A Rose By Any Other Name

Pros and Cons of Pseudonyms

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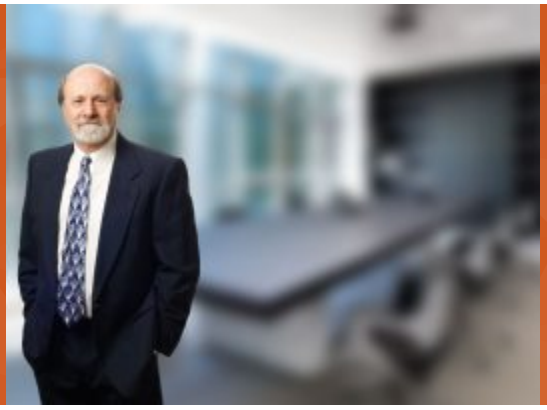

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Theodor Geisel had three. Lawrence Block had six. At last count Dean Koontz had eleven.

Then again, Samuel Clemens had only one, but it's among the most famous.

We're not talking about spouses, sports cars or prize-winning spaniels. We're talking about pseudonyms or, as they're popularly called, "pen names" — not nicknames or abbreviations, but phony by-lines.

Why do authors sometimes use assumed names? Are there advantages to adopting one? Disadvantages? And how do you get one?

This article will offer some answers. (As for answers to who is really whom, check out www.trussel.com/books/pseudo.htm, which cross-lists thousands of authors and their pen names.)

Why Writers Use Pen Names

As you'd suppose, authors use pen names to disguise who they are. Why would you want to do that? There are several reasons:

Mask Gender

In 1968 a new star burst upon the science fiction scene. James Tiptree Jr.'s stories were literate, brilliant, thought-provoking … but no one knew who he was or how he got to be so damned good.

Speculation abounded. Introducing a collection of Tiptree's fiction, science fiction superstar Robert Silverberg praised Tiptree's writing and argued that one thing was clear from his distinctive voice: Tiptree was surely a man.

Actually, as became known soon after, Tiptree was a former CIA intelligence agent and doctor of experimental psychology named … Alice Sheldon. No stranger to disguise, Sheldon had decided to hide her gender within the male-dominated field of science fiction (as had C.L. Moore and Andre Norton before her.) Thus, one reason authors use pen names is to conceal the fact that they're writing in the "wrong" gender for their field. Authors sometimes use pen names to hide other personal traits, such as their age (sometimes you're "too young" for the air of authority you need to adopt; sometimes you're "too old" for the readers you're targeting).

Shift Genres

Historically, authors succeeding in one genre wouldn't risk their reputations, or disappoint readers, by publishing in different genres. Evan Hunter (born Salvatore Lombino) was "Evan

Hunter" when he wrote more serious works, such as *The Blackboard Jungle*, and "Ed McBain" when he wrote police procedurals, including his 87th Precinct series.

As the emphasis shifts from books/literature to authors/celebrities, however, this may be changing. In 2001 James Patterson, known for his Alex Cross mysteries, published *Suzanne's Diary for Nicholas*, a romance, and John Grisham, revered for legal suspense, published the coming-of-age novel *A Painted House*… both in their own names.

Disguise Prolificity

Not every writer is a James Michener or Joseph Heller, taking years to produce each novel. Some writers dash them off relatively quickly. Rather than risk having readers assume they're just hacks grinding out uninspired formulaic works, it's often smarter to use multiple names.

Unify Identity

Sometimes people decide to use one name to produce a series that will have two or more authors. Ellery Queen was actually cousins Frederic Dannay and Manfred Lee. The Stratemeyer Syndicate invented many authors, including the Hardy Boys' "Franklin W. Dixon" and Nancy Drew's "Carolyn Keene," each of whom was each really a group of writers. (Five decades after the Hardy Boys books appeared, Leslie McFarland revealed himself as the first Franklin W. Dixon. Mildred Wirt Benson, a young journalist, was the original ghostwriter for the Nancy Drew mystery novels.)

Hide Moonlighting

Most writers have day jobs; if they published under their real names their bosses might assume they're not working hard enough and fix the problem. And sometimes a person just doesn't want his good name or reputation tarnished by the opinionated or risqué works he's writing.

In 1969, the Edgar Award for best mystery novel was won by Jeffrey Hudson … a Harvard Medical School intern whose real name was Michael Crichton. Two decades earlier, a young writer and Ph.D. candidate defended his chemistry dissertation worried he might be rejected because of a humorous essay published under his real name, despite asking his publisher to use a pseudonym. Fortunately, he was too talented — as both writer and scientist — to be turned down, and so he became "Doctor" Isaac Asimov.

Establish Credibility

Some names lend weight and authority to a writer, while other names distract or detract. My wife went to grade school with a boy named Mortimer Mortimer. That may be a great name for a humor writer, but how would it sound affixed to a guide to picking up women?

How To Do It

Suppose you decide you need a pen name. How should you go about adopting one?

- Find a name that's available. Check white pages, Internet search engines and U.S. Copyright Office records to avoid choosing the name of a real person, particularly another writer.
- Decide how critical it is to keep your true identity a secret: It is harder to keep your publisher from knowing who you really are, and to block readers from discovering your true identity, than to simply have your work appear under an alias.
- States often require persons doing business under assumed names to register with their municipality (though few I've spoken with seem interested in having writers do so). Whether this applies to you depends on the extent of your use and where you live, so consult your lawyer, or city or town clerk.
- Decide how to handle copyright matters. Copyright Office rules allow you to register copyrights under a pen name, with or without disclosing your real name. What you do here

affects your copyright term, however: Copyrights ordinarily last for the author's life plus 70 years; but for works published anonymously or pseudonymously, the term is the shorter of 95 years from publication or 120 years from creation. So publishing a work pseudonymously typically extends your copyright if you die in less than 25 years and shortens your copyright if you live more than 25 years. Fortunately, you can fix the latter by recording your true identity with the Copyright Office. For more details, see Copyright Office factsheet FL101, available on the Copyright Office website, www.copyright.gov.

In short, there are often good reasons for adopting a pen name. If they apply to you — or you're just feeling mysterious — be sure you: Choose a name that won't get you in trouble; comply with legal requirements; arrange for payment through your publisher, agent or bank; keep detailed records of your true name and pen name literary assets; and act wisely to assure the longest protection for your copyrights.

Why Not a Pen Name?

My article offers reasons for using pen names. Unfortunately, some writers adopt them for the wrong reasons. If your motivation for using a pen name is any of the following, think again.

Distancing Defamation

Some writers wrongly believe that if they lambaste their enemies under a pseudonym, they can avoid being sued for libel or slander. Though using a pen name may make it harder for plaintiffs to find you, or prove that you (pen person) are you (real person), if they're persistent they'll get you.

Concealing Contract Breaches

Most book publishing agreements require authors to give the publisher a first look at their next book and not to publish anything competitive. Will a pen name avoid these restrictions? Generally, no. (However, publishers sometimes waive certain restrictions for works published under a pseudonym; don't be afraid to ask.)

Exploiting Another's Identity

Wouldn't it be clever to jumpstart your writing career by attaching the name "Stephen King" to your werewolf novel? Again, no. *Don't* try passing yourself off as another (real) person. Such "identity theft" may get you sued. It may also cause confusion, anger publishers and prevent you from gaining your own loyal readership.

(Over)extending your copyrights

In a celebrated 1883 case, Samuel Clemens sued the publisher of a new collection of his uncopyrighted sketches. Clemens claimed the publisher was exploiting his valuable Mark Twain "trade name" without permission. The court rightly noted that a victory for Clemens would effectively grant copyright protection under a trademark theory and confirmed that if someone is entitled to publish your work, they can use your name – real or pen – in doing so.

Trimming Your Taxes

Most dangerous of all would be to use a pen name to lower your taxable income: "If the next $1000 is paid to "Will Shakespeare," thinks the playwright, "it needn't appear on Edward de Vere's Schedule C." That, ladies and gentlemen, is tax fraud. Avoid it.

Even if your reasons for using a pen name are sound, there are still potential drawbacks, including:

1. Processing your advances and royalties gets complicated: you'll need a trusted agent or cooperative bank.
2. Pseudonyms can complicate the sale of reprint and subsidiary rights, as well as the administration of your estate — collecting your literary assets and transferring title to

your heirs — after you die.

3. Since today so much promotion is personal, consider the effect of a pen name on your ability to market your book: How will you attend readings or signings, or appear on *Oprah*, if you don't want the world to learn who you are?
4. A major reason for writing is to see your name in print. *Your* name in print. Do you want to endure the frustrations of a Clark Kent or Peter Parker, unable to tell your friends that that superhero writer is YOU, or unable to convince them it IS you after you confess?
5. As the article explains, failure to register your pen name with the Copyright Office could shorten you copyright protection.

In short, though it can be fun to use a pen name, and often a smart thing to do, be sure your reasons are sound and offset any drawbacks.

If you would like to discuss the issues of using a pseudonym, please feel free to contact **Howard G. Zaharoff**.