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Pseudonymous Disguises:
Are Pen Names An Escape From the Gender Bias in Publishing?

“In my own mind, I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be.” –Anne Brontë

Nettie Finn
2016
Sponsor: Susan Hahn
Committee: Lili Wright and Jonathan Nichols-Pethick

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Introduction: Women and Wikipedia

When Amanda Filipacchi, author of the novels *Nude Men*, *Vapor*, and *Love Creeps*, discovered that Wikipedia editors were systematically removing female novelists from the category "American Novelists" and moving them to the category "American Women Novelists" she sounded the alarm bell. In her 2013 opinion article for the *New York Times*, "Wikipedia's Sexism Toward Female Novelists," Filipacchi didn't shy away from making it clear that when a supposedly all-encompassing category like "American Novelists" contains only men, the implications aren't good for anyone: "It's probably small, easily fixable things like this that make it harder and slower for women to gain equality in the literary world," she states in her article "Wikipedia's Sexism Toward Female Novelists," critiquing this categorization decision by Wikipedia's overwhelmingly male editors.

Though Wikipedia editors heard and answered the call for a more gender-neutral set of subcategories by creating the parent category "American Novelists," which now contains the subsets, "American male novelists" and "American woman novelists," the 2013 categorization and following editorial points to a larger problem for women in the publishing world (Gleick). The separate categorization of "American Novelists" and "American Women Novelists" call attention to an inequity in how we view our authors: one set deserves the overarching title, while the other must be specified—they aren't novelists, they are women novelists. If equality in the publishing industry, or in the assessment of contemporary literature, is ever to be reached, maybe Filipacchi is right to demand that all novelists be grouped into one category. But at the same time, as we know from history, the playing field has not been equal, so contemporary women authors must perform a balancing act. Since their material working conditions may be radically different from their

male counterparts', they may be expected to offer distinct viewpoints. Thus in the same way that we have women's studies courses which draw attention to the contributions of women to every discipline, it is important to recognize the rich history of women as writers and to honor the history of their struggle towards publication separately. Therefore, it's not unusual for college campuses to offer courses in "Women Writers" right alongside "African American Writers," "Chicano Writers," etc. as a way to feature these under-represented groups and to ensure they have a place in curriculums.

A brief discussion of what the Wikipedia phenomenon represents would not be complete without mentioning post-structuralist Michel Foucault. "Discourse [that is the social use of language] is inseparable from power," he says (*An Introductory Guide to Cultural Theory and Pop Culture*, 93). Discourse here is described as language as we use it in our day-to-day lives; it is the language of the people and that language can shape the way we make sense of the world. Foucault focuses on the relationship between power and knowledge, a discussion that is particularly helpful in the case of women in literature when he moves to the specifics of how power and knowledge operate within the use of language. For example, when Wikipedia calls female authors "women writers" and male authors "writers" they are using discourse to "normalize" the relationship between the word "men" and the word "writer." According to John Storey, Foucault is actually arguing that power is not just an oppressive force (i.e. forcing women writers into a category of "other"), but it is also a productive force that has created the very society that would classify women writers and writers as two distinct groups.

Similarly to Foucault, Pierre Bourdieu focuses on the cultural distinctions that result in the very same power struggle—in Bourdieu's case termed as the class system—that

Foucault traced back to discourse. Thus, the class who holds the power does so by use of “cultural distinction”: “the making, marking and maintaining of cultural difference” (*Cultural Studies and the Study of Popular Culture: Theories and Methods*, 116). In the case of women’s authors, if “power appear[s] to be the result of cultural distinction” (116) then for many years women authors have been at a disadvantage simply because the snide remarks and patronizing reviews by the class who held the “cultural distinction” of having propriety over the creation and judgment of literature. The act of categorizing through cultural distinction creates the social structure we take as the norm. In a social structure as historically patriarchal as ours has been, men were already recognized as writers by the time women took up the pen (given their privileges in education). As such they held the cultural distinction that allowed them to set cultural standards in literature and to create a cycle in which women had no cultural power, and therefore could not gain any.

Anonymity, for many years and for many women, offered a chance to escape the power dynamics already set up within the system; it offered a chance to become a character themselves, and to shape their destinies as they chose. Women authors hid behind pseudonyms or the simple moniker of “A Lady” in order to be published, received, and reviewed fairly. But sixteen years into the 21st century many famous names (most notable, perhaps, are Joanne Rowling’s adoption of J.K. Rowling and Robert Galbraith, and Nora Robert’s pseudonym J.D. Robb) still perpetuate the trend. It’s a point of fact that Rowling’s publisher, Barry Cunningham, suggested early on in the process that “young boys might be wary of a book written by a woman,” so she decided on initials as a way of disguising her gender. Though Rowling herself is the perfect example of an international bestselling author who is also a woman—proving that it is far from impossible for women

authors to achieve success—her home country, Britain, is still not reviewing men and women authors equally, as documented when the 2014 *London Review of Books* featured reviews for only 58 female authors, and 192 for male authors (VIDA). As far as the Wikipedia categorization goes, if there had been any women huddling under male names during their categorization process, I feel quite sure they would have remained in the seemingly broader, more authoritative category of “American Novelists” from the beginning.

This last statement, though admittedly based in speculation, begs the question: are women continuing to use pen names because of the continued gender bias in the publishing industry? In other words, are they using pseudonyms for the same reasons their predecessors did, or are the women of today’s publishing landscape adopting pen names for other reasons altogether? Before I set out to do my interviews, I expected the answer to this particular question, as answers to these sorts of questions usually are, to be a mix of both. The “publishing gender gap” may contribute to a modern woman author’s use of a pseudonym, but after this research project, I no longer believe it to be the sole factor in the decision to use a pseudonym, no matter how much pen names may have helped disguise women authors when Wikipedia’s 2013 editors stepped up to the chopping block.

Bias by the Numbers

After a look through the numbers, what I have discovered is sad and simple: women are being grossly underrepresented when it comes to markers of prestige in publishing: the number of reviews they are given, and the number of awards they win. As with so many things today, including gender bias in general or racism or sexual bias specifically, it is tempting to say, “Look how far we’ve come!” But a look at recent statistics gives away how far we have yet to go when it comes to equal representation of women authors in contemporary literature, among many other things. To be sure, the past 50 years have seen remarkable strides made in women’s rights due to the women’s movement: the passing of Roe v Wade, anti-rape legislation, a push, albeit a failed one, for the Equal Rights Amendment and most recently a slew of feminist movements online, including “bye Felipe!” (an Instagram account that uses screenshots of conversations to call attention to men who handle the rejection of their online advances with bullying and threats), and the #yesallwomen social media campaign. Yet there is work still to do for gender equality politically, and across the literary landscape, as the numbers will demonstrate. Lack of unbiased representation is especially relevant in three categories: reviews for women authors (just general reviews, ignoring whether those reviews are positive or negative), awards for women’s books, and the number of women being published in the first place.

Female Award Winners (Or Lack Thereof)

It is clear politically that the fight for gender equality is far from over—just look at the push for the defunding of Planned Parenthood and the fact that Donald Trump, who makes outspoken comments about women’s looks and excludes whole groups of people

based on religion or ethnicity, is a legitimate candidate for the presidency. A glance at the literary landscape shows this sad lack of gender equality just as clearly, with two of the largest and most impressive literary prizes proving to be no exception. In the past 50 years, there have been only 16 female winners of the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, including 2012, when there was no winner named. The years from 2000 onward are more promising, with six of the 14 winners being women (“Fiction”). The Nobel Prize for literature admits upfront that while 108 Nobel Prizes in Literature have been awarded since 1901, only fourteen of those have been granted to women. Only five of those fourteen have come in the years since 2000, while another two of those fourteen were granted in the 1920s, with Grazia Deledda in 1926 and Sigrid Undset in 1928 (“The Nobel Prize in Literature”). It’s not promising when the ‘20s were nearly as kind to women writers as the 16 years since 2000 have been.

If we consider the other important literary prizes such as The Man Booker Prize, PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, National Book Awards for Fiction, Edgar Awards, National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction, Costa Book of the Year Award, and the Costa Novel Award the record for lauding women’s achievements as authors is not much better. In the last 15 years, six seems to be the magic number for winning women authors across all categories, with the Man Booker Prize, PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and the National Book Award for Fiction’s prizes given to women all totaling that number (“Timeline | The Man Booker Prizes,” “Past Winners & Finalists” and “NBA Winners by Category, 1950 – 2014”). The National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction and the Costa Book Awards Best Novel category did slightly better with seven prizes in the past fifteen years going to women authors (“National Books Critics Circle” and *Costa Book Awards*). The

most women were honored in the Costa Book Awards Book of the Year category, which gave the award to eight women authors, while the worst was the Edgar Award for Best Novel, who found women deserving of the prize only three times since 2000 (*Costa Book Awards* and “Edgars Database”). Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* was overlooked in 1999 for a PEN/Faulkner Award for Fiction, and again in 2010 for *The Lacuna*, both times losing out to a man (“Past Winners & Finalists”). The only Anita Shreve novel ever to win a literary award was *The Weight of Water*, which won the L.L. Winship/PEN New England Award in 1998 (“Anita Shreve”). These numbers and missing names are not comforting. Of these nine prestigious literary awards, only one can count women as over half of the winners in the past fifteen years. Only two fall short of the halfway mark by just one, which puts the other six at well below half.

Where Are All the Female Protagonists?

It’s not just that women authors are losing out to their men counterparts in the awards circuit: books with female protagonists are also coming up short. In the past fifteen years, zero Pulitzer Prize’s in literature have been given to novels featuring women as the protagonist. This number comes from Nicola Griffith, herself an award winning and critically acclaimed female author. Griffith looked into not just who was writing prize-winning literature, but whose point of view they were writing it from. In her research, she examined winners from the following six awards in the last 15 years: Pulitzer Prize, Man Booker Prize, National Book Award, National Book Critics’ Circle Award, Hugo Award, and Newbery Medal. Her results, presented in a series of pie charts, show that of the six awards, only the Newbery Medal had over half of its award winners written from the perspective of

women or girls, in comparison to the complete lack of women featured in Pulitzer Prize winners. In an analysis of her data, Griffith had this to say:

It's hard to escape the conclusion that, when it comes to literary prizes, the more prestigious, influential and financially remunerative the award, the less likely the winner is to write about grown women. Either this means that women writers are self-censoring, or those who judge literary worthiness find women frightening, distasteful, or boring.

Even the women who have won these awards have oftentimes won when they are not writing about women. I join Griffith in wondering why female characters have been judged unworthy by award-givers over the past fifteen years.

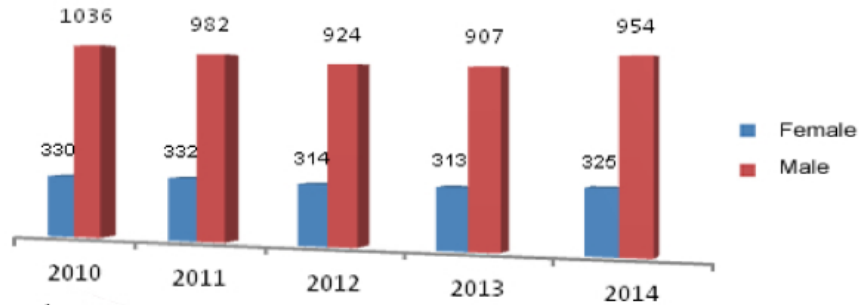
VIDA and the Lack of Women Authors Reviewed

VIDA: Women in Literary Arts began a count in 2009 examining how women were faring in literary review journals and supplements. The most recent VIDA "Count" took place in 2014, when the volunteer-based organization measured by gender the reviews (including both who is reviewed and who is reviewing) in popular and literary magazines for the fifth time. VIDA also provides the most recent available data on the gender discrepancy in reviews and reviewers in literary magazines currently available. In 2014, the *New York Times Book Review* reviewed 504 books by male authors, compared to only 358 by female authors. The *New York Review of Books* reviewed 354 books by male authors and 164 by female. *Harper's Magazine* reviewed 55 males and 22 females. Across the pond, women are faring no better. *The Times Literary Supplement's* discrepancy was shocking, with reviews of 954 male authors and only 325 female authors, and the *London Review of Books* was no better, with 192 male authors reviewed and 58 women authors reviewed in the year.

VIDA Count™

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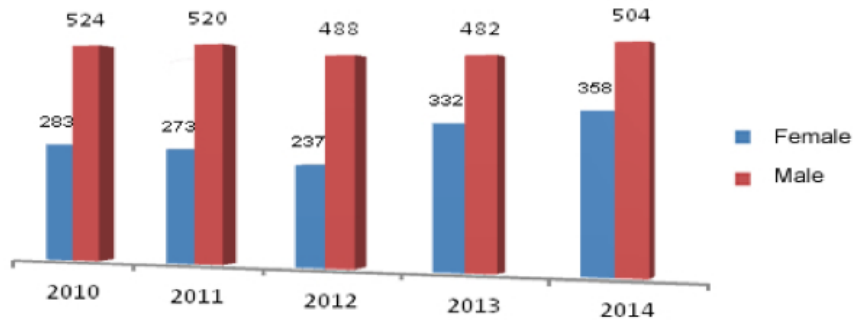
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The New York Times
Book Review

**Authors Reviewed
Five Year Comparison**



Letters to the Editor
The New York Times Book Review
620 Eighth Avenue, 5th Fl.
New York, NY 10018

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Graphs courtesy of VIDAweb.org

The above graphs, which detail the five years of data available for the *New York Times Book Review* and the *Times Literary Supplement* show that the 2014 numbers aren't a fluke: they're the norm. In fact, the 2014 ratio in the *New York Times Book Review*, 504 male authors reviewed to 358 women authors, actually show an increase in progress. In 2010 and 2011 the ratio was nearly 2:1, and in 2012 it was over 2:1. It is not until the 2013 and

2014 publications that a ratio of about 1.4:1 was reached. The story for the graph representing the *Times Literary Supplement* is even worse—in fact it is absolutely appalling. In 2010 the ratio of men authors reviewed to women authors reviewed was over 3:1, and for the following four years up to and including 2014 that ratio held steady at just under 3:1, which no significant increase in the number of women reviewed occurring in any year. Men are being reviewed overwhelmingly more than women are in prominent journals, and this puts women at a number of disadvantages.

Top-Down Bias: Are the Publishing Houses Responsible?

Though the most recent Bowker data available for print books states that in 2013, 50,498 fiction books were published in print and through publishing agencies specializing in electronic books (this number excludes self-published books), they offer no data for the breakdown of gender in these published pieces (*ISBN Output Report for 2002-2013*). In order to have some grasp of the numbers of women being published, I decided to use one publishing house as a sample, and count the number of women authors they represented myself. Pegasus Publishing, LLC, is a small publishing company that falls under the holdings of W.W. Norton. They have only three full-time employees and one-part time employee. All of these are women. The publisher himself is the lone male in the bunch. By counting and recounting the authors listed on the Pegasus website, I have arrived at this depressing breakdown: this company full of woman, where I myself interned, has the bios of 282 male authors listed on their website, and only 105 women. A ratio not quite as bad as the *Times Literary Supplement's* at 2.6:1, but falling well below the *New York Times Book Review's* 2:1 average. When I specified “fiction” on their website, I was not given a full list, but was

instead directed to what I assume was a lineup of the 31 fiction books that, for one reason or another, Pegasus has decided to promote. Of those 31, 21 were books written by men, and only 10 by women. Unfortunately, Pegasus “reject[s] a fair amount of books that are never even logged,” according to Marketing Director and Senior Editor Iris Blasi, so it is impossible to tell whether the lack of women published is due to the fact that women are submitting fewer manuscripts or not.

Pegasus may be the outlier, and my fingers are definitely crossed that that is the case. But with so many women working and making decisions at the company, I am more likely to believe that this lack of women authors being published is a trend across the publishing industry. If it is a trend, then perhaps it is not the reviewers who are at fault for not reviewing books by women, but the publishers who—for whatever reason—aren’t publishing equally. Maybe women aren’t writing in the same numbers as men, maybe these numbers are vastly different at larger publishing houses, maybe, maybe, maybe. Without thorough research into the number of women authors submitting books to publishing houses, and into the number of women authors published each year, the answers to these questions must remain in the realm of hypotheticals.

However, there is an anecdotal example of gender bias coming from literary agencies to be found in Catherine Nichols’ account of sending her novel out under a man’s name, rather than under her own. In her story, “Homme de Plume: What I Learned Sending My Novel Out Under a Male Name,” Nichols tells the contrasting tales of what happened when she sent her novel out under her legal name, and what happened when she sent it out under a man’s name—for the purposes of the story that name was “George Leyers.” She created an email account for George, and sent out six queries to literary agencies—as she

calls them “the gateway to publishers”—attaching a letter of explanation and the first few pages of her novel:

Within 24 hours George had five responses—three manuscripts requests and two warm rejections praising his exciting project. For contrast, under my own name, the same letter and pages sent 50 times had netted me a total of two manuscript requests.

And those 24 hours took place over the weekend. She sent 44 more queries out, so that George Leyers had sent the same number of queries to literary agencies as Catherine Nichols had. George’s manuscript was requested a total of 17 times, which means that, as Nichols puts it, “he is eight and a half times better than me at writing the same book.” Even George’s rejections were “polite and warm” whereas Catherine had mostly been ignored. Perhaps most appalling, Nichols cited one instance where an agent who had rejected the book when it was sent from Catherine, requested George’s manuscript and even offered to send it along to a more senior agent.

Nichols puts the stark contrast between Catherine’s rejections and George’s reception down to one of three things: agents (and publishers) recognize the public’s bias and feel they’d have an easier time selling a book by George; a book by Catherine might be categorized as “Women’s Fiction;” and/or agents subconsciously favored George. Nichols goes on to comment on the VIDA numbers and attempts to answer the very question I myself asked: are women winning and being reviewed less because women are actually writing less? To which she theorizes: “Some number of these women must be drummed out and bamboozled before they reach their mature work.” Though George’s novel and Catherine’s novel were exactly the same, the simple name change gave George the advantage. George was greeted with: “let’s see more,” while Catherine received: “it’s not what we’re looking for.” Though this is just one instance, Nichols’ story is an experiment

that shows some kind of implicit bias is holding women authors—or potential women authors—back before they can even make it out of the gate.

Who Readers are Reading

When it comes to readers, the numbers tell an entirely different story.

Goodreads.com is an online community of book lovers, where readers can share what they're reading, what they'd like to read, rate books, make suggestions to friends, etc. Essentially, it's social media for bookworms. The site launched in 2007 and currently boasts 40 million members. According to the Goodreads list "Most Popular Books Published in 2015," women authors are doing a lot better than is reflected in their number of reviews and in the number of women published (at Pegasus at least). The list, which was generated according to "the top 200 books published in 2015 that people have added on Goodreads," includes 147 books written by women and 53 written by men. Strikingly, it is not until you reach number 15 on the list that a male author is represented at all (*Aziz Ansari's Modern Romance* is the book that breaks the all-female streak). So when it comes to what the average Joe is reading—or wants to read badly enough to bookmark it online—women come out on top.

An infographic also published by Goodreads.com took a look at whether the gender of the reader plays a part in the books they're more likely to pick up. With a "sample size of 40,000 active members on the site, 20,000 men and 20,000 women" Goodreads set out to determine what sex had to do with books. They started simple: stating that men and women had read the same number of books in 2014, albeit these books could have been published in any year ("Sex and Reading: A Look at Who's Reading Whom"). So far so equal.

As the graphic continued however, preferences began to split along gender lines. Women were twice as likely to have read a book published in 2014 as men were, and while 80 percent of a female author's audience was other females, male authors' audiences were split straight down the middle—showing that men were a lot less likely to be interested in reading a book written by the opposite sex. When it came down to it, however, the graphic states that “when it comes to the most popular 2014 books on Goodreads, we are still sticking to our own sex,” since of the 50 books published in 2014 that were most read by men, 45 were by male authors and only five by women. For women, these numbers were almost exactly the opposite, with women's favorites consisting of 46 books by women and only four by men.

The Year of Reading Women

So it's clear that women are reading just as much, if not more than men, and if readers are so partial to their own gender, it follows that books by women are popular with women readers, and that it is Pegasus, the reviewers, the agencies, and the award-givers who need to catch up. In a push to help the publishing industry get with the times, author Kamlia Shamsie called for a “year of publishing women.” In her article, which she calls “a provocation,” published in June of 2015 in *The Guardian*, she calls for 2018 to be a year when only women are published—“none of the new titles published in that year should be written by men.” No doubt this is a radical suggestion, but Shamsie calls it a way to “redress” the inequality that has so far perpetrated the industry. So far, however, only one publisher has stepped up to the plate: And Other Stories, a small press that publishes only about 10 to 12 new titles a year, has pledged to publish women authors only for the

entirety of 2018. If other publishers were to join *And Other Stories* in taking Shamsie's challenge seriously, what would happen to the literary landscape in 2018? Would publishers and reviewers give hundreds of women authors a chance they had so far been denied in favor of their male counterparts and be pleasantly surprised by sales? Would reviewers find that they were rating books, on average, just as highly as they had been when men ruled the bookstores? Even if the answer to both these questions were to be a resounding "yes!" the most important question is one that Shamsie poses herself: "What would happen in 2019?"

It's Not Just Women: Why Pseudonyms?

It is by no means necessary for a writer to be female in order to take a pen name. Famous examples of male writers who have chosen to disguise themselves with a nom de plum include Mark Twain, Dr. Seuss, and Lewis Carroll, just to name a few. But in the past, men have made these decisions based on a variety of reasons, while a common thread running through women authors' choices to take pen names has been fear of repercussions from the reading and reviewing public based on their sex. A pseudonym is an author's alter ego, based on the Latin phrase "other I": "This suggests the writer is not so much wearing a mask as becoming another person entirely" (Ciuraru, xviii). Instead of a cloak, a pen name can become a character in and of itself.

Writers have always been a finicky bunch, and some of their more eccentric decisions have come in the whys and wherefores of choosing to use pen names. Born as Samuel L. Clemens, the author of *Huckleberry Finn* and *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* eventually chose the name that would bring him fame and fortune, "Mark Twain," based on the discarded signature of one Captain Sellers, who Clemens once mocked in a piece of writing published in a New Orleans newspaper. This account, however, which Clemens gives in *Life on the Mississippi*, is not regarded as pure fact, and more widely accepted is that he simply adopted the name "Mark Twain" from the phrase "mark twain"—a phrase for water two fathoms (twelve feet) deep that riverboat crews would call out to notify others that the way ahead was clear (Ciuraru, 87).

So, for Clemens/Twain, at least, that explains the "how." But the "why," to my knowledge, is not known at all. Carmela Ciuraru, in her book *Nom de Plume: A (Secret) History of Pen Names*, hypothesizes that Clemens became Twain, "simply because he could"

(88). It seems doubtless that Clemens, great arbiter of the American way that he was, would have enjoyed fooling his audience in any way he could. In general, however, authors who chose to take pen names did so for a variety of reasons, stretching from the philosophical train of thought which believed accepting credit for one's work was "bourgeois," to a writer's wish to separate themselves from their previously established "brand" (Donaldson, 55). Clemens is by no means the only author to have taken a pen name purely for the fun of it, but he is no doubt the most famous.

Before pen names came into vogue, authors wishing to fly under the radar would simply publish with no name attached whatsoever. Anonymity in one of its first forms began in the medieval time period, when authors—who would most likely squirm at today's society's need to identify and claim everything they see—who were "unburdened by modern concepts like intellectual property, the need to sell books or originality" saw no need to proclaim to the reading public that these words were theirs and only theirs (Donaldson, 55). But "this began to change as new copyright laws were created" (55). Since the new laws included the addition of royalties, authors felt a greater temptation to reveal their identities—at least to their publishers. As Donaldson explains in his article "The Artist is Not Present: Anonymity in Literature" pressing reasons to ignore this temptation included many variations. One popular reason for anonymity was in order to present ideas that might have been considered unpopular at the time of their publishing, or even dangerous. For these renegade ideas, anonymity provided an "invisibility cloak" (55) that protected the author from the backlash of the reading and reviewing public. Today, however, truly anonymous publications of a serious nature have dwindled, leaving

anonymity to “insider accounts” concerning governments (such as *Primary Colors* and *O: A Presidential Novel*) and Internet comment sections.

Though complete anonymity has faded from vogue, and perhaps even become unnecessary, adoption of pseudonyms has not. One reason for the continued use of pseudonyms is that “the synecdochic power of the famous name undercuts serious consideration of the ideas presented,” a theory sometimes known as the ‘cult of the author’ (54). The desire to be escape her famous name and the expectations that came with it is the reason J.K. Rowling gave for choosing Robert Galbraith when she turned to writing crime fiction. Rather than being judged on the merit of past works, under the name recognized by so many the world over (itself a nom de plume in a way, since Joanne Rowling in fact has no “K” in her name), she chose to be judged on the “ideas presented” and to give herself a chance to “work without hype or expectation and to receive totally unvarnished feedback” as she said in her “About” page on Robert Galbraith’s website.

Another reason for artists—including male authors—to take pen names has been, and continues to be, in order to move away from extremely cultural or foreign-sounding birth names. Joseph Conrad was born as Jozef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, and Allan Stewart Konigsberg (though he did not abandon his Jewish roots) chose to work under the Anglicized name Woody Allen (Fallon). A recent news bite that has been circling the Twitter-sphere features the fact that Donald Trump’s family name was once (albeit not since the 1600s) Drumpf—a dig made by John Oliver when Donald Trump tweeted at Oliver’s former employer and friend, Jon Stewart, saying “If Jon Stewart is so above it all & legit, why did he change his name from Jonathan Leibowitz? He should be proud of his heritage!” (Rosenbaum). Name changing to become more culturally mainstream is clearly a

fad that is here to stay for the foreseeable future, and that is not limited to the literary landscape.

In fact, pseudonyms have, in contemporary literature, become so widespread that they have grown to include the exact opposite of the topic of this paper: male authors will sometimes take a woman's name—or at least an ambiguously gendered name—in order to be published or to gain an audience. Sean Thomas, for example, decided mid-career that he was switching from hard-boiled thrillers to psycho-thrillers. In his own words, he went from “Grail-hunting drug cults to wistful tales of haunted twins” (Thomas in Oswell). He'd been using a pseudonym while writing his Da Vinci Code-esque thrillers—Tom Knox—in order to distance himself from the subtle, literary novels Sean Thomas had been writing. With the change to a new kind of thriller, Thomas needed a new name to go with it. Since these books would be written from a woman's perspective, Thomas and his editors decided on a gender neutral name this time: S.K. Tremayne. Bestselling author of *Before I Go to Sleep*, S.J. Watson, known in his private life as Steve Watson, also chose initials because of the gender of his protagonist, and even went so far as to have his agent “not mention” that he was male when approaching publishers (Oswell). Both Watson and Thomas agreed that being referred to as a “she” when being reviewed is something they view as an accolade: it is reassurance that the female voices who tell their stories are believable to readers.

Interestingly, Thomas actually argues that, “it arguably helps, these day, for fiction writers to be female, or at least not male.” This viewpoint is intriguing since, as “Bias by the Numbers” shows, female readers might be more likely to read novels by female authors—or even authors with names that seem feminine or androgynous—but a female name is definitely not helpful for reviews and awards. However, it is true that genderless

pseudonyms are becoming more popular, as is evidenced by J.K. Rowling's unarguable success as well as the fact that of the three female authors I myself interviewed, all three chose to disguise themselves using initials rather than a definitively male name.

There are also examples, however, of male authors' adoption of female names that go horribly awry. These are the cases that stray from a gentle masking to all-out hiding, and can even cross the line into cultural appropriation. When it was revealed that the author Yi-Fen Chou was actually male poet Michael Derrick Hudson, "the literary Internet exploded" (Fallon). After receiving many rejections when submitting his poems under his given name, Hudson decided that the adoption of a Chinese-American woman's name would give him the panache he was missing. The difference between this pseudonym and others, however, is stated briefly and succinctly by Claire Fallon in her piece "When a Pseudonym is Not Just a Pseudonym: The Case of Yi-Fen Chou":

Standard literary pseudonyms were either identity-neutral, intended only to allow a writer to establish themselves in new genres, or were deployed to circumvent deeply rooted cultural bias against marginalized groups.

Since what Hudson had done was exactly the opposite—he took on the identity of a marginalized group (two groups in fact)—the literary community was right to be outraged. This was not an author who was part of a marginalized group using a pseudonym as a way to escape bias, it was a purely commercial decision made to reap benefits from an underprivileged group without necessarily understanding their struggles, and definitely without having lived them. The business of taking a pen name is always a muddied one, but not usually morally incorrect. Hudson, of course, proved that even the historically equalizing tactic of using a pseudonym can be misused.

This appropriation by use of a pseudonym is by no means limited to male authors. Women can be just as guilty of misusing the tactic that for so many years was a boon to women in the publishing industry. *Love and Consequences: a Memoir of Hope and Survival* was published under the name Margaret B. Jones in 2008. It told the tale “of the author’s experiences as a foster child and a Bloods gang member” (Ciuraru, xxiii). The story was not based on her identity and instead was complete fabrication. There was no Margaret B. Jones, there was only Margaret Seltzer, a thirty-three-year-old white woman who had lived through none of the traumatic experiences detailed in the “memoir.” When the deception was revealed—by the author’s own sister—she expressed no feelings of guilt or remorse. “I thought it was my opportunity to put a voice to people who people don’t listen to” (Seltzer in Ciuraru). Margaret B. Jones wasn’t a mask to protect Seltzer from a judgmental public, it was a mask that she put on, just as Hudson did, without understanding or having lived through that less-privileged person’s experiences. The case of Jones has more similarities to the creation of the author as character, but by calling the book memoir and trading on these character’s experiences as her own, Seltzer—and others like her—had crossed the line. When a person of privilege takes on the persona of a person of less privilege it’s a problematic power struggle because they are choosing to use that persona in a way that might be beneficial, without having the lived experiences of the many ways that persona may be less privileged day-to-day.

Putting questions of appropriation and misuse of pseudonyms aside, there is still ample evidence that women have, historically, not had sole ownership over pen names. Pen names allow an exploration of self as character, or the “other I” that a legal name might not be able to, and this has been true for both men and women authors over the years. What is

even more interesting are the cases of male authors using female names for their pseudonyms. This reversal of the classic use of pen names points to a society that gives women readers more say-so in the publishing community, but still keeps the sexes staunchly segregated. Unfortunately, male authors using women names doesn't speak to a more open literary landscape; if anything it places authors more firmly into gender roles and perhaps even leads to the separation of genre by gender, since S.K. Tremayne apparently feels he couldn't have written stories about "haunted twins" as Sean Thomas.

Women's Pseudonyms of the Past

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself.
How often flings for nought, and yokes
Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
Another, not from her, but him;
While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;
And if he once, by shame oppress'd,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast
And seems to think the sin was hers;
Or any eye to see her charms,
At any time she's still his wife,
Dearly devoted to his arms;
She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone.

-Excerpt from Coventry Patmore, "The Angel in the House" (1854)

In her essay "Professions for Women" Virginia Woolf argues that every female author—at least those of her generation and before—must do battle with the so-called "Angel in the House" before she can begin to write. Alluding to the poem above, Woolf describes this Angel, characterizing the requirements that this female Angel must meet:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was a chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she was so constituted that she never had a mind of a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. (*Women and Writing*, 59)

Woolf herself did her best to overcome this Angel, saying she had to “kill” the seraphic entity over and over again. But though Woolf herself may have managed to keep the Angel in check, this specter has haunted the writing of women since women first put pen to paper. From Jane Austen, writing bits and pieces of her novels at her desk in the sitting room and hiding her scribbles under letters in case anyone should walk in, to George Eliot using the first name of her lover rather than her own, to the Brontës, all three of whom published under pseudonyms due to a “vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice” (Brontë), women authors have done battle with this Angel. In fact, generations of women have been forced to veil their work in some way in order to avoid criticism from both reviewers and society at large.

Of the four famous women authors one seems always to be running into when discussing women’s literature—or literature in general, really—all four, Woolf points out, selected novels as their form of choice. George Eliot, Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë, and Emily Brontë all led enormously different lives, and yet each came separately (possibly barring Emily and Charlotte) to the conclusion that the method of best expressing the stories they needed to share would be to write a novel. Woolf herself was a novelist and pre-disposed towards prose, as evidenced in the fact that her major work of feminist critique, *A Room of One’s Own*, is an internal discussion had by the fictional character Mary Beton. Because of the expansion of free time available to middle class women, they were likely to turn to literary and cultural pursuits. However, it is likely that their “lower educational standards made classical and learned literature out of the question for the great majority” leaving novels as the main mode of lady’s literature (Watt, 151). Following

the tastes of their fellow women, women authors sought to satisfy the demand for fictional prose, and the novel has been women authors' choice form of expression for centuries now.

Jane Austen and "A Lady"

Of the "four famous names" put forth by Woolf (*A Room of One's Own*, 67), Austen was the first published, and the one who abandoned anonymity (which she chose in place of an out-and-out pseudonym) most quickly. *Sense and Sensibility* became the first Austen novel to reach a reading audience outside of Austen's family circle when it was published in 1811. The novel, however, was not published under her own name and was instead labeled "By a Lady," indicating that while Austen did not shy away from her gender, for her first novel she chose not to attach her name. Though Austen was met with near-immediate acclaim, eventually published under her own name, and received support from her family from the beginning of her efforts (with her father George Austen even attempting to have one of her novels published as early as 1797), she still was uncomfortable in her profession, hiding "her manuscripts or cover[ing] them with a piece of blotting paper" always careful to ensure that even the servants were unaware that she was undertaking a career in writing (*A Room of One's Own*, 67).

In her review of *Love and Friendship*, "Jane Austen Practising," Virginia Woolf points out what is mostly considered a literary truth: Jane Austen "is the most perfect artist in English literature" (*Women and Writing*, 104). Her characterizations were impeccable, her satire strong, "her knowledge of the upper middle classes was unrivaled" (105), and everyone agreed to it. And it is no doubt due to these very reasons that she was able, as a woman, to have such unmitigated positive reviews. She focused on the day-to-day, the

household cares; no hint of crime or politics darkened the doorstep of an Austen novel, and they all end with a “happily ever after.” Woolf goes on to point out, however, that the myth that is Jane Austen has become constraining in its own way:

For the past ten or twenty years the reputation of Jane Austen has been accumulating on top of us like [...] quilts and blankets. The voices of the elderly and distinguished, of the clergy and the squirearchy have droned in unison praising and petting, capping quotations, telling little anecdotes, raking up little facts. (104)

Indeed, Austen was loved by the very group who would call *Wuthering Heights* “odious” if written by a woman, a group which came to include George Lewes, the reviewer who “admired” Jane Austen, though he “never for a moment lost sight of [her] sex” (Caine, 85). He wrote that “the domestic experience which forms the bulk of woman’s knowledge finds an appropriate form in novels” (Lewes in Caine, 86), and goes on to say that Austen’s novels had “a homely common quality” not requiring “the highest kind of genius” (Lewes in Caine, 87). In fact, though Eliot loved Charlotte’s work, particularly *Villette*, Charlotte could not say the same of Austen’s novels, which she found “uninteresting” because of their focus on “ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses” (Ciuraru, 23). Though undoubtedly brilliant—in fact it seems to have become almost law that to be a woman and a lover of literature one must love Jane Austen—Austen may have been stifled by the use of her given name in a way that the Brontës and George Eliot would not be. True, this notion is speculation, but just as Virginia Woolf longed to see what Austen’s next six books would have been had she not died “just as she was beginning to feel confident of her own success” (120) so I long to see what a further six novels could have been if she had become “another self”—a self able to leave not just the parlor, but the household entirely.

The Brontës and The Bells

Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë published *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell* in 1846. Charlotte and Emily followed their debut respectively with the publication of *Jane Eyre* in October of 1847 (Charlotte) and that of *Wuthering Heights* just a few months later in December (Emily). According to Charlotte herself, during the sisters' time together in Haworth, they began writing stories for each other, finding it "the highest stimulus, as well as the liveliest pleasure we had known from childhood upwards" (Brontë). However, even when the women—prodded, if not entirely pushed, by Charlotte—published their works for the world at large, they chose to "veil" their names. Though perhaps inspired by their father's early requirement that the children wear masks while quizzing them intensely in hopes that the masks would inspire "confidence and candor" (Ciuraru, 4), the decision to adopt pseudonyms was ultimately made because:

We had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their rewards, a flattery, which is not true praise. (Charlotte Brontë's Notes on the Pseudonyms Used)

Even with, or perhaps because of, their undoubtedly secluded lifestyles, the Brontës were able to recognize the derision that women writers of the time period were often met with by the public and reviewers alike. In her satirical novel, *Cold Comfort Farm* (1932), Stella Gibbons cannot resist touching on this very point in her description of the buffoon-ish "scholar" Mr. Meyerbug (or Mybug, as he comes to be known). He is writing a book examining his view that "no woman could have written [*Wuthering Heights*]. It's male stuff. [...] He was a tremendous genius, a sort of second Chatterton—and his sisters hated him because of his genius" (Gibbons, 102). Though *Cold Comfort Farm* is a work of fiction and Mr. Myerbug clearly a satirical character, his comments mark the feeling of the time, and

there were many dwelling outside the covers of humorous novels who were absolutely convinced that it could not have been written by a female, and that if it had, it was the work of a distinctly base example of her gender (more fools they).

Reviews and speculation on the sex of the three authors made Charlotte's worries seem well founded. Though *Poems* were reviewed very highly, and *Jane Eyre* was read aloud by Queen Victoria, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote that "the qualities, half savage and half freethinking, expressed in *Jane Eyre* are likely to suit a model governess or schoolmistress" (Barrett Browning in Ciuraru, 11), and another critic—though admitting that the novel was clearly a masterpiece—couldn't help but call the author a "rather brazen Miss." Though *Jane Eyre* was gripping by any account, it shocked many, and reviewers were divided on the gender of the author. "No woman *could have* penned the 'Autobiography of Jane Eyre,'" wrote one reviewer, going on to say that "it is all that one of the other sex might invent, and much more" (though Jane's constant struggle towards freedom seems to beg the question: could any man have written *Jane Eyre*?). One reviewer, apparently especially obsessed with the morality of women and the coarser aspects of the novel, wrote that Jane Eyre was "a triumph if written by a man, 'odious' if written by a woman" (Ciuraru, 13). *Wuthering Heights*, meanwhile, was being derided completely for its "details of cruelty, inhumanity and the most diabolical hate and vengeance," according to one reviewer and many more like it.

Charlotte and Anne eventually traveled to London so that Charlotte could reveal herself to her publishing house Smith, Elder and Company, and to her editor, W.S. Williams. Emily, feeling hurt and betrayed by the *Wuthering Heights*' reviews, refused to accompany her sisters, which prompted a later letter from Charlotte to Williams requesting that he

pretend their meeting had never happened, and that he had never learned the sisters true identity. Until her death, Charlotte was published as “Currer Bell.”

Following Emily’s death in 1848, Anne fell ill with the same disease—tuberculosis—and realized that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* would be her last novel. Perhaps because of the coming freedom of death, Anne’s preface to the second edition of the novel was remarkably candid:

Acton Bell is neither Currer nor Ellis Bell, and therefore let not his faults be attributed to them. As to whether to name be real or fictitious, it cannot greatly signify to those who know him only by his works. As little, I should think, can it matter whether the writer so designated is a man, or a woman, as one or two of my critics profess to have discovered [...] I make no effort to dispute it, because, in my own mind, I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. (Anne Brontë in Ciuraru, 18-19)

As the preface reveals, though still entirely wedded to the identity of her pseudonym, Anne was nonetheless pushing back against the readers and reviewers who felt that the gender of the author must define the work. Charlotte was fighting her own battles against reviewers’ bias against women, most violently, ironically, against George Lewes, the man who would later become George Eliot’s lover and staunchest supporter. Though originally a proponent of Currer Bell’s work, as time passed, Lewes began to “engage in reductive criticism on grounds of gender” (21). As Barbara Caine puts it in her essay “G.H. Lewes and ‘The Lady Novelists,’” Charlotte did not fit into Lewes categorization of “women’s writing” and he “chastised her severely for her lack of womanliness” (Caine 88). The first four pages of his review of *Shirley* in the *Edinburgh Review* were dedicated to Lewes’ discovery that Currer Bell was, indeed, a woman, and to remind readers that “the grand function of a woman, it must always be recollected, is and ever must be, MATERNITY” (Lewes in Caine, 90). His review of *Shirley* might in some ways be seen as a scathing response to a letter

from Charlotte, in which she mirrored her sister Anne, and pled: "I wish you did not think me a woman. I wish all reviewers believed 'Currer Bell' to be a man; they would be more just to him" (Charlotte Brontë in Caine, 90). Though the Brontës had become the Bells in order to escape the very gendered reviews that Lewes gave, and which Charlotte and Anne protested so strongly against, their true identities could not remain secret. It was the loss of their "other identities," much more than the identities themselves that caused the Brontës such strife.

Mary Ann Evans and George Eliot

Though Mary Ann Evans' true identity would also be revealed in her lifetime, she is different from the Brontës in that her pseudonym, George Eliot, is what the author's books are still published under. But even before becoming George Eliot, Evans was not content with her name, or her way of life. She moved from Mary Anne to Marian, and at the time of her death was known as Mary Ann. She was shipped off to boarding school at the age of five, and then shipped home at the death of her mother to head up the household, before rejecting her father's religion and leaving his household (Ciuraru, 49-51). Evans' entrance to intellectual circles came when she began writing and editing for London's *Westminster Review*, but she was encouraged to keep her involvement under wraps, since "a female editor was as unheard of as a female surgeon; to be known to have one would have done no service to the review" (Brenda Maddox in Ciuraru, 52). Though her involvement with the literary community was kept quiet it wasn't until 1857, when she published her first story in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* that George Eliot emerged as the nom de plume she would continue to use for the rest of her life and beyond.

Ironically, George H. Lewes played a much different role in Evans's life than he did in Austen's or the Brontës. Rather than the searing critic or shortsighted devotee he had been to Charlotte and Jane, respectively, to Evans he was a partner. Though Lewes was married, he and Evans were living together within a year of meeting, and she began referring to herself as "Mrs. George Lewes": "it is fair to say that without this passionate, supportive partnership, which would last until Lewes's death in 1878, George Eliot would not have been born," writes Ciuraru when discussing their love affair. It is certainly true that Lewes' first name was the inspiration for the first name of the name that would grace the cover of seven masterful novels, including *Adam Bede*, *Middlemarch*, and *The Mill on the Floss*. "Eliot," however, was chosen for no more romantic of a reason than that it was a "good mouth-filling, easily pronounced word" (Evans in Ciuraru, 55-56).

With her first novels, 1858's *Scenes of Clerical Life* and 1859's *Adam Bede*, Evans and Lewes managed to keep George Eliot's true identity a secret. For *Scenes of Clerical Life* she felt it especially important to mask her identity, and since she was "invoking autobiographical ideas about religion, faith, and unrequited love," she made no effort to disabuse Blackwood of his belief that George Eliot was not just a man but a member of the clergy. Aside from this fear of backlash based on religious controversy, there was the fact that no matter the topic of her novels, she wanted to separate the infamous Mary Ann Evans, living in sin with a married man, from the author George Eliot, whose works were so well-received by a reading a reviewing public.

It was not long, though, before people began to wonder. Charles Dickens praised the "exquisite truth and delicacy" that *Scenes of Clerical Life* contained, but added that he had "observed what seem to me to be womanly touches, in those moving fictions, that the

assurance on the title-page is insufficient to satisfy me, even now” (Ciuraru 45). Evans, however, remained reluctant to step forward and claim her works, which left the way open for frauds, one Joseph Liggins in particular. Incorrectly fingered by Elizabeth Gaskell as the author of *Scenes of Clerical Life* and *Adam Bede*, Gaskell stepped into the spotlight without pause, and accused Blackwell and Sons of cheating him of his royalties (Donaldson, 55). When the truth came out, Liggins was disgraced, but Evans did not escape entirely unscathed either. The deception was met with “a combination of resentment that [Evans] had remained so well hidden for so long, and a moral outrage that the praised author was not only a woman, but also self-educated and living in an extramarital relationship” (55). It is at this point that Evans appears to have completely abandoned her given name, “replying to letters addressed to ‘Miss Evans’ with a chilly correction” and going so far as to tell one friend that “I request that any one who has a regard for me will cease to speak of me by my maiden name” (Ciuraru, 57). She was Mrs. George Lewes, or she was George Eliot. She recognized no other identity. With the one name she rejected the patriarchal society that would not allow divorce, and the other she claimed her seat at the table of (mostly male) literary giants.

In a complete turnabout from his earlier statements about Austen and the Brontës, Lewes allowed Evans to become a completely different kind of woman author. To her, he allowed the “range of intellectual interests and [...] experience which [he] had previously denied to women” (Caine, 101). Evans did not have to work within the strict guidelines Lewes had set for other women novelists, and he became her staunchest defender. In a letter to feminist author Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, Lewes wrote:

The object of anonymity was to get the book judged on its own merits, and not prejudged as the work of a woman, or of a particular woman. It is quite clear that

people would have sniffed at it if they had known the writer to be a woman but they can't now unsay their admiration. (Donaldson, 55)

This attitude, completely contrary to his own reviews of Austen and Charlotte Brontë, was reflected in the lifestyle changes his union with Evans brought about. In allowing Evans the opportunity to focus on her writing, he, most ironically, took over the very domestic duties he had once likened to a woman's ability to write fiction (Caine, 101).

Even more so than the Brontës, Evans came to absolutely inhabit her pen name. By becoming George Eliot she had gained influence and power: she rejected the unloved, ugly girl she had been, and became a beloved novelist living alongside a man who loved her absolutely. By the time *Daniel Deronda* was published in 1876, the public had forgiven Evans, both for her unconventional lifestyle and for the trick she had played on them. Though the church refused her final request to bury her in Westminster Abbey because of her rejection of their doctrine, the public adored her. She was a "literary giant"—a woman who, even after Lewes' death, was loved and respected. But this woman is not remembered as Mary Ann Evans, or even Mary Ann Lewes. She is George Eliot.

Such was the remarkable power of pen names. Even when the masks were taken off, and the author as character stepped aside to reveal the author as person, pseudonyms could be absolutely transformative, and they certainly were for the Brontës and for Evans. The naturally reclusive Brontës might never have found the courage to publish their remarkable Gothic novels without the Bells, and the towering figure in literature who is George Eliot might, as Lewes predicted, have been "sniffed at" had she published under her given name. In Evans' case, it is at least true that Mary Ann Evans doesn't have quite the ring to it that George Eliot does, even more than a century and a half since her last published work.

Modern-Day Case Studies

My early morning call to Paula Brackston, who goes by P.J. Brackston for the three books in her “Brothers Grimm Mystery” series—*Gretel and the Case of the Missing Frog Prints* (2015), *Once Upon a Crime* (2015), and *The Case of the Fickle Mermaid* (2016)—was fraught with malfunctions. After finally convincing my cellular provider that I was not calling someone in Wales by accident, I was informed I needed to enter a credit card number to complete the call. I dutifully (and perhaps gullibly) gave my information to an automated voice, only to be told these numbers weren’t valid. In frustration, I emailed Brackston, frantically apologetic: “I am so sorry about this, but it seems that international calling and I do not get along well at all. I wonder if you might be able to give me a call and see if that works?”

When Brackston took the lead, we were finally able to connect. She acknowledged one gender difference in literature straightaway, in an accented voice that for some unknown reason reminded me of the heights themselves from *Wuthering Heights* (It’s possible the research for this project has sunk into my subconscious.): “You didn’t leave school and become a writer, particularly if you were female,” she said when discussing how her career began. So, after finishing up at Lancaster University in the early 80s, Brackston busied herself with other things, not returning to writing until her thirties when she decided to “stop doing everything else and try to do this.”

A strong interest in reading and writing as a child compelled her to enter her writing in the Eisteddfod festival every year (a Welsh festival that celebrates literature, music and performance), and even won some prizes. “Growing up in Wales we certainly have a culture of storytelling, so that seemed to be a way to spend my time,” she added. “I’d often make up

stories and tell them to my brother and friends, or just write them down.” She was inspired by C.G. Wodehouse, Scott Fitzgerald—“mostly male writers” she freely admitted. But later Rose Tremain (author of *Restoration*) caught her attention: “I just was so transported by this book. I thought, ‘This is what I want to write; this is how I want to write.’”

From prior research, I knew that PJ Brackston’s website takes you straight to the “Brother Grimm Mystery” books, and that visitors must choose a direction on the animated signpost on the homepage to go to the “Witches” series. On the PJ site, there is no way to know that the author is Paula. On the “Witches” page, however, the opposite is true: Paula is everywhere and PJ is nowhere to be found. The two authors, though linked, seem right off the bat to be marketed very distinctly, almost like separate personas.

The books in what Brackston refers to as her “Witch” series now number five. They began with *The Witch’s Daughter*, a New York Times Bestseller that has now sold over 200,000 copies. Though none of the previous books in either series have come close to that kind of acclaim, sales have been steady. The “Witch” books were published by St. Martin’s Griffin while the three “Brothers Grimm Mystery” novels were published by Pegasus Books, LLC.

My conversation with Carolyn Haines had a much less fraught beginning. Dogs were barking in the background (Haines has four) and another accent met my ear: this one warmer—a true Southern drawl. I got the feeling that if this weren’t a phone conversation I would have already been offered a cold glass of sweet tea.

Born in Lucedale, Mississippi, Haines took a long path before becoming a published novelist. Both her parents were journalists, and during her own ten-years as a photojournalist she became “fanatical” about short stories: “Flannery O’ Connor, Ricky

Georewell—the voices of these Southern women,” she said. “Because I was used to writing three-page articles, a short story seemed doable. I never, ever considered that I would write novels.” Encouraged by her agent, however, she set out to do so. After toying with romantic novels (“I needed to make money writing, so I went to the bookstore and watched what people were reading and everybody was walking around with these stacks of romances,” she said.) she eventually was published under a Harlequin mystery line—for these novels using the pseudonym Caroline Burns. She then published a comedic book about the relationship with her brother, also under a pseudonym, in this case so that her brother’s identity would remain hidden from the public eye.

Haines has remained in Mississippi, and so have the characters in her “Sarah Booth Delaney” series, for which she uses her real name. These are lighthearted mystery books. In her own words, “While Sarah Booth [...] and the Zinnia gang take crime very seriously, the tone of these books is humorous,” (*Carolyn Haines – RB Chesterton*). But as R.B. Chesterton, Haines’ pseudonym, she allows herself to explore the, as she puts it, “darker” side of crime writing, where the reader is given much less assurance that everything will turn out for the best. The name R.B. Chesterton is, however, a slight disguise at best in the Age of the Internet. The top three results for Googling “Carolyn Haines” are her Wikipedia page, and two different sections of her personal website. The teaser for her Wikipedia page immediately acknowledges that she is “Carolyn Haines (sometimes credited as R.B. Chesterton). Googling “R.B. Chesterton” gives you the result: “Carolyn Haines – R.B. Chesterton.”

Haines has published two novels under her pseudonym R.B. Chesterton, both with Pegasus Books, LLC, as well as one short story that is available as an electronic book

through amazon Digital Services LLC. The two R.B. Chesterton books are *The Seeker* (2014) and *The Darkling* (2013). The Sarah Booth Delany Mystery series is published under her legal name, Carolyn Haines, and currently consists of 16 novels. She has published eight other novels, that on her website she says she considers “darker” under Haines.

While both Brackston and Haines came to me through my contacts at Pegasus Books, LLC, the publishing house I worked for as an intern in Manhattan, J.T. Ellison agreed to speak with me based on the recommendation of Haines. Her speech, unlike that of the other two, is almost entirely regulated—without accent or dialect.

As a child, she read “anything.” She was encouraged by her parents early on to browse bookshelves in a home where no book was off-limits: “I read everything across the board: all genres, all sexes. It’s probably why I became a writer.” This love of reading translated to the desire to write her own books. In our interview, Ellison said she has been writing “my whole life” and she began college with the view of keeping it that way—“I majored in politics and English creative writing.” But her professors were far from encouraging her pursuit of this profession. “My professors kept giving me Bs on my work because—and this is a direct quote—it sounded too much like ‘B grade detective fiction.’ My thesis advisor told me I would never get published, so I stopped.”

After spending years in politics, she met her now-husband, got married, and moved to Nashville. It had been eight years since she’d written anything creative. After adopting a cat, Ellison began working for the vet who took care of it. On the third day of that job, “God smiled, and I blew my back out lifting a dog that had to have surgery.” Homebound during recovery, she demanded B grade detective fiction from her local library and was given John Sanford. Shortly after beginning his “Praise” series, she realized this was what she wanted.

“I sat down, and I wrote a paragraph. I started to cry because that was what I was meant to be doing and every fiber of my being knew it. I never stopped.”

While Ellison is her legal name, she is the only one of the three whose given name is impossible to find online. When asked what it might be in our interview, her answer was brief: “I don’t share that.”

Ellison has published a total of 16 novels, three of which are part of the “Brit in the FBI” series and are collaborative works with Catherine Coulter. Four fall into the “Samantha Owens” Series, and eight into the “Lieutenant Taylor Jackson” series. The Taylor Jackson books were the first to be published, with the first, *All the Pretty Girls*, published in 2007. The Samantha Owens books followed with the first, *A Deeper Darkness*, arriving in 2012. She has written one standalone thriller, *No One Knows* (2016).

Pen Names as a Marker of Separation

With the exception of Ellison, a quick search on these women proves how it has become increasingly difficult to keep worlds from colliding as a professional in the public sphere. But unlike their predecessors, the Brontës and George Eliot, for example, the easy access to their legal names has not proved detrimental to their personal or professional careers. In many ways, in fact, they acknowledged and welcomed the fact that their pseudonyms do not entirely hide their day-to-day selves.

“On Facebook I link [my names],” said Haines. “It’s ‘R.B. Chesterton and Carolyn Haines’. I try very hard not to have it be a secret. It was meant to be a signal to readers: Okay, this is a little different—don’t buy it without investigating.”

This idea—that authors trying their hand at a different style of writing or beginning on a different series shouldn't confuse their authors—was one that was echoed by Brackston: "I wrote the 'Witch' books first and used my name, which seems the logical thing to do," she explained. "When I came to publish the 'Gretel' [Brother Grimm Mystery] books, first of all I suppose I didn't want to confuse readers of my 'Witch' books. This was a different series, it was a different type of book. I think it is quite irritating when you like an author and they do something different and you haven't realized it's a different collection of books. I wanted to avoid that."

Ellison's decision to use initials, on the other hand, was in no way prompted by the need to make a distinction between one series and another. In fact, Ellison first submitted her book under her "real name"—but her (male) agent quickly asked her about the possibility of using initials. She agreed enthusiastically, "trying to fit my whole name on a cover? Not going to happen." And besides, she added, "The only people who call me by my real name are my family and my husband. Everybody else my whole life has called me J.T."

She was, however, very aware that her "subject matter is a little creepy" and was eager to put some distance between her given name and the name plastered on covers in bookstores across the country: "I don't want people to be able to look me up and come find me and knock on my door," she explained. "It gives me a level of anonymity that I find very refreshing. It helps if I get a terrible review—I think, 'poor J.T.' It separates, a little bit, the career from the person."

Gender and Genre

Towards the end of the “why pseudonyms?” discussion, each author brought up gender. Ellison felt that her material called for a neutral name: “I was writing very dark material. [The books] would appeal to men, and we didn’t want to put any barriers in place for them to think that this is romantic suspense just because a woman wrote it.”

Brackston tried to remove her works from gender altogether, while still (hopefully) reaping the benefits of being a male author: “The choice of using initials rather than a name was very deliberate, because it was androgynous. I didn’t necessarily want to take another name because women’s fiction was all ‘fiction written by a woman.’ By using the initials I sort of got around all that.”

For Haines, it came down to the gender of readership in her genre of choice: “[The decision to use initials] was purposefully to be gender ambiguous. I wanted the cloak of being the man, because there is a perception that women are not as scary. It’s like in the thriller genre, men writers sell better, and the same is true in horror.”

Each of these reasons bring up an interesting point: that the decision to keep their gender shrouded was made—in some way—because of the genre they had chosen to write. Each of the three women I interviewed wrote under the umbrella of crime fiction, and for Haines and Brackston, the difference between the series they used their given name for and the series they used initials for was how “dark” they considered their subject matter, perhaps because there is a belief that women can sell well writing lighthearted crime, but for the more dismal, gorier section of the genre, they’re better off masking any tendency towards femininity—even if that includes their names.

Haines voiced this sentiment exactly in the first minutes of her interview: “To be a woman in romance, or even literary fiction—that’s okay. But if you’re a woman writing crime, it’s a little bit harder.” Brackston agreed with this synopsis: “We can hash out our romances as much as we like, but if we want to write something a bit cleverer, or a bit more important, then you should be a man, really.”

For her novels, specifically, she added this: “I think the subject matter and the genre is more male, or at least less specifically for female readers. A lot of females read crime and a lot of male readers read fantasy, but I don’t know that they’d read my ‘Witch’ books because they are female protagonists, and they’re quite female books in a lot of ways. I think also the ‘Brother Grimm Mystery’ books are humorous and satire and crime, and maybe that’s something men read more of as well.”

According to Linda Rodriguez, herself the authors of the two “Skeet Bannion” mystery novels, and winner of the Malice Domestic Best First Traditional Mystery Novel Competition, thrillers were “originally written by, for, and about men.” In her article “Who Reads What: Thrillers, Mysteries, and Gender Lines” she discusses the rise of the thriller genre, beginning with the 1903 thriller *The Riddle of the Sands* by Erskine Childers. According to Rodriguez, this novel had not a single woman character until Childers’ publisher forced him to add a female as a background character. “Women were only occasional minor characters within thrillers, and the primary readers of thrillers were men,” said Rodriguez. According to Rodriguez, Ken Follett’s 1978 novel *The Eye of the Needle* was the first widely acclaimed thriller to adopt a female protagonist.

Case-by-Case: Do Gender Neutral Pen Names Attract More Male Readers?

Since crime and thrillers are genres acknowledged for attracting male readers, the three women interviewed spoke candidly about the fact that their adoption of ambiguous names was partially an effort to attract these readers.

“Women will read male writers, but men won’t read female writers,” said Haines, echoing the facts found in a Goodreads.com graphic that found 85 percent of women authors are other women, while readership for male authors is split 50/50. “It’s the old ‘women scribblers’ mentality.”

For Haines, the decision to adopt a pen name seems to have been incredibly helpful in attracting male readers, at least according to a brief purview of the genders of her Amazon reviewers. When attempting to decode the gender of reviewers, I judged first based on username, it seems safe to assume that “John” identifies as male while “Carol” and “JerseyGirl” identify as female. If the name offered no clues, I examined their recent reviews. Those who had reviewed women’s pants and exclaimed that, “they fit perfectly!” were then categorized as women. If there were no discernable, concrete clues to gender—for example, if the user in question had only ever reviewed books—then they were categorized as unknown. By no means as foolproof method, but at least help in getting a sense of whether Ellion, Haines, and Brackston are gaining traction with male readers. Using this methodology, the difference in who was reviewing Haines’ “Sarah Booth Delaney” novels and who reviewed the works published under the name R.B. Chesterton was striking. *Bones of a Feather* (2012) and *Bone to Be Wild* (2015), both published under Haines’ legal name, received zero reviews from discernibly male reviewers within their 20 most recent reviews for 60 and 108 reviews, respectively. *The Darkling*, on the other hand,

received one review from a male reviewer within 20 of its most recent reviews (with a grand total of 50 reviews) and within the next ten reviews another three male readers popped in to give their opinions, as well. For *The Seeker*, the 27 reviews yielded a total of four male reviewers and seven unknown reviewers. R.B. Chesterton is definitely garnering more reviews by male readers than Carolyn Haines is—and a jump from zero reviews from male readers to four is nothing to sneeze at. Though this could be as much due to the previously mentioned “darker” material that the Chesterton novels discuss, at this point, it is hard to tell which came first.

Though the difference in customer reviews for P.J. Brackston and Paula Brackston is slighter than the difference between R.B. Chesterton and Carolyn Haines, it is still noticeable. Two of the novels from the collection of what Brackston refers to as her “Witch” books, *The Witch’s Daughter* and *The Silver Witch*, each received only one review from a male reader with three readers of an unknown gender reviewing. These numbers were taken from the most recent 20 reviews for the 828 total reviews for *The Witch’s Daughter*, and the 13 total reviews given for *The Silver Witch*. P.J.’s numbers, though, see an uptick from one to three male reviewers according to the 17 customer reviewers for *Gretel and the Case of the Missing Frog Prints* (the first in the “Brothers Grimm Mystery” series). For that novel, there are also four reviewers of unknown gender instead of three. One possible reason that there isn’t as much of a jump in the number of male readers as there is for Chesterton versus Haines is that there’s less of a difference in Brackston’s material. Though the “Witch” books undoubtedly have more romance, the “Brothers Grimm Mystery” books still feature a female protagonist, and have a focus on fairytales and fantasy that male readers may not be as attracted to, no matter the gender of the author. Still: there are more

men reading and reviewing the “Brothers Grimm Mystery” novels, and the fact that Brackston uses initials for this series cannot be discounted.

Ellison’s case is different from those of the other two authors, however, for the simple reason that J.T. Ellison is the only name she publishes under, while both Haines and Brackston work under two different hats. Perhaps it is for this reason that Ellison’s male reviews remain steady at two for the three novels I examined, *What Lies Behind*, *The End Game*, and *All the Pretty Girls*, while the unknown reviewers wavered at two, three, and four. However, Ellison’s one standalone novel, *No One Knows*, was reviewed by only one man in the most recent 20 of its 59 total reviews, though there were five unknown reviewers. Men are consistently reading and reviewing Ellison, but with no separation between the different styles of her novels and the different material tackled, it is possible that once a man has seen *What Lies Behind* reviewed as “romance” (a categorization that Ellison discussed later) they might be less likely to pick up *All the Pretty Girls*.

Editorial Reviews and “Best Of...” Lists

What Lies Behind was dubbed “romantic suspense” by a review in *Publishers Weekly*, a categorization that Ellison feels speaks to the bias she encounters not just from award-givers and readers, but also from reviewers. The book in question contained “no sex and no kissing.” When Ellison read the review, she “lost her mind.”

“I don’t write romantic suspense, I’m writing thriller: the story is paramount, the relationship is not. It drives me absolutely bonkers that because I’m a woman of course I must be writing romantic suspense. No! Where are you getting that?”

The review in question—which is actually quite favorable—says that *What Lies Behind* “will leave fans of romantic suspense eagerly anticipating the next installment,” and it is the “romantic” that Ellison so clearly takes issue with. The review mentions that protagonist Samantha Owens is joined by her boyfriend in this installment, and that their “missions converge,” but if what Ellison says about the lack of sex and even kissing contained in this novel is true, and since she is the author I think we can take her word for it, then the mere presence of a relationship doesn’t necessarily indicate romance. The fact that *Publishers Weekly* felt that it did, makes me agree with Ellison that there may subconsciously be something else at play here, or at the very least that this reviewer has missed the point.

In a *Kirkus* review for one of the novels Ellison wrote with Catherine Coulter, *The End Game*, the two protagonists are a man and a woman, but there is no mention of romance in the synopsis provided in the review. Instead, the novel is described as being “increasingly violent” and as using “scary technology” and “physical action to produce a tip-top thriller.” Perhaps it is the discrepancy between the wording in the respective reviews of *What Lies Behind* and *The End Game* that gives Ellison pause: is there some invisible line she crossed in *What Lies Behind* that she and Coulter stayed well away from in *The End Game*? According to the reviews, men and women are thrown together in both novels, but it is *What Lies Behind* where the boyfriend is key, and the story is called romantic. Maybe it is even as simple as the difference in who reviewed the books, though unfortunately no bylines were published so it is impossible to know the gender of the reviewers.

One of Brackston’s reviews also calls her work “romantic”—in this case “romantic historical fiction”—but since the *Publishers Weekly* review in question refers to *The Witch’s*

Daughter, which was published under Paula Brackston, I can't imagine this driving her as "bonkers" as the same classification drove Ellison. The reviews for the three Brothers Grimm Mystery novels remain solidly non-gendered: *Publishers Weekly* calls *Gretel and the Case of the Missing Frog Prints* full of "folktale whimsy" and says that Gretel has a "sardonic adult voice;" *The Case of the Fickle Mermaid* describes Gretel as being a "no-nonsense" hero with a "sarcastic tongue," and say the book itself is a "blend of fantasy and murder." *Once Upon A Crime* come the closest to catering towards making Gretel seem like a girls-only heroine, since her likes include the ability to "indulge her tastes for fine clothing" and "lusting for some "Timmy Chew shoes." There are also subtle differences between the reviews for Carolyn Haines and the reviews for R.B. Chesterton. *Rock-A-Bye Bones* is called "cozy" and *Bones of a Feather* is full of "great dollops of charm," while *The Darkling* is a "sharp and edgy gothic thriller" and *The Seeker* "deftly blends the supernatural and the historical." Once again, however, I can't perceive Haines being offended by the difference in these reviews—after all, the books themselves are so different. But Haines and Brackston both discussed using their pen names as signposts for readers, and I do wonder if this separation between darker and lighter material helps clue in the reviewers as well.

Even with the potentially biased language Ellison has encountered in her reviews, she remained more hesitant than her colleagues to say men were only reading her books because of her androgynous name, disliked being asked to make a hard-and-fast judgment. "I know a lot of guys who read women. I have a lot of male readers." However, she does think that male reviewers are responsible for perpetrating a certain kind of "guy's club" mentality: "When a guy does his "Best of..." list, it's very rare that there's a woman on it. [...] There's a legitimacy that I think the industry has placed on male writers that women

writers don't have. Male readers are getting the news "Best Books of the Year Written by Men!" so why would they even read women?"

However, it seems that, for 2015 at least, the tide is shifting. "The 10 Best Books of 2015" is a list selected by the editors of the *New York Times Book Review* and this year it included seven women. That's right, women constituted over half of the best books written in 2015, as chosen by the reviewers at the top of the literary food chain. Of the 50 Poetry and Fiction books included in the "100 Notable Books of 2015," women once again took charge, though this time by the incredibly slim margin of 26 to 24, but even equal numbers is a win. National Public Radio's Best Books of 2015 includes an incredibly detailed slew of pages that allows readers to break down the kind of books they're interested into specific categories. There's the option for "Eye-Opening Reads," "Identity and Culture," "It's All Geek to Me," "Ladies First," and "Seriously Great Writers," just to name a few. I chose to examine the category "The Dark Side," since one of the varied reasons the authors I interviewed chose to use pen names was to separate their lighter fiction, or their personal lives, from the darker work they may be writing. "The Dark Side" included 60 books, 23 of which were written by women: honestly a number I was pleasantly surprised by, though not up to the high standards that the *New York Times Book Review* is apparently determined to set (maybe they started to be ashamed of their VIDA numbers?). Though these recent compilations of "best of" lists seem remarkably unbiased, it is less clear whether individual lists follow that same trend. I would assume they do not, since the numbers show that whether a reader is run of the mill or a top-notch reviewer, our preferences are biased towards our own gender.

The Term “Woman Writer”

But whether the numbers hold up in the “best of” lists, “Bias by the Numbers” show that there is still overarching bias, so it is hardly a surprise that Ellison assumed the “best of” bias would be just as prevalent—though I am pleased to learn she was incorrect. As previously show, awards, in particular, provide instance after instance of underrepresentation of women. The natural question, then, is whether women authors and male authors should be awarded and categorized separately—much like the separation in the Academy Awards’ “Best Female Actor” and “Best Male Actor.” In answering this question of separation, the authors were wary (perhaps fearing the sexist-seeming categorization reminiscent of Wikipedia’s faux pas).

“I don’t really understand this whole ‘woman writer’ thing: I’m a writer,” Brackston said, firing up a bit at my retelling of the Wikipedia tale, followed by the following questions: “would you classify yourself as a writer or a woman writer? Is there a need for this difference?” In response to these questions, she fired back: “Do I have to put ‘woman’ in front of everything that I do? Am I a ‘woman’ driver, a ‘woman’ eater, a ‘woman’ patient? I can’t be a male writer, that’s not really an option, but it’s a slightly crazy thing that the default setting is male.”

Haines recalled a time in the publishing industry when there was a “push” for best male thriller writer and best woman thriller writer—similar to the division of the “Best Actor” categories for the Oscars. She vacillated on the issue of separate categories, clearly seeing both the merits and the issues with a system like this one: “A lot of people opposed that [separation] for the very reason you’re saying: ‘why should women have their own separate category, we can stand on our own, we can be judged against men’” she explained.

“But when you’re trying to level the playing field and trying to change perception, and you’re trying to get female writers read more, would you rather not win in any category, or would you rather win in the ‘Best Female Thriller’ category? And I don’t have an answer for that.”

The question of separation by gender in the literary landscape feeds into a debate about whether or not there is a feminine style of writing versus a masculine style of writing. Virginia Woolf believed that the very organization of writing was masculine, and encouraged women to look into changing the very way in which they wrote to better reflect the way women think and feel. This idea actually comes from the French theory *Ecriture feminine*, which technically translates as “feminine writing” and is often translated as “women’s writing.” According to *Ecriture feminine*, “symbolic discourse [language, in various contexts] is another means through which man objectifies the world, reduces it to his terms, speaks in place of everything and everyone else—including women” (Showalter, 362). Because everything we process, read, and write, and even the ways we process these things, is through a masculine lense, women are unable to fully express the inner workings of their worlds and of their processing devices. But how does *Ecriture feminine* translate to the novels we read, and to the novels Ellison, Haines, and Brackston are writing? Without going so far as to follow *Ecriture feminine* theory, is there still an everyday difference between male and female writing?

Brackston, Ellisonna and Haines gave noncommittal responses when asked whether or not it is possible to consistently tell the difference between men’s and women’s writing styles. The consensus to the follow-up question, whether or not they themselves can tell the difference between a woman and a man writing, was that there may be some subtle

distinctions but there is no surefire way to be able to tell what gender is in charge of telling the story—if the book jacket or Internet offers no clues. Though, unlike Woolf and in a pushback against Ecruite feminism, they don't seem to believe that writing styles must necessarily be separated into “masculine” and “feminine” categories.

The discussion then turned to their own writing, and whether or not readers can tell from their styles that they are women. Haines felt there were stereotypes in men's plotting that her own novels ignored: “I know that I have a lot of focus on friendship, on relationships, on more intricate intellect—I don't mean that in a superior way, but my plots turn on tidbits of knowledge, or some clue—whereas a ‘guy plot’ will often rely on action.”

Brackston felt that her choice of main character might tip readers off, since the gender of the protagonist might give away the gender of the author. “I'm not sure if having a female protagonist doesn't give it away,” she said, saying that Alexander McCall Smith's *No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency* was a notable exception. “But I don't think the style would give it away. Gretel [The protagonist in the “Brothers Grimm Mystery” series published under P.J.] is actually quite a masculine character herself, although she's very into fashion, the way she thinks and the single-mindedness.” So for Brackston, it's point of view, not the style, that might cue readers, reviewers, or even other writers into the gender of and androgynously named author.

Pseudonyms as Masks: Are Masculine Pen Names Anti-Feminist?

All of these women clearly believe there is a continuing gender bias when it comes to reading, awarding, and even reviewing novels written by women. But are their androgynous pen names exempting them from this bias? Though, as previously discussed,

their genders are easily discoverable with minimal research, the average reader who is probably not in the habit of Googling an author before purchasing a book might not find out an author's legal name before purchasing. So: do these three authors feel that their audience knows they are women writers?

The responses were varied, but Ellison and Haines both had stories where either fans or even award-givers hadn't realized their genders. "I still get fan mail to Ellison. All the time—it's great," said Ellison. Haines, when attending the Mississippi Book Festival, said it was clear from the invitation that it was R.B. Chesterton who was invited, "but Carolyn Haines was not, and so the audience did not anticipate that I would be a woman," she said. "They were a bit like—'you're R.B. Chesterton?' I thought it was fun."

Brackston had her own story about identity confusion caused by her pseudonym: "I did write another book before I was published by Pegasus which didn't fit again, and I wrote that under a completely different name [P.J. Davies]. I think it sold four or five copies, but it was short-listed for a book award in this country and I had to go to the award ceremony, and I didn't know who the hell I was. They gave me a nametag with my name on it, but the book had a different name. Nobody knew who I was. In the end I didn't win the award, which was probably a good thing, since they might not have given it to me. I would have had a total identity crisis at that point in that situation.

All three told these stories with light laughter, since evidently they considered these experiences nothing more than amusing mix-ups. But in some sense, this is the essence of taking a pen name: you are disguising who you are as an author, and in the case of Ellison, Brackston, and Haines' use of initials, hoping to be taken for something you are not—a male writer rather than a female.

“I think that I made the best decision I could at the time I made the decision,” said Haines of her choice to take a pseudonym. “Has it always been the right decision? I don’t know, because I don’t know what would have happened if I’d made another decision. I don’t think that publishers and readers set off to be prejudiced, I think it’s the same prejudice that all artists face.”

Ellison, in particular, was quite open about the problems that could arise from being a woman taking an ambiguously gendered pen name. As the only one whose given name is not available through any media outlet, she has a layer of anonymity that the other two do not. Publishers overseas, she says, have even gone so far as to refrain from putting her picture on the jacket. “They figure, why give them a reason not to buy it?” she explained. But though her name is still disguised online, her photo is still readily available. “It’s all changing now with the Internet being as global as it is. It’s very hard to hide that I’m not a man. Still there are some people who are under rocks and that’d be great.” This willingness for her gender identity to remain hidden reveals that whether or not Ellison chose to go by J.T. solely for the purpose of avoiding gender bias, it was definitely a consideration.

I asked Ellison to expand upon “great”—for instance, does the feminist part of her feel that commercial success that comes from effectively hiding that fact that she is a woman give her any qualms—and she very candidly admitted how very tangled this web can become: “I’m perpetuating the stereotype for sure. There’s nothing I can do about that. It exists, and there are only so many walls you can climb.” Ellison feels, that by taking an ambiguous name, she is removing some of these walls, albeit only for herself. “There comes a point where it’s like okay, I’m using initials, it was a great entrée, it helped me get male readers from the very beginning, but a lot of other things did too.” Ellison’s pen name may

have given her a leg up, but in breaking through walls in her personal career, she has left women who continue to use their own names on the other side. “J.T.” may have allowed her to go places that a name like “Susan” wouldn’t have allowed her to, but in that same sense, her success hasn’t made being published and winning awards any easier or any more of the norm for “Susan.”

Though all three women concede that gender played a role, perhaps even a large role, in their decision to take a pseudonym, it wasn’t the only reason. “The bigger issue at the moment is seeing the writer as a brand,” Brackston said in closing. “Your name is that trademark, and it’s quite difficult to have any degree of success and then to step out of that. I think the brand issue will get bigger and the gender issue will hopefully fade.” In other words, Ellison is hopeful that pen names, when used at all, will merely become ways to help readers distinguish one series from another, or ways for the author to experiment with an “other I.” But in either case, women will not be choosing a pen name because of gender bias. A good indicator of knowing when we’ve arrived at this point will be when more women and men alike choose pseudonyms that are also women’s names.

These are not women who, like George Eliot or Charlotte Brontë, are fighting against a public long used to liberally praising men for their literary efforts while shunning women for theirs. These are women who, even though they are writing in a genre that has historically been seen as being written and read by men, have managed to find success. True, they have masked their identities, but the masks are thin, and even when removed, the knowledge of their gender does not bring criticism as it once might have. The playing field is not even, but it is getting closer, and according to the women interviewed, avoiding

a gendered “box” is only one of the many reasons that women today are choosing to use pen names.

Conclusion: Answering the Call

After an examination of my interviews and other data showing gender inequities in the publishing fields, I have become convinced that strategies for change need to start at the top of the publishing industry, with publishers themselves. If more women are to win awards, be reviewed, and generally find their way into the hands of the reading public, publishers need to buy and publish more books by women. If my brief examination of just one publishing house, Pegasus Books, LLC, is representative of others (which the data suggests is so) then in at least pockets of the publishing industry, women are underrepresented, and since these numbers are mirrored when it comes to awards and reviews, it seems systemic rather than accidental.

It's true that female authors who take pen names today may not do so purely because of gender bias reasons, but there may be subtle overtures of gender in their choices. In fact, one of the main reasons cited by the authors I spoke with was their desire to separate their private lives from their working personas. This separation also sometimes existed in order to separate the author of one series from another. In either case, their pseudonyms are characters in their own right. These are new versions of a "shield"—not explicitly a gender shield as in the case of George Eliot but a different kind of protection. Still, when given a choice, all three female authors chose to take gender neutral pen names—not another female name—just as J.K. Rowling chose to become Robert Galbraith instead of Robin. We have to at least consider that these female authors seem to feel, perhaps subconsciously, that there is merit to distancing themselves from their gender. The publishing results show there is still a bias, sometimes shrouded: hiding in phrases like

“romantic suspense,” and in the lack of space given to women authors in major reviewing journals.

Today, due to the Internet, anybody who takes the extra step can find out the gender of the author, but a male reader going to the bookshelf is still more likely to pick up a book by John Grisham rather than one by Sara Paretsky. In addition, it appears that publishing today, as perhaps is true with any industry, is driven less by quality and more by the ability to sell, and while books by women authors sell to other women, books by men sell equally to both genders. Even when women can choose any name they want and say gender issues did not come into play, they are still choosing men’s names or, at best, gender neutral names. Their choice of non-female names suggests that publishers and authors feel on some level, whether acknowledged or not, that male authors do better in the publishing industry, and women are using that to their advantages when they choose pen names.

The response to this gender bias, however, should not be a continued or renewed reliance on pen names as they were once used, nor does the pen name offer the same mode of protection or equalizing nature that it did for George Eliot and the Brontës (however briefly). Two of the women authors I spoke to are recognized, published authors under both their legal name and their pseudonym, and the third, Eliot, is known to be a woman. Though all three spoke about the possibility of being mistaken for a man, the choice to use initials speaks more to a play for androgyny than to an outright masculinity, and in the Age of the Internet, none of them expect—or even necessarily want—to pull the wool over the eyes of readers for long. Their hope is for equality: that a potential reader will not write them off by virtue of their gender before glancing at more than the spine.

As we have also seen, pen names today run the risk of being seen as cultural appropriation, and even when political lines are not blurred, moral lines may still be. In setting out to avoid prejudice, women authors who use male or even non-gendered pseudonyms might actually be building up those same prejudices. If J.K. Rowling had gone as “Joanne” and if the books had still been as big a success with boys and girls (and adults of both genders) as they were with “J.K.” on the cover, then perhaps publishers have realized that little boys will read books by women, and therefore be more likely to publish “Elizabeth” the next time she comes along? Here, again, we enter the world of speculation, and no one can fault an individual for doing what they can to break through the glass ceiling in their given career, but it is undoubtedly interesting to think what the effects the one simple change—from J.K. to Joanne—might have had on today’s literary landscape.

That, however, is the past. On the other hand, 2018 is just around the corner. I will admit: when I first read Kamila Shamsie’s challenge to publishers to publish on women in 2018, I was skeptical. I wondered if by not allowing men to play the game, women might in some way be admitting that we can’t keep up. But fifty-some pages later, I see her challenge as an opportunity to get more players on the field, and to prove on a much larger scale that women are just as deserving of being published, being reviewed, and winning awards. If nothing else, it might even the playing field. Perhaps Shamsie has provided a way to break away from pseudonyms altogether; if 2018 becomes the year of publishing only women’s books, or even if the first half of 2018 becomes the six-months of publishing only books written by women, then pseudonyms as a way to disguise gender, as a way to equalize, might become unnecessary. Or maybe not. But either way, pen names are no longer a shield from the subtle biases of the publishing industry, and it’s time to try something new.

Here are the facts: In the United States, we have never had a woman president. Of the 535 members of Congress, 104 are women. Only twenty S&P 500 companies have women CEOs, and there are twenty-two female Fortune 500 CEOs. The low numbers of women in what are considered to be some of the country's most powerful positions suggests that we are still living in a male dominated world. When a women author sets out to make a career in this world, they're already starting out a few steps behind, and in that context a male or gender-neutral pen name can help women catch up and be judged fairly. If, however, we want to remove this reasoning for taking a pen name from the table (as Brackston, Ellison, and Haines mention, there are many, far less gendered reasons to do so) then it is not just the publishing community that needs to push for equal standards across genders. Perhaps it's idealistic to hope for equality 100 years after women got the right to vote, but idealism is necessary if we want a world where a woman is president, where there are more than fourteen female Nobel Laureates in Literature, and where no pseudonym is chosen to escape bias—subconscious or otherwise.

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