother "with a sauce Robert."

As you might guess, she was a stepmother herself. "The kids and I are just starting to get acclimated, and it's a real adjustment," she said. "But I'd do anything for those kids. Their mother neglected them. She fed them Cheetos with every meal, but they treat her like a queen. And the little one—he's six—he looks at me funny. And you know why?"

I wanted to say, "Because you won't let him eat Cheetos?" but I tried to be sympathetic. "I know what you mean," I said, "but some people say stepmothers became the villains because the reality, that the actual mothers might be bad, is too threatening."

My comment briefly threw her offguard. She came back with a litany of grievances about portrayals of stepmothers and about people like me who perpetuated the stereotype. She almost could have done a standup routine if the material had been funny, and I thought that with a little more exaggeration it would have been. But of course I didn't say so.

Would you believe Chloe came to the *student's* defense? "My best friend is a stepmother," she said to Estelle. "And her own mother—*her very own mother*—told her if one of her stepchildren died, she wouldn't grieve as much as if they were her quote *real kids* unquote."

The two of them began nodding furiously and then both of them stopped talking and looked at me, and I could read their thoughts: *What a dork!*

Maybe I should have been more sensitive. Insensitivity is perhaps the main attribute of dorkiness as it may be in schmuckiness. Not so long ago another colleague, a guy who teaches social science, Bob Saragusa, called me a schmuck—and in print, in our student newspaper, *The Harbinger*, in fact.

The fracas was over my letter to the editor. I had written to agree with a student who had said that, considering the income of the students at our community college, the bookstore should investigate cheaper sources for books such as the many online used-book “stores.”

Bob responded that I must think our students were second-rate if I assumed they would prefer a “used book, some frayed, marked-up, coverless rag with ‘Craig Loves Kelsey’ or ‘Craig Wants to Commit Unspeakable Acts with Kelsey’ on the peeling front page.” He added, “No doubt, Ms. Lehman perceives our students to be schmucks, which makes her the bigger schmuck.”

I might have countered that if I did perceive our students to be schmucks, (and I don’t, at least not most of the time) that would not *necessarily* make me a schmuck, that is, supposing it is possible for a student or students to be a schmuck or schmucks.

Instead I wrote that “while a few students may actually want a brand new book, my feeling (based on a poll taken in my largest class) is that at least eighty per cent would prefer a bargain even if it meant a less than pristine book.”

Bob accused me of “practicing social science without a license.” How many were polled? he demanded. Had I considered some students might actually want to keep their books? Why would I assume they would not want to purchase something with a higher degree of durability so that they could begin to build their libraries?”

He then worked himself up to full throttle. “There is nothing nobler than a well-bound book. Such books are the essential furniture in my home.” He concluded, “I hate to think about the gimcrackery that fills the spaces in Ms. Lehman’s house, not to mention her mind.”

I have to admit he made a point, though I thought it badly worded. And I wondered if someone—maybe Chloe?—had told him about all the knickknacks on my mantel: the wicker bird cages a friend had brought back from China, the blown-glass pieces made by the boyfriend before Jon, my current ex, and Jon’s tennis trophy, which he left behind after our breakup.

Maybe Bob was right about the desire for permanence. I had recently spent around two hundred dollars for a single-volume hardbound edition of the *OED* (a used copy, mind you). This would seem to prove his point. But when I was a student, I would never have shelled out money for the *OED*. No, back then it was tapes and CDs. Now I see so many of those tapes and CDs were mistakes and that my collection is an index to different kinds of dorkiness.

I broke up with Jon last semester, and since he too is a colleague, going to work has become an awkward, painful experience. Perhaps I draw awkward, painful experiences to myself because I am an awkward person, which is another of the possible meanings of *dork*.

Besides being called *dork* and *schmuck*, I have been called *doofus* and *boor* by Jon. He used all these terms during the course of our relationship, especially when we had our breakup fight. I too was furious because I had just discovered he had something going on with Chloe.

"Well, at least I'm not a dork," he said as he loaded up hacky sacks, tennis rackets, soccer balls, his *jai lai* set, bocce balls, the tin of Mexican train dominoes, his bi-lingual bingo.

I couldn't think of a good response. True, I had raised a few questions at a recent English department meeting, innocently I thought, and apparently those questions had entangled him more tightly in Chloe's arms.

Chloe was his grant partner for the "Teaching Innovation Grant." They were recently awarded five thousand dollars, a tidy little sum for our college. Chloe and Jon plan to market their program if it comes to fruition.

Their proposal is to work with the Academic Computing Division to develop a program they are tentatively calling "(Down)loading the Canon." Cloe got the idea after buying a Wii—and inviting Jon over to try it out. They discussed how great it would be if instead of interacting via the television and a computer program with an animated tennis player, the user could interact with one of the greats of American literature—such as Emily Dickinson or Walt Whitman or Ernest Hemingway.

As they explained it in the meeting, their program would first introduce the writer with the briefest of texts. Then an animated cartoon figure of the writer would appear. There would be various game-like options for the student such as "Finish Emily's Poem" or "Modernize Emily's Capitalization" in which the student would use a handheld device like the Wii control while on the screen a quill pen would appear (with early writers, anyway)

and scratch out a capital letter or word, replacing it with a lower-case letter or more current word.

Another sequence would be titled “Receive Emily’s Visitors.” The student would hear a rapping sound at the Dickinson front door and could then select one of Dickinson’s famous contemporaries such as Emerson, Alcott, or Whitman to enter. Then various conversational possibilities could be explored.

Suppose the student selected Alcott. Once she was “admitted into the Dickinson parlor,” the student could (via Emily) pick from questions to ask her, for example, “Do you consider Amy hopelessly flawed?” This would provide “cross learning.”

I had a few reservations.

“Will the student learn how the unfinished poem really ends?” I asked.

“If they wish, they can click on a link that takes them to the text,” Jon said. “Or they can play around with the poem, select from alternative lines, de-capitalize it, and so on.”

“You’re saying *change* her poem?”

“Well, yes,” he said and whispered something to Chloe. During the meeting they were sitting side-by-side at a table in front of the classroom facing us, and now and then I saw their legs touch under the table.

“I’m not sure how much Dickinson would have liked that,” I said. Of course, I was hurt, but the whole idea seemed screwy. “Aren’t you encouraging a *kind* of copyright violation even if it’s legally okay?”

Chloe waved the objection away. “Our goal is to de-sanctify these so-called giants. We believe the student who is brought into the lives of the greats in a fun, friendly sort of way will find them more accessible and much less intimidating.

I said I thought if our students were intimidated, it could only be in the most indirect way, but I had another question.

“Did Walt Whitman ever actually visit Emily Dickinson?”

“I don’t see that it matters,” said Jon. “It’s a game.” He folded his arms and looked as if he were being plagued by an annoying child.

“How will they know what’s fiction and what’s fact?” I asked. Chloe shook her head, but I continued. “Also, I think a little respect is due these writers. I’m not sure I want them turned into cartoons. I mean if it was a program like *South Park*, it would be okay, but ...”

I glanced around, trying to see if anyone saw things my way, but it seemed no one did. Perhaps, you might say, I began to ramble a bit.

"I mean *South Park* even has Jesus appear. But I don't see ... I mean if you're going to treat these writers with dignity ... well what's Hemingway going to do? Like, are you having him talk about his six-toed cats?"

"Actually," said Chloe coolly, "we do have a segment that includes the Hemingway cats. It's called 'Hemingway's Creatures—in Life and Art.'"

"These things engage the student. I don't see the problem, Miranda," Jon said.

Later that day we had our big fight, and he confessed to sleeping with Chloe.

"As soon as the project got underway," he said, "we developed an attraction. She shares my enthusiasm for our collaborative work. By the way, I don't appreciate your comparing our project to *South Park*, as if we intend to make these authors the butt of humour."

"It would be *butts*, wouldn't it? Since there are more than one?"

"Butt, butts. We put in hours and hours on this project. And we were speaking in front of our colleagues."

"But we were supposed to question. You said at the outset—I heard you—you said, 'Don't hesitate to ask questions. We want to get the kinks out.'"

"Oh, don't be a dork!" he said.

"No, I swear you said it."

"Well, sure I said it, but you don't think I wanted to hear it, especially from you. It's not very loyal."

"But you've been screwing Chloe. How is that loyal?"

"But you didn't know for sure until this minute."

He shook his head in amazement, packed his gear, and left. Someone said he found my clumsiness and insensitivity wearying and had been drawn to Chloe because she was sensitive, not to mention better in bed.

The department decided to support the project, but our chairperson advised them not to tinker with Dickinson's verse, adding he *did* think it was a great idea to include Hemingway's cats and suggested they might add a link to a site on creatures with extra digits, a.k.a. polydactylism, which "might lead the student—one would hope—to Anne Boleyn." He also suggested a link to bull-fighting and another to famous suicides.

"What does that have to do with Hemingway's work?" I asked Mel, the chairperson.

"We can't avoid life—or death, Miranda," he said. "Art doesn't take place in a vacuum. Why steer clear of things such as alcoholism or suicide or creatures born with an extra finger, like my cousin Steve, by the way.

Hemingway saw things squarely. So did my Aunt Alma and Uncle Roy.” And he lowered his eyelids to show I had lowered myself in his estimation. *Dork, dork, dork!* that look said.

“I’d love a six-toed cat,” I said weakly.

“So you say.”

For weeks people gave me amused, disdainful looks. I was hurt and mad, so I decided to try to squelch the project. I wrote a letter to a woman I located through the Internet who was a distant relative of Dickinson. I said that of all the great American writers, Dickinson, because she was such a private person, would like this project the least.

Unfortunately, the woman, a Ms. Carrie Winton, who lived in West Rutland, Vermont, wrote back that this kind of technology was new to her, but she didn’t really have an objection.

“Actually, it sounds rather entertaining,” she wrote. “The truth is I was never a great fan of my relative’s verse ... so choppy with all those dashes. I much prefer Longfellow. But I do have an old family picture of her on my mantel. I have to confess, I’m not fond of it. She seems so ... pensive ... sort of, well, odd. I don’t know what to say about her. My grandson would probably say, ‘She looks like a dork.’”