

## Where nobody knows your name

If you're worried what the neighbours will say or do, Theodore Dalrymple says, pseudonymity is the way to go

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Will anyone finger Inger? His (or is it her?) debut novel, *The Calling*, is about to be published, but it is already known that Inger Wolfe is a pseudonym, one that strongly resembles that of a Danish thriller writer. Why the pseudonym? Why that particular pseudonym?

In a way, I am an expert on pseudonymity. In my time, and for a variety of reasons, I have written under four different pen names. None of them, alas, has become a household name, and even I have difficulty now remembering two of them.

My first foray into pseudonymity was when I was living in an African dictatorship and sent articles about it to a British periodical. I adopted a pseudonym for obvious reasons. Then I wrote a little satire on the dictator and his European admirers, using an African name to confuse reviewers. (I later heard that the dictator read it, and he asked whether the dictator satirized in it was he.) Then I wrote an article under yet another pseudonym on a subject about which those of my fellow citizens who are interested in it have less of a sense of humour than the Ayatollah Khomeini. Notoriously, they persecute with telephone calls and nasty letters all those who do not take their view of the matter.

Then I chose my current and longest-lasting pseudonym when the editor of a British periodical asked me to write bulletins from the prison and slum hospital in which I was working as a doctor. I chose a name that sounded suitably dyspeptic, that of a gouty old man looking out of the window of his London club, port in hand, lamenting the degenerating state of the world (there is a lot of pleasure to be had from lamentation).

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The great advantage of pseudonymity - apart, of course, from the avoidance of arrest and maltreatment in, and extradition from, dictatorships - is that it allows you to adopt a personality with secret views that are unavowable in polite society. I cannot speak for others, but quite a lot of what I think would be unprintable under my own name: Almost everyone I know would cut me dead.

Pseudonyms are useful in the perpetration of literary hoaxes, some of which have important points to make. In 1944, for instance, two young Australian poets, James McCauley and Harold Stewart, wanted to satirize Modernist poetry, and spent the afternoon drinking beer and writing a collection of poems called *The Darkening Ecliptic*. They then sent the poems to an Australian literary magazine, claiming the poems were by a young poet, Ern Malley, who had recently died of Graves' disease. Their accompanying letter pretended it was from Ern's unsophisticated and uneducated sister, who had no idea whether the poems were any good, and who naively asked for the editor's opinion.

The editor, Max Harris, proclaimed the poems to be works of genius, and thus the point was made, once the hoax was revealed (Harris had to employ a private detective to find out whether Ern Malley had ever existed). But the strange thing is that some of the poems are rather good, and that one titled *Durer: Innsbruck, 1495*, ends with a memorable line: "I am still/ The black swan of trespass on alien waters."

Another favourite hoax of mine, also making an important point, is the case of Rahila Khan. She appeared to be a young Asian woman in Britain who wrote some short stories describing the difficulties of Muslim girls growing up in Britain; it was titled *Down the Road, Worlds Away*. She sent them to the feminist publishers Virago, which agreed immediately to publish them and praised them to the skies.

Unfortunately, Rahila Khan turned out in real life to be the Rev. Toby Forward, a Church of England clergyman. Virago immediately, and angrily, pulped the edition, which instantly made the few copies that had escaped into the marketplace collectors' items. Virago's reaction demonstrated that, at least for some ideologists, the identity of the author of a book is more important than any truth the book might contain.

A further irony of the story is that the Rev. Forward had grown up in precisely the area of England that he wrote about, where Asians and white English live cheek-by-jowl. Unlike the staff at Virago, he knew what he was talking about. The stories were very good, and often moving.

Not all pseudonyms are taken to make points in this fashion. Some are adopted for aesthetic reasons. If one wishes to be a writer but is born, say, Albert Small, one would be well-advised to change one's name. (Having written that, it suddenly occurred to me to look up Albert Small on AbeBooks. There were 128 books on sale by Albert A. Small, Albert H. Small and Albert K. Small.) George Orwell trips better off the tongue than Eric Blair, and if you are going to write pulp thrillers it is probably better to call yourself Sax Rohmer than Arthur Henry Sarsfield Ward, Rohmer's real name. And would the Alice books have been as successful as they were had they been by Charles Lutwidge Dodgson rather than by Lewis Carroll?

After a time, the pseudonymous author may grow into his name and forget that he was ever anyone else. The older I get, for example, the more I sit at the window with my glass of port and lament the state of the world. Of course, it could just be that the world really is going to the dogs.

*A British writer and retired physician, the pseudonymous Theodore Dalrymple is the author of, among other works, Our Culture, What's Left of It: The Mandarins and the Masses.*

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