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ON CHARACTER NAMING

For a book lover there is nothing more fascinating than the way in which authors write their stories. How they combine people, places, events, and ideas to create a unique, fictional world, saying something significant about human existence that will help the reader better understand himself and the world he lives in.

Memorable characters. One of the hardest things an author has to do, apart from devising the plot, is finding the right names for his characters. Some authors think of the name first, and the name suggests their character's personality. Some authors can't even begin to write until their character has the exactly right name; others change their minds several times times during the writing of the first draft, as they make decisions about characters' actions and reactions. Some create elaborate family trees to the fourth generation; others seem to resent the necessity of naming and use the same names over and over in unrelated books. But all these authors have one thing in common: Characters have to be called *something*, memorable if posssible. As Sherrilyn Kenyon (b. 1965, a bestselling and award-winning US author of both fiction and nonfiction) says: "A memorable character name will not only define the book and shape the story, but it should invoke an instant image in the reader's mind" (Kenyon, 2005: 2).

Do we like Holden Caulfield's name only because *A Catcher in the Rye* deeply affected us, or because it was well chosen and contributed to the novel's effect? It has been argued that both Horace Benbow and Quentin Compson are shadows of William Faulkner himself, but these two very different-looking and different-sounding names have two quite different effects on the reader in the contexts of *Sanctuary* and *The Sound and the Fury*. Francis Scott Fitzgerald enjoyed, but with good reason, giving his characters names that were puns. In *Tender Is the Night,* Albert McKisco sounds like "gasoline or butter," Fitzgerald said; Tommy Barban, the barbarian; Campion, who was campy; and, of course, Dick Diver, who dived from high to a low place in life (Madden 1988: 112). In *Tess of the D'Urbervilles,* Tess was originally called Sue but Thomas Hardy finally decided that Tess had the right ring.

The name of Patrick White's hero in *The Tree of Man* is Stan Parker, which has important symbolic associations relevant to the book: Stan is the Old English word for stone, Parker has associations with land transformed into parkland, with the Garden of Eden. William Golding calls the hero of his book *Pincher Martin* Christopher, which means "Christ bearer" and this is both ironic, in view of Christopher's character, and an indication of his function as Everyman/Prometheus; his naval nickname is also interesting in that it illustrates Christopher's character as a stealer – he takes what belongs to others, particularly from his friend Nathaniel ("gift of God") (Maybury, 1979: 105).

The names of some of Shakespeare's characters can also provide clues as to what they are like. In *Twelfth Night*, Sir Tony Belch suggests an earthly, crude character; Feste, someone festive and quick-witted (from the Latin *festinare*); Sir Andrew Aguecheek sounds like a sickly faced person; Malvolio hints at "evil wishing" (from the Latin *male volente*); in *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio suggests someone who is well-intentioned, while Mercutio suggests a mercurial temperament, or Mercury messenger of the gods, a trickster renowned for eloquence, luck and magic, and a bringer of dreams. In *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*,

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Shakespeare's audience would probably recognize the significance of the names of the two gentlemen. Proteus, the false character is a "shapeshifter," named after the deceitful Greek sea god who could change shape. Valentine, the true, innocent lover, bears the name of St. Valentine, the patron saint of lovers, whose name symbolizes the ideal lover. In Othello, Iago reminds one of St. Iago de Compostella, known as "El Matamoro" (the Moor killer) (Gibson, 1999: 127). Even in Shakespeare's historical plays some characters are defined by their names, for example, Pistol, Doll Tearsheet, Shallow and Silence, Bullcalf and Feeble in *King Henry Part 2*.

Eponymous characters. Another sign of the way in which a character dominates attention in a story is the frequency of eponymous heroes and heroines. Featuring the protagonist in the title of a narrative has a long pedigree. It goes back to the Greek tragedies (*Oedipus the King, Agamemnon, Medea*), to the beginnings of the novel in the seventeenth century with works like Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko, or the Royal Slave* (1678) (Abbott, 2002: 125), continues through the eighteenth century with novels like *Robinson Crusoe, Pamela, Tom Jones, Humphrey Clinker, Tristram Shandy, Rameau's Nephew, The Sorrows of Young Werther*, and on through the nineteenth century with *Emma, David Copperfield, Jane Eyre, Adam Bede, Daniel Deronda, Cousin Bette, Old Goriot, Madame Bovary, Thérèse Raquin, Anna Karenina*. Eponymous heroes are less common in Asian narrative traditions, but the great Japanese classic of the twelfth century is *The Tale of Genji*. In medieval China an oft-retold oral tale was the seventh-century *Story of Mulian*.

Major guidelines. Of course, each author has his own naming technique (there is no such thing as a definite pattern) but, interestingly enough, quite a few of them, when they have acquired a certain amount of fame, feel the need to share their experience with the newcomers, young people who try their hand at writing fiction. Kenyon, for example, suggests ten major guidelines (Kenyon, 2005: 3-7) that transcend genre.

1. Capturing the persona, that is capturing the character's personality, which is the first link that the reader will have to the story. In Alexandre Dumas' *The Three Musketeers*, Lady de Winter is the cold and calculating villainess. Undoubtedly, the author could not have found a better name for her.
2. Choosing a name in keeping with the character's heritage and personality and/or trade. In Sara Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski series (1982-2009), the female character V.I. is sensitive about her name, which is a formal sounding of Victoria. She refers to herself mostly as Vic, which fits her tough private investigator reputation. Her last name points to her father's Polish heritage. A few members of her family and friends sometimes call her Vickie, but, struggling hard for respectability, she is extremely selective about who should use that name with her.
3. Making the name harmonious, that is varying the syllables between first and last names. Jonathan Wright has a much more attractive ring to it than John Wright. However, even non-varied names such a Ian Fleming's James Bond can work effectively, although in this case the charismatic secret agent usually introduces himself as "Bond. James Bond," which, besides having its own unique harmony, conveys the character's trademark arrogance.
4. Keeping the character's name consistent with his time period. Readers will be thrown off if they find a Sherri or Brandy in a tenth-century Viking novel set in Scandinavia, unless it is a time travel and they are from the modern era.
5. Keeping the character's social status in mind. Until recently, it was virtually unheard of to find European nobility named "common" names such as Sarah, Molly, Emma, etc. They

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relied on the traditional names such as Elizabeth, Victoria, Anne, that were recycled through their families.

6. Using nicknames. If an author has a character that historically or culturally has to have a horrifically bad name, he should use a nickname for him. One of the best examples is Stephanie Laurens, who uses nicknames to add an additional layer to her characters. In her best-selling Cynster series (2001-2009), all the men have traditional English noble names such as Rupert, Sylvester, Harry, etc., which are not at all romantic. To stay historically accurate and yet give her characters names that would be evocative and sexy, she nicknamed every one of them: Scandal, Devil, Demon, etc.

7. Varying the names of the characters. An author should not get stuck on a letter or a rhythm. If he uses names that sound or look alike, readers will get confused.

8. Keeping in mind the genre. If the author is writing a Western and he has a hero named Giles de Givrey, it will most likely not ring true to the readers.

9. Explaining the name if it breaks the rules. In the case of Giles de Givrey, he might be the child of French immigrants who came out west to start a new life and were then murdered by the bad guy.

10. Avoiding the names others have made famous.

Lawrence Block (b. 1938, an acclaimed American crime author), while admitting that the success or failure of a piece of fiction rarely depends on the names of the characters, does stress the fact that character names influence an editor's buying or rejecting the story. Here are his own major guidelines (Block, 2005: 146-159):

1. Avoiding confusion. Although duplication occurs in real life, authors should not people the same chapter or a crowd scene with Carl and Cal and Carol and Carolyn, or Smathers and Smithers and Dithers and Mather.

2. Avoiding the names of prominent people.

3. Picking interesting names. Lenghtly last names rather than short ones, and uncommon names rather than common ones would do the trick. Or using surnames as first names, since a substantial number of first names started out as surnames. But if too many of the character names in a story are too interesting, plausibility is certainly sacrificed. Of course, if the story is meant to be humorous, then the characters' names can be as outlandish as the author can make them.

4. Avoiding twisting the reader's tongue. The reader should be able to pronounce everything he reads. He may not say it out loud but he will certainly be hearing it in his head, and it can throw him off-stride if he is unsure how it should sound. This does not mean names have to be of the sort that every reader will pronounce identically. What is important is that the reader can assume he knows how to pronounce them.

5. Researching the ethnic names. If one of the characters is a Latvian or a Turk, it is easy to add an authentic note by picking a suitable name for him. A good encyclopedia comes in handy.

Character naming in science fiction and fantasy. If the author uses known-world settings, Brian Stableford (b. 1948, a British science fiction and critic) recommends that he should use slightly unusual names. The more exotic his characters are, the more exotic their names should be, although it is sometimes possible for him to "run a double bluff by giving bizarre alien creatures bathetically familiar names" (Stableford, 1997: 125). Standard techniques for framing sets of alien names include the liberal use of apostrophes and the consistent use of unusual consonant formations.

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One particularly useful resource for names is mythology. Many fantasies are directly based in ancient mythology which can be thoroughly researched, producing a ready-made set of exotic names. J.R.R. Tolkien's interest in Old English, for example, helped him give immense narrative authority to the hypothetical languages of Middle-Earth. A further advantage of this strategy is that names borrowed from mythology are already packed full of useful symbolic implication.

When an author creates an entirely new world, his characters' names may have no direct reference to Earth or civilizations, as in the case with Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's Death Gate Cycle series (1990-1995). The elves, for example, have lyrical names such as Agah'ran and Rees'ahn. The dwarves' names, Limbeck and Jarre, summon images of solidity and strength. One of the evil magicians, Sinistrad, has a name that instantly evokes malevolence. The main antagonist in the series is a magician named Xar, giving images of darkness and maliciousness. The four worlds they use are Arianus (air), Pryan (fire), Abarrach (stone), and Chelestra (water). While reading the names of these worlds, the reader gets a sense of what they are comprised of.

Character naming in horror. Horror, much like in science fiction and fantasy, is a genre where one can let his mind run wild. In *The Gunslinger*, the first book of his epic Dark Tower series (1982-2004), Stephen King names his lead character Roland of Gilead, based on a poem, *Childe Roland*, by Robert Browning. The name gives the character historical complexity as well as meaning for the reader. Another character in the Dark Tower series shows us the differing personalities that names portray. Odetta Holmes is a woman with a dual personality, one that she is unaware of. Odetta is rich, polite, and formal, just as her name suggests. Her alter ego, Detta Walker, is a tough, mean, street-smart killer. When King meshes these two personalities into one and forces them to take on each other's attributes, the result is Susannah Dean, formal and kind as well as tough and street-smart.

One thing that King has brought through several of his works from *The Stand* (1978) to *The Eyes of the Dragon* (1987) to the Dark Tower series is the consistent use of the same letters (R.F.) as the resident evil. In *The Stand* it was Randall Flagg; in *The Eyes of the Dragon,* again, it was Randall Flagg; and in the Dark Tower series it was Richard Fannin. The constant use does not only intrigue the reader, but the implication instantly frightens, which, certainly, is King's ultimate goal.

Character naming in romance. No hard, fast rules exist for naming a romance character. In contemporary romance, the author can take many liberties since the names do not need to be historically accurate. In Suzanne Brockmann's *The Unsung Hero* (2000), Navy SEAL Lieutenant Tom Paoletti's name instantly brings to mind strength and dependability. When first introduced to the heroine, Dr. Kelly Ashton, the reader will picture a vibrant, spunky woman who is also intelligent and proud of it.

With historical romance, readers do like to see traditional names of that time period. Johanna Lindsey keeps her readers and characters rooted in the tumultuous Regency period with her Malory series (1985-2010). It is not just a matter of utilizing names that the reader will believe were common in the early nineteenth century, it also means having the correct use of titles as well as the names of residences, which reflected the owner.

One of the characters in the Malory series, Anthony, is a rather handsome rake. Society knows him as Lord Anthony, a name tied to power, status, and fear. Yet, his family calls him Tony, and the reader instantly knows that the persona Tony portrays to society is nothing like the real man, who is a jokester and charmer. Another character is Regina Ashton, niece to the Malorys. Most people call her Regina, invoking the image of refined beauty and

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elegance, of which she is. However, one of her uncles calls her Reggie, instantly making the reader picture an imp of a girl getting into all sorts of trouble without thought to consequences. Yet another uncle calls her Reagan, and we get an additional picture of the character, this one of a strong-willed and levelheaded woman. And as we read through the story we find that Regina is indeed all those things and more. Lindsey captures the heroine in each of the names.

Character naming in thrillers. In the case of the protagonists, the trend seems to be for short average names such as Tom Clancy's Jack Ryan (from *The Hunt for Red October*, 1984, to the *Teeth of the Tiger*, 2003) or J.D. Robb's Eve Dallas (In Death series, 1995-2009). Again, strong names are the norm. Readers seem to expect something catchy and smart.

Character naming in war fiction. Military writers are careful to assign their characters names that are also geographically and culturally correct. In the case of W.E.B. Griffin's Corps series (1986-2004), the names are specific to the World War II time period. Griffin uses names that were common in high society at the time, as most of his characters were not only successful military men but also wealthy and prominent in society.

Character naming in teen fiction. The first teen books that usually come to mind are the Harry Potter series (1997-2007). With her spellbinding books, J.K. Rowling has immortalized the name Harry — a boy who starts out average but then turns out to be special. Teens want to read about people their own age. Meg Cabot has also captured teens and young girls across the US with her Princess Diaries series (2000-2009) and heroine Mia Thermopolis.

Character naming in westerns. One of the premiere writers of westerns, Louis L'Amour defined the genre with his unforgettable pioneer family, the Sacketts. The Old West was filled with such hard names as Wyatt Earp, Billy the Kid, and Doc Hollida - and readers of western fiction have come to expect their characters to have names along those lines.

Character naming in mysteries. Agatha Christie captured the genre with her Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot. Hercule is a French form of Hercules, and to read that name invokes an image of a man with more strength and integrity than a normal person has. It was the perfect fit for the brilliant sleuth. Another example is Elizabeth Peters and her Amelia Peabody series (1975-2006). The name Amelia certainly suits the brainiac Egyptologist as no other name could. Sherlock Holmes and his famous sidekick Dr. Watson and nemesis Moriarty are three characters created by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The mere mention of these characters' names invokes the image of high intellect, tenacity, perseverance, and extreme cleverness.

Character naming in erotica. The erotica genre has no rules. Some readers prefer the more common names, such as Brandon and Cindy, giving rise to the idea that average, everyday people can experience erotic adventures. Others like names that have great sex appeal, like Delilah or Eve, and Slade or Tristan, which give the reader an immediate sense of sensuality and sexual prowess.

Character naming in paranormal fiction. Paranormal is a genre that can take a reader from modern day Houston, Texas, to Renaissance England in the space of a few pages. It allows the author many degrees of leniency as far as names go; however, it brings its own special restrictions. Rules of both contemporary and historical fiction apply. Since paranormal can encompass any and all genres, from western to horror to romance to erotica, the rules of the specific genres accessed should be observed.

Conclusion. What names to use is a decision an author has to make every time he sits down to write a piece of fiction. The minute he chooses a name, he brings to the character a load of ethnic, national, even racial baggage. As Nancy Kress says, "There is power in

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names" (Kress, 1998: 23). Besides their effect on the characters themselves, the names of the characters are also the label the reader uses to help keep the characters straight. That is why it is always helpful to give characters memorable – and very different – names. After all, "a name is part of who a person is. It's the label that stands for everything you've done and everything you are" (Card, 1988: 41).

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RÉSUMÉ

COMMENT L'ECRIVAIN CHOSIT-IL LE NOMS DE SES PERSONNAGES ?

Pour ceux qui aiment lire, il n'y a rien de plus fascinant que la manière dont les écrivains conçoivent leurs histoires, combinent les personnages, les lieux, les aventures et les idées pour faire surgir un monde inouï, plein de sens pour l'existence humaine, qui aide le lecteur à se comprendre mieux et à mieux comprendre le monde où il vit. Pour un écrivain, l'une des options les plus difficiles est le choix des noms des personnages. Au moment où ils choisissent un nom, celui-ci se charge de significations ethniques, nationales, parfois même raciales. A part leur effet sur les personnages, les noms, s'ils sont bien choisis, mémorables, aident le lecteur à poursuivre l'action sans difficulté. Certes, il n'y a pas de formule unique, chaque écrivain a sa technique de baptiser les personnages, mais ceux qui jouissent d'un certain prestige éprouvent le besoin de partager leur expérience aux jeunes qui tentent de se forger une carrière littéraire, surtout dans la littérature commerciale.

Mots clés *: personnage, nom, éponyme, science-fiction, littérature fantastique.*

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