

I was born blonde and stay that way thanks to my clever hairdresser. So you'd think I'd be insulted by the endless dumb blonde jokes. You know how they go: Why can't a blonde dial 911? Because she can't find the eleven. Ha. Ha. It's based on a stereotype. One hit movie, *Legally Blonde*, used this to advantage when Elle, a supposedly brainless blonde, is forced to study to pursue her boyfriend to law school. There's a lesson here for us, the writers. Stereotypes are useful. They give us a handle to hang a character on. But we can't just stick to the cliché the stereotype represents. Elle may have started out as the dumb blonde who ran with the sorority chicks and cared for nothing but her outfits and image, but she quickly learned to surprise her critics with her sharp brain. When she acted against her typecasting, she won big. Ahh.

There are plenty of stereotypes for us to mine in our writing. The alpha hero is a favorite. Boy, have we seen a lot of Navy Seals lately. How about a tough cowboy? Or maybe you are fond of a jock—the football player comes to mind. It's your challenge to make your stereotype multi-dimensional. To give him something that makes the reader go, hey, I had no idea a macho man could do or say that. Maybe your hero has an allergy that can make him vulnerable. Or a soft spot for his dog. Yes, I'm a sucker for a dog lover. He could have a talent that he hides because it would make his teammates tease him. He's artistic or a chef in his spare time. Are you thinking yet?

The heroine needs to break out of her stereotypes too. The uptight secretary, librarian, or long-suffering in silence assistant to the boss. Those clichés were done in the eighties to death. But they can be fresh again. How? Let your gal be a computer whiz who saves the day. A P.R. person who knows what to say and when. Or maybe she's the chef who makes him amazing chicken soup when he's having the worst allergy attack of his life. Is your heroine an Earth Mother? There's nothing wrong with a gal who wants to stay home and raise a family. But you have to make her a little more in this day and age. Can she invent a time-saving device for

mothers everywhere? Is she the one person who understands the hero and makes him feel safe? Give her strength along with understanding and you may have broken the stereotype.

All of this started with Elle in *Legally Blonde*. People judged her by her looks. Big mistake. Under the big hair and high heels was a woman with a high IQ and the ability to motivate an entire sorority into being better women. She made friends with people who wanted more for themselves too. The minor characters in that movie were interesting and tended toward stereotypes too. There was the loud, insecure hairdresser. Or was she the manicurist? Doesn't matter. She had a heart of gold and fell for the FedEx man. He wasn't the brightest bulb but they were made for each other. Elle helped her insecure friend find the nerve to make a play for the guy she wanted. This is how we write longer books. When I write 100,000 words, I have to have sub-plots. Getting a happily ever after for another couple besides my heroine and hero is one way to do it. Interesting minor characters make it easier.

And when you're writing a synopsis to go with your book? Drag out your stereotypes. It makes telling what your story is about so much easier. My first book was about an undercover cop and an uptight banker. Those descriptions set up conflict before I ever wrote the story. The fact that the cop was undercover in a motorcycle gang made it even better. The banker got caught in the middle of a sting which put her in danger and forced her to stay close to a cop known as Wild Man. It was a short book so there were no minor characters except the bad guys. I wrote that book in 1998. Today, I'd beef it up and add more plot, twist it and, of course, add cell phones. Don't you love progress?

Gerry Bartlett is the author of the best-selling *Real Vampires* series. She is happy to say that she may be blonde, but she's got several college degrees, holds her own when challenged at bridge and is still proud of her shoe collection.