

Character Names: What is ACTUALLY in a name?

by Chazda Albright -

<http://greatstorybook.com/what-is-actually-in-a-name/>

This entry is part 3 of 15 in the series [Devil in the Details](#)

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You might think that names are just names. A rose by any other name would smell as sweet – that type of thing. It’s my experience that in life, this is not really the case. In a story, it should never be the case. Romeo and Juliet learn this the hard way.

A writer, in some sense, has a greater responsibility for [naming their characters](#) than a parent their child. The reason for this is because a child will either accept or reject a name and the world will respond to that in real life. A character will react however the writer chooses, and the writer will also determine how the rest of the world (in the book) responds to the character’s name. The way the characters respond dictates how we readers will take or reject a name, so when writing instructors say that you should choose your characters’ names with care, they really do mean it.

There are many things one should consider in naming characters, [not the least of which is genre](#). But is it

possible to choose a name for your character so that it might actually cause tension – perhaps even another dimension to story plot – just because of their name?

The short answer: YES, absolutely.

Personal History & Relativity

My last name is Albright, a name that several generations ago my ancestors from Germany altered from Albrecht. Albrecht is a name that is sort of peculiar because no one seems to know exactly where it hails (some report Germany, others Austria), or what it really means anymore. All name experts agree that the name is quite old, as old as the 7th Century. It is possible that it means something as lofty as “noble, bright and famous.” There was a Duke Albrecht von Albrechtberg. I’ve also been told that Albrecht is the name of an occupation, one that no longer exists. As it starts with “alb” I imagine it might have something to do with color removal or whitening of some sort (as in albino). Something we no longer need to do.

The eraser. The bleacher of – something. Could be. Duke von Deletion even sounds like a name, perfect for a character in a book. (I cannot be the only one who likes to play with names like this! Can I?)

Mixed Pronunciations, Cultures

A friend of mine is a native German and her name is Stein. However, it isn’t the German version, it’s the American version – because she married an American. Now she is living in Germany, but with an American variant of a German name. She is Ms. Stein, not Ms. Shtine – if an English-speaker were to write it phonetically.

Our world is getting smaller, but it’s still big enough for name quirkiness. It’s no longer so strange a thing to meet a Jennifer Chang or a Leonardo Smythe, and it isn’t so unusual to find these names no matter where in the world you might be. People travel a lot now, and not just for holiday. What happens to names is a mix of history and context.

Names to Genres

A road trip type of story or a fish-out-of-water story (often overlapping genres) comes from experiential and cultural difference. It’s worth thinking about this kind of thing in terms of developing story through character. This is how we can build a sense of depth. How does the meaning of a name change when you take it across a border?

How we name our characters can underscore cultural differences and cultural connections. I will always think of myself as an American living abroad, and yet my heritage is such that one could say that I am reconnecting with my family roots (or at least some of them – as I am a typical American mutt).

Because many [publishing houses](#) specialize in specific cultures or regions, it’s pragmatic to consider (for

example) how an Inuit might feel in a place like Texas, or how they might feel in Italy. How would the experience be different and how similar?

Real Case Scenario: Wanker vs. Piscec (and other toilet humor)

Acquaintances of mine (actual real and living), Ms. Wanker and Mr. Piscec, are a couple. They had traveled around before, and discovered that Piscec (sounds like piss-check) is a funny name. So when deciding to visit London, they decided to book their hotel and travel tickets under Wanker (sounds like Vahnk-air). You can probably guess what happened when they hit England. “Papers please?” became the precursor to hilarious guffaws and tears of mad joy. [Wanker](#) is considerably worse than Piscec, especially in England, but neither of them knew that at the time. In such a situation, you can do your best to explain how your name should actually be pronounced, but good luck with that. People are people.

Consider these NINE name-oriented questions that can fuel story problems:

1. What if a character travels to a highly superstitious region and their name is somehow unlucky?
2. How do people respond to the name?
3. Does it sound strange to other people? In what way?
4. Can people pronounce the name at all?
5. Does the name sound like another word in the other language? Is this a good or bad thing?
6. What if a character is very serious or needs to be taken seriously but their name is hilarious?
7. What if a character’s name originates from the country they’re visiting but it has changed to better fit a different language and culture? (As is the case for my friend Ms. Stein.)
8. What if your character has a name that matches that of a person who is famous in another country? An old friend of mine from Africa carries the name [Jonathan Frakes](#). You can well imagine how Trekkers in America react to hearing that!
9. What if the character’s parents intentionally named their child (or children) after a figure of history? In many cases, the hero of one culture is the enemy of another.

Names and Other Words

Think about your own experiences abroad, or perhaps those social interactions around the neighborhood. I imagine you can think of several situations where a name became something much more than just a name – for one reason or another.

Words are so important. As writers, we recognize this. Names are perhaps the most important words we can choose to denote and define a given character because if you are clever, it can become so much more than a simple Sue. You need only remember [“A Boy Named Sue” from Johnny Cash](#). Context is everything.

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