

CLOSE-UP

Courting controversy

A couple of years ago, when Harvard University President Larry Summers suggested that innate biological differences between men and women might help explain the dearth of women in top science and math jobs, Susan Pinker was deep in research on a similar topic. The controversy surrounding Summers' comment made international headlines – and made Pinker's job harder. "It had the effect of chilling everybody's desire to talk about the issue," she recalls. "Even scientists were unwilling to talk about their research – female scientists in particular."

But in the publishing industry, Pinker's findings – leading up to a daring assertion that men and women are wired to value different things in the workplace – have been met with anything but chills. Her first book, *The Sexual Paradox: Extreme Men, Gifted*

Women and the Real Gender Gap, will be released simultaneously this February by Random House Canada here and Scribner in the U.S., and rights have been sold in multiple foreign markets.

The Summers debacle makes it safe to assume that *The Sexual Paradox* will spark controversy, although Pinker's book doesn't seek it out. In fact, Pinker, 50, seems less interested in upending politically correct truisms than in seeing the positive sides of phenomena usually greeted with dismay, such as boys' problems in school and women's absence from the top echelons of many professions. "In the last decade or so a whole window has opened up," says Pinker, referring to advanced brain scans and other developments. "My emphasis is on this incredible burgeoning of the science."

The Sexual Paradox also draws on Pinker's own work experience. Born and raised in Montreal, she has been a practising



■ Susan Pinker

developmental psychologist for more than 25 years. Several years ago, however, she found herself longing for a more creative outlet and cut back on her practice to take up journalism part-time. She eventually found her niche addressing workplace issues in her "Problem Solver" column in *The Globe and Mail*, a post that led to representation with agent Denise Bukowski and the decision to write her first book. Pinker budgeted one year; instead, the book took two and a half. "I was terribly naïve" about the process, she says. "But I was lucky enough to be passionate enough about the subject to carry me through."

The Sexual Paradox examines two closely linked subjects: why fragile boys often later succeed in the workplace and why women appear to fall behind their male peers. As a psychologist, Pinker knew that boys experience learning disabilities and related disorders in greater numbers than girls. In adulthood, however, such problems don't seem to lead to "the same deleterious effect in the workplace," says Pinker. Indeed, she argues in her book, some of the traits that cause problems for boys in school – single-mindedness, for example, or a lack of self-consciousness – can help them thrive in certain jobs. Pinker also noticed that the boys' female classmates appeared to be on a very different trajectory. "When we look at very capable, highly motivated little girls who grow up into highly competent, high-achieving women, many do not come to the top the way we expect," she says.

The difference between male and female professional achievement is usually attributed to the glass ceiling or a lack of family-friendly work policies. But armed with the latest neuroscience and psychological and economic studies, Pinker suggests that women may be biologically inclined to prefer collaborative, empathetic, and creative work over cutthroat competition and 80-hour work weeks. Pinker, who is married with three children, also presents convincing evidence that males are simply more variable than females – when skills and abilities are tested, the average scores of men and women will be the same, but the distribution will be different, with more men at both the top and the bottom.

Pinker argues that we miss the point when we see men as the norm and judge women as falling short. In fact, she says, many women are actually choosing – rather than settling for – their particular career paths. "What I saw was that women were making choices that had to do with their desire to make a difference and their desire to have autonomy," says Pinker, "so if they wanted to have more time with their kids they could; if they wanted to take a French course they could – and they were willingly paying a price for this flexibility."

Pinker's book is an easy sell around the world, says her agent, Denise Bukowski: "The women who read it immediately have a 'eureka' moment and say, 'this is what I've been thinking all my life and nobody's said it before.'" At the Frankfurt Book Fair in October, Bukowski says, there was a "bandwagon effect" as the buzz about *The Sexual Paradox* spread; rights have now been sold in the U.K., Holland, Germany, Japan, Israel, and Brazil.

Still, if Pinker's experiences researching the book are any indication, she can count on a backlash. "I think there's a lot of sensitivity about the message that anything women do can have a biological basis. That message has really been abused in the past," she says. "Some of the academics I approached for opinions would just blow their gasket. They weren't even able to express themselves coherently about why they opposed [my ideas]."

Of course, from a publisher's perspective, blown gaskets beat indifference every time. "A lot of the publishers like controversy," says Bukowski. "It's going to get a lot of media attention wherever it is published."

— SUSAN CATTO

LOCAL BUZZ

That Place by Tantramar

Sackville, New Brunswick, has found its bard in Douglas Lochhead, author of some 25 books of poetry, who was named the town's first-ever poet laureate as part of its 2003 centenary. To commemorate the event, town council published a selection of Lochhead's poems on local themes. The result, a slim volume entitled *That Place by Tantramar* (printed by Gaspereau Press), was released in September 2007 and has sold over 100 copies at Tidewater Books, making it the store's bestselling poetry title of all time.

Many of the poems are inspired by the rugged dykelands that surround the town, says Tidewater Books owner Ellen Pickle. "It's really an homage to the physical beauty of the area," she says. One poem, "Breakfast at Mel's," is centred on a popular café. Pickle says it's that familiarity, coupled with Lochhead's stature in town (he's a professor emeritus at Mount Allison University), that fuels the book's popularity. "I think it's going to be considered a keepsake," she says, adding that she expects a boost in sales when the tourist season kicks off this summer.

That Place by Tantramar

Douglas Lochhead; \$16.95 pa., 978-0-97837-900-1,
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