

Read the “Pen Names in Literature” passage set.

Pen Names in Literature

Source 1: What’s in a Name?

by E. Bennet

- 1 Names are useful. Sometimes they’re even more useful when they’re fake—especially if you’re a writer. Pen names, aliases, or pseudonyms—as they’re variously called—allow authors freedom, flexibility, and opportunity. Eric Blair, author of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, adopted the name George Orwell because he feared his early work would embarrass his family. C. S. Lewis, concerned about his status as a professor at Oxford, used the name Clive Hamilton to publish a collection of poems. Charles Dodgson, a noted mathematician, used the name Lewis Carroll to write fantasy works such as *Alice in Wonderland*.
- 2 For many writers, turning to a pen name is the only way to get published. When a local newspaper refused him publication, sixteen-year-old Benjamin Franklin started writing letters to the editor under the persona of the middle-aged widow Silence Dogood. Likewise, many female authors have had to conceal their gender in order to overcome discrimination and get publishers to take them seriously. The Brontë sisters (Charlotte, Emily, and Anne) wrote poetry and novels under male pseudonyms. Charlotte wrote under the name of Currer Bell, while Emily and Anne used the names Ellis and Acton Bell.
- 3 Even today some authors adopt a pen name in order to stem biases and preconceived notions. Perhaps the best-known example of this is J. K. Rowling. Rowling’s publishers feared that young boys—the presumed audience of the *Harry Potter* series—wouldn’t take the book seriously if they knew it was written by a woman. So Joanne Rowling became J. K. Rowling. In hindsight, though, the change was hardly necessary. Rowling’s books enjoyed unprecedented success, gaining millions of fans among boys and girls of all ages, and adults as well.
- 4 In fact, Rowling became so famous that she later turned to another pen name, Robert Galbraith, in order to write detective novels. For Rowling, a new pen name meant a fresh start and a chance to explore a new genre without the pressure of her Harry Potter fame. When

asked why she chose a new pen name, Rowling responded, "I was yearning to go back to the beginning of a writing career in this new genre, to work without hype or expectation and to receive totally unvarnished feedback. It was a fantastic experience and I only wish it could have gone on a little longer than it did."

- 5 Susan Eloise Hinton, who is famous for young-adult novels, is another author who adapted her name. S. E. Hinton's first book, *The Outsiders*, includes a male narrator. As with J. K. Rowling, Hinton's publisher thought it would be a good idea to use a pen name; if readers associated the narrator of the story with a male author, it would make the story seem more believable. Hinton herself appreciates having the alter ego of a teenage boy. She believes that it helps her separate her writer self from her true self, and it creates a persona as rich as a character in her novels.

"What's in a Name?" by E. Bennet. Written for educational purposes.

Source 2: Introducing Jane Eyre: An Unlikely Victorian Heroine

by National Endowment for the Humanities

- 6 When Charlotte Brontë set out to write the novel *Jane Eyre*, she was determined to create a main character who challenged the notion of the ideal Victorian woman, or as Brontë was once quoted: "a heroine as plain and as small as myself (Gaskell, Chapter XV)." Brontë's determination to portray a plain yet passionate young woman who defied the stereotype of the docile and domestic Victorian feminine ideal most likely developed from her own dissatisfaction with domestic duties and a Victorian culture that discouraged women from having literary aspirations. There were many expectations and limitations placed on Victorian women. Considering Brontë's position and her desire for literary achievement given that context, we are able to see why she felt compelled to write *Jane Eyre* and to publish it under a male pen name, Currer Bell.
- 7 During an era in which etiquette guides circulated freely, empire waists¹ gave way to tiny-waisted corsets, and tea parties grew in

¹empire waists: a style of dress fitting just below the bust, leaving the waist and hips undefined, that became fashionable in the early 19th century.

popularity, it might seem unlikely that realistic novels would set the Victorian literary trend. Perhaps the socially conscious novel may have been a result of the belief of the rising middle class of Victorian England in the possibility for change, since they had witnessed such economic changes in their lifetimes. Works such as Charles Dickens' *Hard Times*, George Eliot's [another woman using a male pen name] *Middlemarch* and Charlotte Brontë's own sister Emily's *Wuthering Heights* [published under Ellis Bell instead of Emily Brontë] featured female characters that represented trapped and repressed Victorian women marrying for the wrong reasons, disillusioned with family life, and relying on their physical beauty as a means to gain attention and advancement.

- 8 And then, along came the character Jane Eyre: physically uninteresting yet passionate and intense in her desire to express her emotions and thoughts. It is no wonder that Currer Bell's novel was considered groundbreaking and bold. Jane is a heroine battling the same societal limitations as her literary counterparts, but her raw narrative voice never fails to expose her Romantic sensibilities, psychological depth, and her adamant desire to stay true to herself.

Adapted from "Introducing Jane Eyre: An Unlikely Victorian Heroine," by National Endowment for the Humanities. In the public domain.

Source 3: Letter from Robert Southey to Charlotte Brontë

In December of 1836, Charlotte Brontë sent a letter with some of her poetry to the Poet Laureate of England, Robert Southey, asking his opinion of her work. The following letter is his reply.

Keswick, March, 1837.

Madam,

- 9 It is not my advice that you have asked as to the direction of your talents, but my opinion of them; and yet the opinion may be worth little, and the advice much. You evidently possess, and in no inconsiderable degree, what Wordsworth calls "the faculty of verse." I am not depreciating it when I say that in these times it is not rare. Many volumes of poems are now published every year without attracting public attention, any one of which, if it had appeared half a century ago, would have obtained a high reputation for its author.

Whoever, therefore, is ambitious of distinction in this way, ought to be prepared for disappointment.

- 10 But it is not with a view to distinction that you should cultivate this talent, if you consult your own happiness. . . . The day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind; and in proportion as all the ordinary uses of the world seem to you flat and unprofitable, you will be unfitted for them without becoming fitted for anything else. Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and, when you are, you will be less eager for celebrity. You will not seek in imagination for excitement, of which the vicissitudes of this life, and the anxieties from which you must not hope to be exempted, be your state what it may, will bring with them but too much.

. . . .

Your true friend, Robert Southey.

Excerpt from "Letter from Robert Southey to Charlotte Brontë." In the public domain.

Source 4: Who is Richard Bachman?

by J. L. Campbell

- 11 Stephen King is one of the most prolific and widely known American authors, with 54 novels and more than 200 short stories to his name. Well, sort of.
- 12 Stephen King has also written using the pen name Richard Bachman; the Bachman name has been with King for almost the duration of his career. Initially, King wanted to write using the Bachman pseudonym so that he would be able to publish more books. When King started writing, it was common practice for publishers to release only one book per year. Writing as both King and Bachman, he could produce twice as much work.
- 13 King also embraced the Bachman pseudonym because it allowed him to analyze his own success in his writing career: was he successful because of his talent or successful because of luck? Although King claims that he still does not have an answer to that question, perhaps book sales speak for themselves. *Thinner*, a book released under Richard Bachman's name, sold about 28,000 copies. When it was later

released as a Stephen King book, it sold more than ten times the Bachman version.

- 14 King chose his pseudonym very carefully, even though he was pressed by his publisher to quickly come up with a name. He thought about calling himself Gus Pillsbury, as a tribute to his maternal grandfather with that name. Ultimately, though, he settled on a combination. Richard Stark, a pseudonym used by the crime writer Donald E. Westlake, was the inspiration for the first half of his nom de plume. Bachman, the second half of King’s pen name, came from the music he was listening to at the time, by a band called Bachman-Turner Overdrive.
- 15 In an effort to establish Richard Bachman as an author in his own right, King created a detailed backstory about Bachman that included a fictional wife, a former position with the Coast Guard, and the operation of a dairy farm in New Hampshire. Bachman’s true identity was revealed in 1985; a Washington, D.C., bookstore owner noticed that the writing styles of the two authors seemed similar. He used his detective skills to look at publishing records kept at the Library of Congress. Even though King was exposed as the real Richard Bachman, it did not stop him from continuing to write using the Bachman pseudonym, though his success as Stephen King meant that—by that time—publishers would likely allow him to publish more than one book per year, without needing a pseudonym at all. As King’s and Bachman’s writing careers continued to evolve, Bachman’s role as King’s alter ego has also evolved. King has referenced Bachman in his own stories, as well as Bachman’s fictional wife, to create a fan base invested in the author’s work, regardless of whether the work has “Richard Bachman” or “Stephen King” on the spine.

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Writing Prompt

Your town's public library is hosting an exhibit on pen names throughout history. You have been asked to write an informational article for the exhibit's display explaining why some authors choose to use pen names. Your essay should be based on the ideas and concepts found in the "Pen Names in Literature" passage set.

Manage your time carefully so that you can

- read the passages;
- plan your response;
- write your response; and
- revise and edit your response.

Be sure to

- use evidence from multiple sources; and
- avoid overly relying on one source.

Your response should be in the form of a multiparagraph essay. Write your response in the space provided.