

What's in a Name

We all know what William Shakespeare had to say about a name in "Romeo and Juliet" -- that "a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet."

Maybe so for flowers, but not for characters.

How would Shakespeare's play have worked as "Howard and Brunhilda"? (*Editor's note: This article was written well before "Shakespeare in Love" came out, or I surely would have used Ethel as the example.*)

Lacks a certain resonance, doesn't it?

A character's name is the first clue we give the reader about this individual we want them to care about, to love, to hate -- but above all to follow. It is also perhaps the biggest clue.

A number of studies have shown that a paper submitted to a panel of teachers will generally fare better if the student's name on it is a currently more popular name than the same paper with an unpopular or old-fashioned name.

In other words, for the same work, Jason might get a B, while Adolph drops to a C-. A name colors perceptions of the person -- or character -- who carries it despite our best conscious intentions.

A writer can take advantage of that, to tell the readers things about a character without necessarily spelling them out in text. A pregnant friend maintains that naming her child-to-be is more difficult than my naming a character, because she doesn't know what kind of person her child will become. True, but that also gives the child an opportunity to mold the name to his/her personality and accomplishments, to go against our expectations. In the era of Merle Oberon and Errol Flynn, who would have believed that one of the top actresses now would have a name like Meryl Streep or that men named Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger could have been styled as romantic leads. An author can also play against types, but beware that it carries a risk.

Selecting a name for our characters, I maintain, is more difficult than naming a baby because we are trying to convey not only what the person can become, but what s/he is and has been.

That's a lot of weight for a few syllables to carry. Naming the primary characters is one of the more important elements of putting together a proposal for me.

I often start writing the story simply referring to the characters as "he" and "she."

I usually know what they look like, what they do for a living, their personality, their flaws and their strengths before I start the search for the right name to help convey all these elements of this individual. So, what specific considerations do I mix into naming characters?

Sound -- Most of the names I choose blend hard and soft sounds because the characters are not all one thing or another.

The hero of my Silhouette Special Edition *Rodeo Nights* was Walker Riley, with the hard "K" sound of his first name balancing the softer sound of the last name.

On the other hand, the hero in *Wedding Woman* was Nick Dusaq -- hard "K", "D" and "Q" because I wanted the reader to immediately know that this is NOT a man in any way in touch with his feminine side.

Length -- As a generalization (so naturally it has exceptions), a combination of one-syllable first and last names sounds generic, bland, unthreatening, possibly wholesome.

Think of Joe Blow, Jane Doe, even Tom Hanks. These I tend to save for minor characters.

Be aware of a name's rhythm, and where that places the emphasis.

In *Rodeo Nights*, heroine Kalli Evans' name has the emphasis, to my ear, on the initial syllable -- KALLi Evans.

If you had a character whose family name was vital to the story, you might want to aim for the emphasis there, with a softer first name -- say Anna ScarLOTti.

Balance -- A first name can overwhelm a last name, or vice versa: Bob Blessingfordshireson. By the time you get to the end of it, Bob's nearly forgotten.

You might want to do that for effect with a character, just be aware of the impact.

Also, try to balance the strength, sound and length of name with the other characters. Sue Lamb does not sound as if she'll stand up to Tarkington Dunkirk.

Associations -- Some associations are nearly universal, so you likely would be careful about using the first name Adolph or last names of Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin or combinations such as Benedict Arnold, Lizzie Borden.

I would also be wary of using timely political names such as Clinton, Hillary, Reagan, Bush or distinctive names closely identified with one person such as Oprah, Demi, Trump, Spielberg. However, if we try to steer clear of all the generic names in politics and entertainment, we could

quickly run out of possible names. So don't worry about using Bill or George or Kerry or Blair, as long as you don't pair it with the other half that makes it distinctive.

Of course names will have personal associations for individual readers -- their neighborhood bully was named Nigel and they can't get past that to see your sensitive hero. There is no way to avoid that.

But names also have personal associations for you, and this is one of the perks of writing.

Nobody can make you use a name you hate, nobody can stop you from using a name you love (except an editor, but they're offering you money).

Appropriateness to the story and/or character -- I have a friend named Michael Patrick Doyle who is primarily of Italian heritage. Unless that seeming discrepancy was vital to the story and/or the character, I would not use that name for an Italian character, because the reader's expectations get jangled each time s/he reads the name. Ask yourself if it's worth unsettling the reader.

I like using names that have geographic significance.

In *A Stranger in the Family*, a May 1995 Special Edition, the heroine's name is Cambria.

The name comes from a small mining community in Wyoming that was abruptly abandoned early in the 20th century. Besides liking the sound of the name, it's very appropriate for a woman who lives in Wyoming and whose mother deserted her as a child.

Meaning -- Some dictionaries list common English given names (though we might dispute what's common -- Milford? Grover?). There I discover that Robert means bright in flame and Amanda means worthy to be loved.

In *A Stranger in the Family*, I was searching for a name for Cambria's nurturing, calm step-mother when I came across Irene, which means peace. Perfect.

I never tell the reader in the book that's what the name means, but it adds another layer to the character for me, and perhaps for a few people out there who know what her name means.

Do I like it -- Hey, I'm going to be typing this name a lot in a 75,000 word manuscript, I don't want to be grimacing every time my fingers have to tap out Juniper Jonquil.

Where can you look for names?

Baby books -- Tried and true. Now, they also have computer programs of baby names.

Movie/TV show credits -- Be patient, watch the entire credits, because it's not the stars' names where you might find a gem, but among the supporting cast, the crew and staff.

Phone books -- If I know I want a certain sound to start a name (most often a last name, but not always), but am not sure what's to follow, I'll let my fingers do the walking.

Once, I went searching for a last name with a hard "G" sound and came up with Grainger -- Cully Grainger -- for a supporting character in *A Stranger in the Family*, who became a hero in his own right in *A Stranger to Love*.

Sports results in the newspaper -- Lots of names, lots of ethnic backgrounds, lots of sounds and combinations. (And, as opposed to the rest of the paper, you have at least a 50-50 chance the namesake isn't going to jail)

Another place to look is a local paper's listing of school awards, because kids' names most accurately reflect recent popularity in names.

Paint company color chips -- I haven't used any of these yet because the names are usually too flowery for my heroines (heroes, too!), but if that's the image you're going for there are all sorts of possibilities--and the chips are free.

Friends, family, acquaintances -- A sometimes overlooked resource, especially as a starting point for a name that you then twist, tweak or fine-tune to suit your character. I also find great satisfaction in naming villains/dolts/doofuses after real-life people who irk me. Not directly, of course -- just in case they had a spasm of good taste and bought one of my books -- but close enough that I know who spawned the name.

For instance, say a neighbor of yours with a mustache was a real pill, you might kill off a minor character named Bill Tache.

(It's a great way to vent animosity.)

Now for a few warnings:

Don't get too elaborate. -- Readers will not labor over long, difficult to pronounce names -- even in a graduate level literary course, we took to calling Dostoevsky's book "The Brothers K."

Minor characters can become main characters in sequels/spinoffs... and that neighbor you offhandedly named Mildred Mollingford Milquetoast is now your heroine.

So think the names through carefully. Don't get too cute.

A name that causes the reader to stop and admire the writer's

cleverness, a.) draws attention away from the story, and b.) makes the reader stop -- and even when it's to admire your cleverness, that doesn't benefit the writer.

Don't be repetitious. -- Yes, families will name their three boys Konrad, Kris and Karl, but it will only confuse your readers. Try to spread names out around the alphabet.

Also, avoid sound-alikes, for example Gerald and Jerard.

So, how does all this work? In *A Stranger in the Family*, I knew the hero's first name was Boone (for his North Carolina roots) and his last name was Smith (for plot reasons).

I wanted him to have a two-syllable middle name (for the rhythm) with a hard sound in it (because he has a lot of strengths). I didn't want to use a "c" or a "w" because the heroine's name is Cambria Weston.

I borrowed the name Dorsey from friends, and came up with Boone Dorsey Smith, sometimes known by the nickname Bodie (for another plot element).

Which brings up a final point, a name with some variables has the potential to show how those around your character view him/her. In my second book, *A New World*, the hero sees elements in the heroine that other people have missed.

One way he showed that was by refusing to call her Eleanor as most people did, or El as her closest friend did, but to search for a name that reflected what he saw in her, and to start calling her Noreen.

In Eugene Field's "Jest 'Fore Christmas" his narrator says "Father calls me William, sister calls me Will, Mother calls me Willie, but the fellows call me Bill." A name not only shows the character, it can show his/her relationships with others.

So think carefully about that combination of letters you assign to identify the individuals peopling your pages.