Why Authors and Artists Choose Different Names

The place of chosen names in creative life and family heritage

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Choosing a name for creative work is an established and legitimate part of artistic life. A pen name or stage name can give a body of work a recognisable identity, preserve some privacy, or express a connection to family heritage. The Authors Guild explicitly supports an author's choice to publish anonymously or under a pseudonym. [1]

Names also carry affection and family history. A parent may understandably feel attached to the name given to a child and wonder what another name means. An artistic name can exist alongside that family connection. The person remains the same, while the name attached to their work serves a particular purpose.

A person can honour their family while choosing how to be known as an author or artist.

What the Authors Guild is

A guild is an association of people who share a trade or profession. In the arts, a guild may bring together writers, visual artists or performers to support their professional interests. The organisation cited in this article is the **Authors Guild**, a United States professional association for writers with roots dating to 1912. It advocates for freedom of expression, copyright protection, fair publishing contracts and fair payment. It also provides professional resources and a community for writers. [2]

Its support for an author's choice to use a pseudonym is relevant because it reflects a recognised professional position within the writing community. [1]

What aliases and pen names mean

An **alias** is another name by which a person is known. A **pseudonym** is a name adopted for use in place of one's usual name, often for writing or other creative work. Writers commonly call theirs a **pen name**, or *nom de plume*; performers use a **stage name**. A literary name may be invented, drawn from family history, or adapted from an existing name. The National Library of Scotland describes pseudonymous publication as an established literary convention, with motives including privacy, reputation and the kind of work being published. [3]

A public name and an official identity can coexist. For example, Amazon's publishing service expressly allows authors to publish under a pen name while requiring their real name in their private account information for payments and tax forms. Using a different name on a book cover is therefore a familiar publishing arrangement; it does not, by itself, amount to a formal change of legal name. [4]

Nor must a pen name remain secret to remain useful. Once readers know who an author is, the established literary name can continue to identify the work.

A tradition extending across centuries

Alternative literary names long predate social media and modern celebrity. The fourteenth-century Persian poet known as **Hafez** used a pen name: the University of Toronto identifies him as Shams al-Din Muhammad of Shiraz. His example also shows that the practice extends beyond the Western world. [5]

In European and English-language literature, several names now familiar to generations of readers were chosen names.

Public name	Name behind the public identity	What the example demonstrates
George Orwell	Eric Arthur Blair	Adopted his literary name before the publication of *Down and Out in Paris and London* in 1933. [6]
George Eliot	Mary Anne Evans	Adopted her pen name in 1857. Her identity became public in 1859, while George Eliot remained her literary name. [7]
Mark Twain	Samuel Langhorne Clemens	Adopted the name in 1863. It referred to a riverboat expression for a depth of two fathoms. [8]
Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell	Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë, respectively	Used pseudonyms to help their writing receive a hearing without prejudice against women authors. [9]
Lewis Carroll	Charles Lutwidge Dodgson	Published mathematical work under Dodgson and children's literature under Lewis Carroll. [10]
David Bowie	David Jones	Adopted a distinctive professional name in 1965, helping avoid confusion with other entertainers. [11]

Orwell is especially relevant to the relationship between writing and private life. His biographer Bernard Crick records that he used a pseudonym partly to avoid embarrassing his parents and partly to protect himself against the possibility of literary failure. His decision preceded the publication of *Animal Farm* and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. [12]

The name became the one associated with his literary achievement. It allowed him to establish a public identity as a writer while considering the effect his work might have on his family. That is a recognisably human and practical concern.

A respected practice in educated and intellectual life

Chosen names have a substantial place in Western literary and intellectual history, including among highly educated writers and scholars.

Lewis Carroll provides a particularly clear example. Charles Dodgson was an Oxford mathematician whose mathematical and literary publications appeared under different names. The University of St Andrews explains that he formed "Lewis Carroll" by translating his given names into Latin, adapting them back into English and reversing their order. A scholar's engagement with language helped produce the name by which his fiction became known. [10]

Christian scholarship offers another example. **Philipp Melanchthon**, the Reformation scholar and colleague of Martin Luther, was born Philipp Schwartzerdt. His relative and mentor Johann Reuchlin gave him the Greek rendering of that surname, meaning "black earth". He became known by this scholarly name. This was a learned adaptation into another language, rather than a claim of Greek ancestry. [13]

These examples show that scholarship, professional seriousness and chosen names are entirely compatible. The practice is also open to writers and artists with every kind of educational background.

Why an artist might choose or change a name

A creative name can help an audience recognise an artist's work and distinguish it from someone else's. It can also separate different kinds of writing: an author may want one name associated with children's stories and another with adult fiction or political commentary. The Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association recognises genre separation, a fresh professional start and privacy among the reasons authors use pseudonyms. [14]

For some artists, choosing a name is itself part of developing a creative identity. The sound of a name, its meaning and its cultural associations may express something they want their work to carry. A musician's stage name can suit the atmosphere of the music; an author's name can reflect a language or literary tradition that matters to them.

That identity can develop over time. A name chosen early in an artistic career may eventually give way to one that better fits the person's work or sense of heritage. There is room in creative life for retaining a birth name, adapting it or choosing another. The decision belongs to emerging artists as much as established ones.

Privacy when the subject is controversial

Literature can touch matters people hold deeply: religion, politics, family, sexuality, national identity and moral responsibility. An author who enters these discussions has reason to think carefully about the relationship between public expression and private life.

A book such as *The Reclamation of Masculinity: A Conservative Christian Perspective* enters debates in which readers may hold strongly conflicting convictions. Its author may reasonably anticipate disagreement, including from readers on the political left or those who reject its Christian framework. In a workplace or community where the author's outlook is uncommon, publishing under an everyday name may feel particularly exposing.

Reactions will vary. A secular or politically progressive community contains individuals with different attitudes, and disagreement does not automatically become hostility. The possibility of personal backlash is nevertheless a legitimate consideration. PEN America's guidance specifically identifies a pseudonym as an option for people writing about highly charged political and social issues who may face harassment or the exposure of private information. [15]

An author may want to protect an unrelated business from becoming the focus of a dispute about a book. They may want to keep customer relationships, employment and family life at some distance from their publishing activities. Concern for one's livelihood and personal wellbeing is a reasonable part of deciding how publicly to attach an identity to controversial work. These are possibilities to weigh, rather than outcomes that can be predicted from the political character of a suburb or state.

The same principle should extend across political and religious differences. Writers whose convictions run against the prevailing outlook in their own communities may all have reasons to preserve privacy. The freedom to discuss difficult ideas is stronger when that consideration is applied consistently.

Readers remain entitled to challenge a book's arguments. The Authors Guild distinguishes good-faith criticism and respectful disagreement from harassment. An author can accept scrutiny of the work while maintaining boundaries around private life. [16]

A pen name can help establish those boundaries, although it cannot guarantee anonymity. Information shared through photographs, biographies or connected accounts can reveal the person behind it. Its value depends partly on how the author manages the connection between public and private identities. [14]

Choosing a name connected to paternal ancestry

A name drawn from the language of one's paternal ancestry can be a meaningful and appropriate expression of identity. It may honour a father or grandfather, maintain a connection to an ancestral culture, or recover an aspect of family heritage that has become less visible across generations.

A family's present-day surname or spelling does not necessarily express every part of its history. Choosing a name from an ancestral language can make one of those connections more visible. Maternal ancestry and other established family ties can also carry that meaning.

The explanation can be straightforward: "I have chosen a name from my father's ancestral language because it reflects part of my heritage and the identity I want my work to carry."

That choice can coexist with affection for the name given by one's parents. Indeed, a name connected to paternal ancestry may be intended as an acknowledgement of the father's family and its history.

Accuracy still matters. Restoring a surname documented in family records and choosing a new name inspired by an ancestral language are different descriptions. Both can be meaningful; the explanation should match the evidence. The spelling, meaning and cultural use of a particular name deserve care, especially when moving between writing systems.

An ancestral connection provides a reason to choose a name. It does not require someone to regard every other name in their family history as less authentic.

How language and power have changed names

Names can change through adaptation to another language, migration, social pressure or official recordkeeping. Some changes are freely chosen. Others arise when people face pressure to fit the language and expectations of a dominant society. There are also documented histories of names being imposed through colonial institutions and compulsory assimilation.

In Australia, the **Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies** explains that Indigenous people sometimes chose new names or used different names in different circumstances. It also documents names changed by employers, missionaries and institutions receiving children who had been removed from their families. European recordkeepers could spell the same Indigenous name differently according to their own language. [17]

A separate example concerns an ethnic and religious minority in Europe. **Minority Rights Group International** documents the Bulgarian government's 1984–1985 campaign forcing ethnic Turks to adopt Bulgarian names, alongside restrictions on Muslim religious practice and the public use of Turkish. This was coercive assimilation, with names made an instrument of state power. [18]

These histories help explain why returning to a name associated with ancestral language or culture can have deep significance. The name on an official record may reflect decisions made by people who held power over the person being named.

Each family's history still needs to be understood on its own evidence. Some families adopted another language's names willingly and cherish them. Others experienced coercion, and many histories contain a mixture of choice, pressure and adaptation. Respect for cultural identity includes respecting those different experiences.

Someone choosing an ancestral name today need not establish a history of oppression to make that choice meaningful. A sincere desire to honour family heritage is a sufficient personal reason. Where there was forced assimilation, reclaiming a name may carry the additional meaning of recovering a connection that others attempted to suppress.

Respecting the person behind the name

For a family, the most useful conversation is about what the chosen name means to the person using it. It may express a creative ambition, protect a measure of privacy, or honour a part of the family story. Listening to that explanation makes it easier to understand the choice without assuming that affection or loyalty has changed.

An author remains responsible for the honesty of their claims and the quality of their work. A chosen name can accompany truthful writing, accurate qualifications and a sincere account of cultural identity.

There is ample precedent for taking that choice seriously. The names on bookshelves and record sleeves already testify to it. A thoughtfully chosen name can become an honest expression of the person, their work and the heritage they wish to carry forward.

Sources

Numbered references identify the historical and professional sources used in this editorial. Source titles are clickable.

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