A tale to beat bias
Critters give keys to halt prejudice

By Clare Noonan
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There is trouble in Triversity.
Animals and humans fight, bite, judge and act arrogant — much the same as in the real world.

But this isn't real, it's a whimsical land created by former Modestan Stephanie West Allen in "Triversity Fantasy, Seven Keys to Unlock Prejudice," (KiteShade Publishing, $14.95).

The book recently hit the No. 1 business paperback spot in The Denver Post and Rocky Mountain News, only one month after publication.

"It's a very strange book to classify," said Allen, a teacher/lawyer who lives in Colorado.
"Basically it was written for people in law firms, accounting firms, corporations," she said. But people have suggested high school students should read it and one reader said it explained her boyfriend's behavior.

Triversity is inhabited by fairy tale folk. Regular humans are there, too, in the form of a woman named Story, and Lien, a contentious lawyer. The two don't get along, but ultimately learn to settle their differences.

As the story opens, things aren't going that well in Triversity:

Aesop creatures bug the Hans Christian Andersen people, who ring the wrong note with the Brothers Grimm.

That is, until seven "keys" — letters A through G — begin to haunt the thoughts of various critters and people. Allen uses the keys to make readers think about prejudice and how it starts.

Take the key of G, or Groupie. As Roosteroo rattlesnake explains: "... when we group people, we may have a tendency to feel good about the groups of which we are a part and to judge those we are not. We can become a Groupie."

The key of G is connected to the key of C, which Allen says is the simplest one of the seven.

C stands for Comforter. "We grow when we allow others besides our comforters into our lives and when we expand our zone of comfort," explains Bera, a rather outspoken inhabitant of Triversity who Allen said she'd like to be.

Working on the key of C doesn't have to mean tackling our most ingrained prejudices, the author said. She urged more simple ways to stretch your comfort zone every day: brush your teeth with the other hand, take a different route to work, talk to someone you normally wouldn't.

Change comes in small increments, Allen said. "I don't imagine any reader's going to take all seven (keys) away, at least the first time."

Not without a strong dose of the key of D, or Doer. In the words of Oxfordmand, an old sheep in Triversity: "In order to be a doer, we must have the appropriate knowledge, skills and desire."

Especially desire, Allen emphasized. Corporations that want to be more inclusive of gender and race in the workplace can provide diversity training. But the training goes nowhere unless it's taken by employees who have a desire to change the workplace.

Although "Triversity Fantasy" is serious, it's also fun.

There's magic: Lien arrives in Triversity via a bubble bath, animals talk (often making better sense than humans), and fish swim willingly into hands wanting to fry them.

There's music: Tobit the chimpanzee plays calming tunes before each key is explained.

There's hope: An enlightened woman named Piper Pintada describes a tolerant world where shades of grey are celebrated and honored.

It's a world Allen would clearly welcome. "For some reason I've always been interested in why people don't accept difference."

Exposure to prejudice came early in her life. Allen visited Barranquilla, Colombia as a high school student and wasn't allowed to visit a native she'd met in Modesto because the person was from a lower social class than the family with whom she was staying.

She got another taste of prejudice several years ago in a law and psychology class she taught to undergraduates at the University of Colorado.

Allen divided the class into random groups and was surprised, along with the students, at how quickly the mood changed. Each group, she said, became "very competitive. They believed their group was right."

Dealing with prejudice without harsh judgment sounds strange, but Allen's not one to follow a prescribed path. She left a Bay Area law practice 10 years ago to spend two years waiting tables in Santa Fe. Then she worked at a health resort for four years teaching, among other things, stress management.

Since moving to Denver in 1989 Allen has taught the psychology of prejudice, law and psychology, and mediation and negotiation techniques. Her book reflects her background, combining as it does seven keys to ending prejudice with the means for mediation, or settling disputes.

No easy task, said Allen, who has mediated disputes in divorces as well as in the corporate world. She estimates 50 percent of disputes can be solved through mediation.

"Mediation requires that a person be able to listen to what the other person wants and express what they want. That's asking a lot."

And yet anyone who reads Allen's fantasy senses optimism.

According to Bev the cow: "I promise you that if you learn the keys and other matters simply at the level we have presented them ... you will have all the pieces you need to interact in a profoundly different way with others."

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