Simon Rose
www.simon-rose.com

Naming your Characters

Thinking of names for the characters in your stories can be very easy for some writers, with the names just popping into your head, while for other it can be a torturous and painstaking experience. Sometimes it may not even be that crucial to get the name just right, but there are a few things to remember when choosing names for the people you invent.

Names very often typify characters and conjure up certain images in the minds of the reader. If you need to know what impression a particular name can give, check out the better baby name books. Many of these types of publications inform you in detail how names mean strength or wisdom or beautiful and so on, but some baby name books refer to famous, and even infamous, people who may have had that name or remind you of characters in movies.

Creating an Impression

Often the longer a person's name, the more we think they might be educated, confident, accomplished or possess many other desirable qualities in a hero or heroine. For example, if you want a strong male character in your novel, will you go with Alexander Wainwright or Tom Smith? If your female character is a sophisticated, well educated, statuesque beauty, will she be known as Elizabeth Castlewood or Susan Jones? Names are very important and you only get one chance to make a first impression, so make sure you make the right choice.

As well as personifying a set of personality traits, or conjuring up images of a famous person, names can also be related to class or social status and also to the person's ethnicity. If you're setting a story in a particular country and you're not familiar with that part of the world and its first and last names, do your research. There is no shortage of websites these days on surnames popular in Ireland, Germany, France or most other countries. After all, if your book is set in Ireland, or even in the Irish community in a North American city, how many readers are going to take it seriously if the hero is called Carlos Fernandez and the heroine is Heidi Bergmann?

Historical Names

When writing historical fiction, the era of your story is also of crucial importance, whether this is set in the distant past or in relatively recent times. Names that are

popular today were not in such abundance in earlier eras and in some cases may not even have existed at all. In medieval England, for example, surnames were not used until well into the twelfth century. When they did come into everyday use, they were often at first based on a person's occupation such as Carpenter, Smith, Cooper, Cartwright and so on. Some surnames were related to the aristocratic estate where the person worked. Other names were derived from geographic features, such as wood, brook or hill and of course the word 'son' began to appear at the end of names, which is where we get surnames such as Johnson, Jackson, Williamson and so many others. There seems to have been a lack of standardization until sometime in the seventeenth century, by which time surnames were well established.

Another important consideration is that there were a limited number of Christian names in use in the Middle Ages. Men would have been known as Henry, Thomas, William, John, Richard, Robert, Roger, Edward and a few others that are familiar, in addition to names that are not as common today, such as Walter or Hugh. For women, names appear to be even more limited, with many ladies being called Elizabeth, Mary, Anne, Margaret and some that are now uncommon, such as Joan or Matilda. Consequently, it's vital to choose the right name for the time period.

Obviously, you won't use a very modern name for your medieval character, but you also don't want your story that is set in 1300 to be littered with names that weren't used widely until the mid-fifteen century. The same applies to stories set in the late eighteen century and Napoleonic era, when names like Charlotte, Cassandra, Louisa, Charles, James and others, which are less popular today, were very much in favour. An examination of the names used in novels of the period, such the works of Jane Austen and the Bronte sisters, is a good starting point for this, but websites are again an excellent source for this era.

Finding Information

Baby name books and websites can give you an insight into names from the Middle Ages, but they can also give you an idea of names that were popular with parents in the early part of the twentieth century. If you have a story which takes place in the Second World War and are unsure of the names that were prevalent then, a quick check of the baby names popular between 1910 and 1920 would give you an idea of the names borne by adults in their twenties and thirties during the war. Writers often make the mistake of giving their characters names that are popular today, but would not have been used years ago. If your story is set in the present day and you make use of a name that is currently abundant in elementary and high schools, although your character is supposed to be thirty five, it's going to seem a little out of place, to say the least. You need to check the baby name lists of thirty years ago to obtain the best fit. A story set in the sixties needs to take into account names that were given to babies born during World War Two as well.

Dated Names

Even among the exotic and unusual names we see very often today, some names for children never seem to go out of fashion, such as Michael, Matthew, Christopher, Emily, Sarah or Samantha. Others come back after a long absence, such as William, Henry or Harry, although others from the same era seem to be stuck in the past, such as George or Albert. However, it's important to remember that with certain names, we immediately picture someone of a certain age. For example, Brian, Keith, Gary, Christine, Sharon, Carol and Linda are now firmly in the realm of people over fifty. These names may make a comeback of course, as others have in the past, but for now, these are the names of parents or grandparents, depending on the age of your main protagonists.

When selecting names for your characters, you can of course borrow and adapt names from famous people, especially if those particular names will be a good fit for the person in your story. However, you'd be unwise to use a name that will be too familiar to people and make them immediately think of a particular historical person, who may or may not have anything in common with this fictional person you've created. Even if Roosevelt or Churchill are heroes of yours, unless the narrative is related to them, it might be best to avoid these names and use something else. It could be similar sounding, but don't go for an exact copy.

Sources of Inspiration

For my middle grade novels, I have a list of names for boys and girls that I like to use in books, plus some surnames and those from different historical periods that I've liked. I've even noted the names of products or companies that I've seen on billboards or on the sides of vehicles, thinking that I might be able to adapt them. In The Alchemist's Portrait, Matthew is the hero and his younger sister Sally accompanies him on some of his travels in time. At the museum where he first encounters the infamous portrait, Matthew receives information and assistance from Tess Philips, a woman in her early twenties, who is working the restoration of the painting. These were all names that just popped into my head and just seemed right for the story. However, other names in the novel had to be appropriate for a particular time period, namely Amsterdam in the year 1666, when the portrait was initially created. This involved research into Dutch names from that era, mostly to ensure that I wasn't using the name of a real artist by mistake. The chief villain is Nicolaas van der Leyden, whose name felt exactly right, but which also seemed to come from nowhere.

Appropriate Names

In The Sorcerer's Letterbox, Jack is the hero, since I needed a name that is used today for a boy of around twelve, but which was also in keeping with the Middle Ages. Other characters, such as Richard III, Edward V and Tyrell, are of course real historical people, but Meg, who becomes Jack's accomplice in 1483, was a common female name of the period. The leader of the band of outlaws to which Meg belongs is Will Tyler. Again, the name Will or William would have been commonplace in 1483. The name Tyler would

have been an occupation surname, but was also inspired by Wat Tyler, one of the leaders of England's Peasant Revolt in 1381.

My fifth novel, The Heretic's Tomb, is historical fiction. As with The Sorcerers Letterbox, I once again researched names from medieval England, this time for a story set in 1349 at the height of the Black Death. While crafting the story, I investigated the name of the chief villain, Sir Roger de Walsingham, to make sure that I wasn't inadvertently using the name of an actual nobleman from medieval England. Roger was a name that was in use in this time period and Sir Francis Walsingham was one of the leading advisors to Elizabeth I in the late sixteenth century, but the combination of the two names worked well as far as I was concerned.

Female names were more limited than male ones in this era, but the queen of Edward II, who reigned in the early decades of the fourteenth century, was Isabella, who was from France. I decided that this was a good name for my strong female character. I also wanted to give her a French sounding last name, eventually setting on Devereaux. However, this didn't mean that she was from France, since there were lots of French names in use in England at this time, owing to the connections between the two countries dating back to the Norman Conquest in 1066. Annie, who travels back in time from the present day, was chosen for similar reasons to my choice of Jack in The Sorcerer's Letterbox, since Annie had to be able to fit in with the locals in 1349. Will, her partner in the story, is again a name that would have been common in the mid-fourteenth century. In this novel, it also wasn't just the names of people that had to be carefully researched. Sir Roger's stronghold is his castle at Alversham and I had to check that this wasn't a real place, once I'd decided to use it for the story.

In Conclusion

As a final note on the subject of creating names for your stories, even though you've spent hours days, weeks or even months coming up with just the right ones, don't be offended if one of your readers tells you that although they loved the story, they hated the names of the characters. Everyone has different life experiences and consequently have memories, both good and bad, of someone who has the same name as your hero or heroine. You're never going to please everyone, so focus on choosing names that you feel are a perfect for your characters. After all, it's your story.