

The Pleasures and Perils of Adopting a Pen Name

GEORGE SAND WAS A GIRL. I'm not saying that to be mean, he was literally a she, a woman writer with a male *nom de plume*, just like George Eliot. The Georgie -Girls, O. Henry, C. S. Forester, Lewis Carroll, George Orwell, Ellery Queen, Voltaire, Dr. Seuss, Ayn Rand, Molière, Mark Twain, and even Lemony Snicket: all of them have names full -o'-baloney, just like mine.

There are as many reasons for a writer to adopt a pen name as there are writers with them, the practice so historically commonplace it is safe to call it a literary tradition, like the couplet or eschewing adverbs, but my own 21st century experience with a pen name has made me ponder anew what it must have been like for all who forged this path before me.

First, let's be clear: a pen name is *not* an alias. Yes, there may be a slight to healthy desire to deceive, granted, but not for criminal intent. Indeed, the real crime regarding the Georgie -Girls was that 19th century Europe required they do book -jacket drag in order to be taken seriously. Others, like poet Lucila de María del Perpetuo Socorro Godoy Alcayaga, who became Gabriela Mistral, probably adopted one so her name would fit on a book spine. Yet I've experienced more than my fair share of jaundiced-eyed, who-did-you-murder looks from friends and family, because from their perspective I'm not being me, and that makes them uncomfortable.

"What are you ashamed of?"

"What are you hiding?"

The simple truth is pen names are practical; such was the case with mine. Before I became Aurelio, I had spent over 25 years making animated feature films with singing animals, anthropomorphized household objects, and needy princesses with a penchant for ball gowns. When I announced to friends and family that I was writing a book, the conversations went like this:

"Oh, a children's book!"

"No. It's a novel. No pictures, just words."

"No pictures...?"

"It's adult fiction."

"Adult fiction...? *Porno*...???"

Sure, it's only natural to assume that someone who drew cute, cherub-cheeked toons for a living would write and illustrate children's books, as many of my animation colleagues do, but when, even after lengthy explanations of what my writing actually is and hopes to be, I continued to be asked, and *repeatedly*:

"How's that kid's book goin'?"

Something drastic had to be done. What if agents and publishers respond like this? Could the literary community take me seriously if they judged me with these same limited preconceptions? I couldn't risk that. And what of the public? Any potential reader expecting a children's book would be disappointed and adult readers might stay away, assuming my work was for children. I wanted my writing to be judged on its own merits, to live free or die on its own. I needed a clean slate, so after a bit of brainstorming, Aurelio O'Brien was born.

This being the 21st century, I immediately Googled "Aurelio O'Brien," as there would be no point in taking a pen

name only to find I'd inadvertently started down the path to identity theft. But nothing came up. I figured if the Great Google Search Engine in the Ether didn't know him, Aurelio was free to be whoever I wanted. I registered the name as a DBA, just to be on the safe side, and started constructing my new career.

It was far easier than I anticipated, and a whole lot of fun. I networked and blogged and joined MySpace, Facebook, and LiveJournal as Aurelio. I made new friends who knew nothing of my creator -of-kiddie-pabulum past. At long last, I had adult conversations about literature, about my work, was asked my opinions, as a writer rather than toonster, and I loved it. The more I became Aurelio O'Brien, the more Aurelio O'Brien became me. And he is me, minus the past that didn't fit his world, and I was genuinely surprised how creatively freeing being him became. By removing my outward impediments I had also apparently removed some inward ones I didn't realize I had. My writing flowed easier and my confidence surged.

Meanwhile, those who know the other me still squirm and huff, convinced there is something nefarious in the whole thing. One of them recently outed me on her blog, and I still get the occasional friend who refuses to use my pen name even when speaking of my literary work. That many of the greatest authors throughout history, Nobel Prize winners, and Dear Abby had pen names means nothing to them.

It used to bother me, but not anymore, not now that I am Aurelio O'Brien. I Googled myself again the other day. More than a dozen pages of links came up, and if the Great Google Search Engine in the Ether now says I *am* somebody, who are they to argue?



AURELIO O'BRIEN is a writer and an artist. He spent over 25 years as an artist, animator, designer, and storyteller in Hollywood, working in the field of Feature Animation. He is the author of *EVE*, a science fiction novel.

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