

# San Francisco Chronicle

## Bastards Out Of California

By Wendy Lichtman,

USED TO BE, YOU knew someone's name, you knew something. Used to be, you'd hear a kid's last name, a kid you'd never even met, and, at the very least, you'd know his mother, his father, and his ethnicity. Used to be, you could tell a book by its title.

When I grew up, if I spoke about a boy I was dating, some relative was bound to ask me the boy's last name, which, in our community, was code for the question, "Is he Jewish?"

I remember one uncle, upon hearing an acceptable name, actually saying, "well, he sounds like a good kid."

But nowadays, it's all up for grabs. Now, you've got your hyphens, you've got your mixed ethnicities, you've got your mother and father and baby all with different names.

It's messing everything up. For starters, it's confusing the hell out of the Census Bureau. When California stopped asking for parents' marital status on birth certificates, that should have gone a long way toward eliminating the ridiculous concept known as the "illegitimate child."

But the folks over at the Census Bureau had to come up with a statistic, so they knew what to do; they simply counted the babies whose last names were different from their mothers', and discovered that California had a 35 percent illegitimacy rate. We're the highest in the nation.

Yes, of course you get it and I get it, but evidently the census crowd is not that swift, and they didn't think about all the married women in our state who have kept their own names; they didn't pay attention to the fact that a high percentage of those babies are given their fathers' last names.

So now we've got all these absolutely legitimate babies passing as bastards.

You can see where this starts to get out of hand.

FIRST OF ALL, you've got children who become illegitimate in the old-fashioned way, because their mothers aren't married to their fathers -- those would be your traditional bastards.

But then you've got children living in stable families who get the illegitimate label by virtue of having parents who prefer not to get married, or by having gay parents who can't marry even if they would love to make a legal commitment -- those would be your alternative bastards.

And now, to top it off, you've got kids like mine, who qualify for illegitimate status even though their parents are married, because they have different last names from their mothers -- those would be your phony bastards.

Maybe the Census Bureau needs to make some distinctions here. Or maybe they should forget the whole thing.

Maybe we all should. Maybe we need to accept that all children, everywhere, are legitimate. It's perfectly legal to be a child.

TO TELL YOU THE TRUTH, until I heard about the great Census Bureau caper, I didn't much like having a last name that was different from my children's.

But now that I see how it confuses things, it suits me fine. I'm pleased that in the Census Bureau stats we're all standing there together -- mothers without partners, mothers who have women partners, and married mothers who have kept their own names.

It's as if Hester Prynne lived in a village where a lot of other women chose to wear great big red "A's" on their clothing.

I like that it's getting nearly impossible to assume that just because we can read the title and see the cover, we know what's in the book.

I'm delighted that it's come to the point where we actually have to meet a child before we can say that he or she seems like a good kid.