

FICTITIOUS NAMES

ROBERT M. RENNICK

Prestonsburg, Kentucky

In the early 1950s, when I was an undergraduate at a certain midwestern university, one of the favorite pastimes of my fellow students and me was the making up of names. But we weren't content to stop there; we had to convince each other, and the authorities, that these names identified real persons. As blatant as this sounds, we would go to considerable lengths to enroll our creations in classes, student clubs and athletic teams, and we even offered them as prom queen (and king) candidates and nominated them for honor societies, including Phi Beta Kappa. We submitted lists of these made up names to city newspapers and described how their bearers had excelled in athletic or scholarly activities on campus. The media lapped it up, so anxious were they in those days to report anything of interest happening on campus.

One of our favorite stunts, back in the days when undergraduates had limited access to the book stacks in the university library, was to fill out a locator card for a book with one of our phony names. This would be given to the student page behind the counter, whose job it was to fetch the books from the closed stacks. When the book was found, the page would call out the student's name so he (or she) could come and pick it up. Among our favorite names for this purpose were Sally Forth, Eileen Dover, Dianne Dekay, Ophelia Dick, Titus Canby, Ben Evolent, Teresa Crowd, Helen Highwater, Ivan Affulitch, and Ron DeVue. What fun for us to sit up there in front of the page station, eagerly awaiting the announcement of the borrower's name! And this we greeted uproariously. Curiously, the page never seemed to get the point—over and over we used the same names.

Over several years we made up hundreds of names of persons who, for awhile at least, were as real to their fellow students as our own names. But what now bothers me is that (as we learned years later) other groups of students, not to mention professional entertainers and humorists, were doing the same thing on their campuses and in their shows and writings. Some of our favorite names were not unique to us. It was ego-deflating to learn that fictitious names, as well as real ones, are limited, and repetitions quite common.

So while we had a Basil Metabolism so did Max Shulman. And Rachel Prejudice, Phyllis Steen, Penny Sillen, Lena Genster, Patty Cake, Sally and Jerry Mander, Kitty Litter, Candy Barr, and Henrietta Hamm were common name combinations in many places. In the mid 1960s one of Harvard's famed Hasty Pudding theatricals, "Right Up Your Alley", thought they were introducing Manual Dexterity, Jason Rainbows, Eileen Backward, Mal Function, and Amos Take, but we had beaten them to these over a dozen years earlier. But they did one-up us with Hale N. Hardy and Igor Beevor, Dipton Mudd, Jimmy Delocke, Zoe Whatznie, and Billy Clubb. Sometime later Harvey Fierstein came up with Bertha Venation. Later still William Safire introduced us to Claire Voyant, Vera Similitude, Norma Loquendi, Natalie Attired, Marian Haste, Delores Mae Shepherd, and Polly Glott. How did we ever miss these? Not to mention Iris Sponsable, Pete Roleum, Ray Diator, Loren Order, and the Chinese physician Hu Pin Koff.

Sometimes one of us would go to the front desk of his dormitory and ask if there were any messages for Mike Carr. If the desk monitor spotted the gag, he would reply with a straight face "No, nor for anyone else's car." On page 48 of his book *Treasury of Name Lore* (Harper, 1967),

Elsdon C. Smith offered a variant referring to Mike Howe. Oh, how I wish we had thought of that instead! On page 49 Smith also shared the experience of a telephone caller asking Information for the number of San Francisco attorney Alden Ames. The inquirer would ask for Alden Ames on Clay Street, only to be told that he couldn't be given all the names on that street or any other.

In his column "Bugging the Beat", Philip K. Mason, city editor of the Helena (Montana) Independent-Record, claimed to have come across the names Roal Doats, Steve Adore, Chris Muss, Alf A. Bett, Ann Droid, Willy Nilly, and Bill Collector. He later admitted to me that he had actually made them up as part of his humor column, but he had no idea then that so many people collected odd names and that some of his would end up in collections based on the notion that if they were in the newspaper they must be real. They even appeared as genuine names on page 11 of Volume 15 of the Bulletin of the American Name Society (Aug 1989)! People still don't realize that it's always been easy to plant phony names in the media.

And it's just as easy to plant them in telephone directories, as Joseph F. Wilkinson, writing in the March 1996 issue of *The Smithsonian*, should have known. Therein he reported on his attempt to determine if any of the many alleged curious name combinations appearing on lists or shared in informal conversations were for real. In checking telephone directories he discovered Barbara Seville, Rosetta Stone, Georgia Peach, Minnie Vann, Happy Days, Phil Harmonic, and Jim Dandy were all listed. Fantastic since, with two exceptions, they were also "students" at my university back in the early 1950s. While they could have been the names of real persons, they could also have been planted in the phone books as easily as they had been in the student directories. Along with Frieda Slaves, Jim Nasium, Barb Arian, Sybil Rights, Annie Mosity, Sandy Beach, Seymour Butz, Ginny Jerail, Robin Banks, Phil A. Telix, Tim Buhr, Allie Gator, and the recent Mae Lachs. And who can forget Johnny Carson's Hope Chest, Gilda Lilly, and Sara Endipity? Not to mention Al Luminum, Sybil Defense, Rhoda Mandelay, Manda Lifeboats, the Soviet diplomat Smirin Vaseline, and the stripper Norma Vincent Peale.

Ever hear of the actor George Spelvin? Everyone thinks he's for real for they've read the 500-word entry on him in the *Biographic Encyclopedia and Who's Who of the American Theater*. But his, too, is a made-up name, given to actors who play more than one bit part in a single production or who don't want it known that they had such a small role.

To trap the plagiarizing companies that have long been lifting entries from *Who's Who in America* to publish them in similarly-named volumes, the authentic publishers placed phony names for non-existent persons in each edition. If these names appeared in the copycat editions, the authentic *Who's Who* would know they'd been copied from [John Morton in *The National Observer*, quoted in the July 1970 *Reader's Digest*].

Some years ago, when I had an occasion to consult the L&N Employees' Magazine, a house organ for employees and customers of the old Louisville and Nashville Railroad, I marveled at its large staff of writers, most unusual for publications of this sort, and wondered especially at some of their names. Articles appeared under the bylines of R.R. South, Steele Raylor, Dick C. Lyon, Lou Nash, L.M. Lynes, C. Ross The, Lincoln Penn, Cole Carr, M.T. Hopper, Rowan House, Rowland Stockk, and even C.A. Boose. An occasional appearance of one or two of these names could have gone unnoticed, but when they began to appear in clusters I couldn't help but feel there was something fishy. On inquiring of the company's public relations department, I learned that in the 1940s the editor Julian James had issued a policy directive that no two articles in any one issue could appear under the same byline. To augment the contributions of the regular staff, writers assumed one or more of the above-mentioned names. The assumption was that no reader would ever imagine that these were real names. Yet, W.R. Heffren, writing as C. Ross Tye, once

received a letter from a lady genealogist stating that she was researching the Tye family and would he kindly send her his family line to see if it could be related to hers [Robert Rennick in Volume 29 of the Bulletin of the American Name Society (Dec 1972)].

Though this practice was discontinued with the retirement of editor James, my informant, staffer Edison Thomas, was also accused of using a fictitious name. He assured me that it's his real name, that his mother had named him for a neighbor and was not thinking of the inventor—which goes to show that what we've been saying can work the other way.

Some of these odd name combinations can be real. When I was an undergraduate I never could have imagined that I'd be faced someday with a genuine Warren Peace, but when I started teaching in Kentucky in the early 1960s I came across the principal of the Whitley County High School, none other than Warren Peace.

Anyone compiling a list of odd or colorful names runs the risk of coming up with some borne by real persons. And some of these real persons may not like the ways their names are being used, and sue. However, unless he can prove that his name was deliberately used to cast personal aspersions against him, or otherwise results in his embarrassment, there's little to preclude the use of his name in a work of fiction. But he can make it difficult for the author by asking rather pointed questions like "Why me?" In the Aug 9 1958 issue of *The Saturday Evening Post*, Robert M. Yoder reported that comedian Fred Allen for his radio show had created a character he named Sinbad Brittle, only to find a Maine resident demanding to know who had submitted his name.

The following story is related by Allen M. Laing on page 135 of *Louder and Funnier* (Allen & Unwin, 1957). Bertrand Russell is said to have told how he got a job teaching western philosophy at a Chinese school. The note offering him the position was signed by Fu Ling-Yu. This sounded terribly suspicious, but as he was obligated to fulfill a contract, he took passage for China. What a surprise to be met at the dock by Mr. Fu Ling-Yu!

If my fellow students and I had been aware of how some of our eccentric names could someday turn out to have been borne by real person, would we have been more careful? Probably not. But then we really didn't think anyone could bear such names—certainly not Warren Peace, and doubtfully another name we used, though we hadn't made up, Kilroy. Years later I learned that he, too, was for real. When American troops during or after the Second World War arrived at a place they were sure to find inscriptions indicating that someone named Kilroy had gotten there first. He became apocryphal, and symbolic. It turned out on his death in 1962 that one James J. Kilroy had initiated the inscriptions back in 1942. As a forty-year-old shipyard inspector in Quincy, Massachusetts, he would check and approve the work of the company riveters by writing "Kilroy Was Here" with unerasable yellow chalk. As the yard's products got to be circulated throughout the world, his catch phrase was duly noted, and began to be imitated by others [James Chenoweth, *Oddity Odyssey* (Henry Holt, 1996), pages 93-94].

For many years, since the turn of the 20th century, Harvard students would yell out their dorm windows "Oh, Rinehart!" This call was attributed for many years to a lonely boy who used to call for himself at the front door to give the appearance that he was popular. Caught in the act, his call was taken up by others and a tradition begun. At the Harvard tercentenary celebration in 1936, John Bryce Gordon Rinehart came forth with the real story: he had been the object of the call from classmates who wanted him to leave his studies and join them for some refreshment. The calls were repeated, and eventually they became a rallying cry for bored students [S.V. Baum in "Legend Makers on the Campus" in Volume 33 of *American Speech* (Dec 1958), pages 292-93].