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What's in a Name? Giving Birth to your Characters

By Celise Downs

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So you've got your plot outlined, a title lined up and the research is done. You're ready to start writing your novel. But wait. Now comes the fun part: creating names for your characters. One of the best things about being a writer—besides the innate ability to create imaginary worlds—is giving birth to a character and then bestowing a name upon him or her. True, you didn't carry the character in your womb for nine months (especially if you're male). But he or she could've been in your head for nine months...or nine years. So choosing a name for your characters seems almost as important as the one you would give your own child.

The name you decide on will dictate the reader's perception of that character, so select wisely. If your character is an agoraphobic scientist, he or she should not be named Brittany or Rick. Does this bunch of hoo-hah sound familiar to you? Raise your hand now, don't be shy. I thought so. Now let me remove the rose-colored sunglasses so you all can see the harsh light of reality. The reality being that having a common name conjures up a stereotypical image. What picture forms in your head when you hear the name Tiffany? Pretty, popular, blonde-haired cheerleader? What about the name Melvin? Skinny guy with glasses and a pocket protector? Now what comes to mind when you hear something unique like Lyric? Or Dax?

We as writers have been blessed with a wonderful gift. We are a rare species unto ourselves in such a way that we can build alternate realities for the public to enter. We are storytellers that pull ideas out of our bu—that is—minds, invent our own language even, and the only names we can come up with for our characters are Johns, Susans, Kathleens, and Sams? Unacceptable. These are perfectly good names, don't get me wrong, but they're safe names. I used to be in an online critique group and someone said that if your main character has an unusual name, the secondary characters should have more common names; that way, it won't be so confusing to the reader. My initial response wasn't printable, but I can

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tell you that it sort of went a little like this: "Who died and made you Ruler of the Writing World? Heaven forbid we throw our readers a curve ball every once in a while."

It's called variety, folks. In the Dictionary, this word is defined as "the quality or condition of being various or varied; diversity." If you don't step outside your comfort zone and offer your readers some different flavors, you're not going to sell any books. I decided from the get-go that all the characters in my books were going to have unique names. I wanted to stand out from the pack and dance my own little jig. So here are some suggestions on finding primo names for your characters:

1)Books, Magazines, and Newspapers - These are wonderful sources. In magazines and newspapers, a story, a self-help column or even a product ad could house a name that would be worth writing down. People use baby books to choose names for their children, so why not do the same for

your characters? These books can be very in-depth, stating the meaning of the name as well as its origin. I've used The Writer's Digest Character Naming Sourcebook (1994, Sherrilyn Kenyon with Hal Blythe and Charlie Sweet). It features more than 20,000 first and last names and their meanings from around the world: Norse, Slavic, Teutonic, Arthurian Legend Names, and more.

I've also discovered the hidden cache of names in other people's books. I'm severely addicted to the adult romance books that come out every month: Harlequin Blaze and Temptation, and Silhouette Desire. And my favorite authors are Janelle Denison, Kristine Grayson, Carly Phillips, and Julie Kenner. Every once in a while, I'll find a name in their books that I can add to my continually growing list. Science fiction, time travel and fantasy books are good for names as well.

2)Walk of Fame – Hollywood actors and actresses may have been born with common names like Julia and Brad, but that doesn't mean their offspring have to suffer the same fate. Will and Jada Smith's children: Willow and Jaden; Demi Moore's girls: Scout LaRue, Rumer Glen and Tallulah Belle; Gwynyth Paltrow's daughter: Apple Blythe; John Travolta and Kelly Preston's son: Jett; Uma Thurman and Ethan Hawke's son: Ronin. Singer Brandi's daughter: Sy'rai; Thomas Jane (The Punisher) and Rosanna Arquette's daughter: Harlow.

Even some famous faces were lucky enough to have been born with one-of-a-kind names: Keanu Reeves, Jude Law, Jada Pinkett-Smith, Macaulay Culkin, Kiefer Sutherland, Oprah Winfrey.

3)Movies and Television Shows - This avenue isn't as unorthodox as you might think. I guarantee someone out there could come forward and claim, "I was named after some character on a soap opera." Ridge and Thorne Forrester, The Bold and The Beautiful; Topanga Morris, Boy Meets World; Teal'c, Stargate SG-1; Leelou, The Fifth Element (my favorite movie of all time); Blade, Ellora Danan, Willow; Teela, He-Man cartoons. Need I say more?

4)Daily Life – For almost two years, I worked the night shift, keying medical claims. Due to that job, I now have a nice long two-paged list of boys and girls names. You would not believe how many wonderfully unusual names I came across every time I flipped a page: Princess, Precious, Treasure, Oreo, Malachi, Ashanti, Treyvon, Diabolique (for real!), Natividad...the list goes on and on. Just think. You could be sitting at your desk, standing in line at the grocery store/coffee shop/fast food joint,

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listening to a song on the radio, eavesdropping on a conversation, or talking to your neighbor and the next thing you know, you're bombarded with names for your characters. Being a writer, one can only hope that you're aware of your surroundings at all times and can see a potential story in everything that goes on around you.

5)Character Naming Contest/Vote - I did this for my third book, which will be Book One in a teen series I'm creating. I had about four different combinations of a name I was trying to come up with for my main character. I sent an email out to my co-workers, close friends and family, asking them to vote on the name they liked best. The name that got the most votes became the name for my character. In return, I'll be including a special thank-you on the Dedication Page of the book. Although there are too many names to print, if they buy the book, they'll know they had a hand in choosing the name of the character. If you go the contest route, offer the winner a free copy of the book, a special gift, etc. If anything, you'll get plenty of names for future books.

I attended a book festival in Prescott, AZ last year. A mother and daughter came up to my table, read the back covers of both books, then walked away. A half hour later, they came back and purchased my first book (*Secrets and Kisses*) because the female character's name was Skylar. For whatever

reason, the name meant something to that young girl. It could've been her name, the name of her friend, a relative...who knows? The point is, your readers are going to appreciate an "anomalous, exceptional, extraordinary, far out, incomparable, inimitable, special, standout, strange, uncommon" name. Now, you are ready to begin writing your novel. Your character has been born, breathing passages cleared (nice set of lungs there), weighed, measured...and awaiting a name. Get creative, step outside the box and remember... a rose by any other name should be something besides Tom, Dick, Harry and Jane.

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How to Create Incredible Characters Easily

By Caterina Christakos

Creating incredible characters can be easy if you know of a few simple rules:

Each character should have his own voice. If your character is from Brooklyn, give him brooklyn accent and mannerisms.

Before you write, decide on his or her background and outline it thoroughly. If she is supposed to be from a high profile Georgia family, know what her parents do for a living. Is she trying to live up to their standards or does she move to California in rebellion? Why?

What's in a Name? Giving Birth to your Characters

Know your character's motivations. If he is a serial killer, what about his upbringing or his mind created him into the pathological criminal that he is.

The lesson is know your characters. Know what makes them tick. Know what drives them wild and what drives them crazy. Know them as well as you know yourself otherwise your audience never will.

By creating a thorough outline on each characters before you begin writing, the decisions are made for you. You will know your characters well enough to know what they would and wouldn't say and how they would say it. More importantly, your readers will believe in them and in you.

Caterina Christakos is the author of *How to Write a Children's Book in 30 Days or Less*. For more writing tips go to:

[How to Create Incredible Characters Easily](#)

[Learn From The Characters](#)

[I'm Working On The Chinese Characters](#)

[Does Your Theme Contain Character, Conflict, Resolution?](#)

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