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My Goat—And How To Get It

I read a lot. It's one of the requirements of the job. You might also say it's one of the perks. I read a lot of industry news, and when I'm all done, I read for pleasure as well. (Yes, I wear great big glasses—I've ruined these eyes for both fun and profit.)

But if you're a great reader, you will inevitably discover one thing: People who write for a living are just like the rest of us, and every now and then they make a great big whopper of a mistake. At least, I think they are mistakes. Maybe they are just big fat lies.

Back to the mistakes. I remember reading a novel set in World War II-era England. An American character (in the Army, of course) gives an English character two puppies, named George and Gracie. They are named, the American says, for two people on a popular "television show" back home. Television? In World War II America? What was this author smoking?

I remember throwing another book (one of a very popular mystery series) across the room in disgust after reading about some bad guys who obtained some plutonium by having a crony "throw it over the fence from a nuclear power plant."

But popular fiction isn't the only place to find some whopping mistakes. I just read in an industry newsletter about Urbana-Champaign (Illinois), "the home of the first man-made reactor." (Actually, this mistake is easy to explain. It's that Eastern Establishment thing. Any place west of Pittsburgh, especially in Illinois, must be Chicago. Nothing else exists in Illinois, right?)

Newspapers are where you will find the most mistakes, however. It's pretty understandable. Reporters are generally young, underpaid, and on tough deadlines. So if they get half the story right, they are doing pretty well.

It's a little harder to explain why newspaper columnists make mistakes. Columnists are generally older, better paid, and supposedly have a little time to think about what they write. But that apparently doesn't make much difference.

Therefore, I'm having a little trouble understanding how a *New York Times* columnist (the column was reprinted in my local newspaper), discussing what he calls a "pattern of neglect on homeland security" after the Iraq war, could say: "Even nuclear waste dumps were left unguarded for weeks."

I don't even know where to begin with that one sentence, it contains so many untruths. Any layperson reading it will envision large ill-kempt landfills with leaking drums of nuclear waste lying about, and no one in sight. No security fences, no guards, no guard stations. Just waiting for terrorists to attack it or steal the waste. No wonder the public has a problem with this industry!

And don't get me started on the word "dump." Throughout the year, I get lots of e-mails from students asking about nuclear waste and nuclear waste dumps. The first thing I do, before I get to any of their questions, is educate them about the word dump. Sure, maybe what the industry did with its waste during the early days of the Manhattan Project, when there was a war to be won, could qualify as dumping. I've seen and read about the Hanford site, for example. But these days, the last thing you would call any nuclear waste operation, at whatever level, is a dump.

There is a point to all this whining. And that point is, we can do something about it! We can write letters to the editors of newspapers that print such material. Most of us don't get our news from the *New York Times*; we get it from smaller local papers that reprint the occasional syndicat-



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ed column from the larger syndicates and newspapers. And those local papers always like to receive thoughtful, well-reasoned letters. The *New York Times* may not print our letters, but the *Podunk Bugle* will, and that's what most people read.

I can't do much about television during World War II or plutonium tossed over a fence, but I *can* make sure that people in my community know that nuclear waste sites and spent fuel storage installations are not *dumps* and that these facilities are extremely secure. And so can you.—
Nancy J. Zacha, Editor