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## Performing Femininity

Storytelling and gender

### J.K. Rowling

## The evolution of female pen-names from Currer Bell to

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Their First Quarrel, Charles Dana Gibson. Wikipedia

Last month author Catherine Nichols went public with her account of sending her novel manuscript to literary agents under a male pseudonym. A writing sample sent to 50 agents in her own name

resulted in only two manuscript requests. Seventeen out of 50 agents requested the same materials from “George Leyer”.

Were the agents exhibiting a subconscious gender bias that assumes the superiority of male authors? Or were they responding to the practicalities of a reviewing culture and audience that can overlook or even reject women’s literature?

Women’s fiction is reviewed less often than men’s in major publications. Even though women buy two thirds of all books sold in the UK, they are much less likely to be reviewing books in male-dominated literary magazines.

And some audiences, such as young boys, are presumed to be entirely unwilling to read books written by women. J.K. Rowling’s publisher felt that an obviously female name like “Joanne” would dissuade boys from reading the debut Harry Potter novel.

The unpublished Rowling was simply happy to be published and said in an interview that “they could have called me Enid Snodgrass”. But Enid Snodgrass would have had the same sales handicap as Joanne Rowling—a woman’s name.

Most discussions of contemporary women writers who have adopted male pseudonyms or initials to mask their sex draw connections between these writers and a long line of literary women, such as the Brontë sisters and George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans), who have published under assumed names.

What is less recognised is that the cultural reasons behind women writers concealing their names have shifted dramatically since the nineteenth century.

Today female names vanish to avoid industry and reader perceptions of what women’s fiction is like. Historically, in the British tradition, female names were hidden because of the perceived inappropriateness of women writing novels. To understand this difference, it is important to know that the very act of reading novels was heavily policed for girls and women in the nineteenth century.

In *The Woman Reader*, Kate Flint shows how girls’ and women’s reading, especially of material deemed frivolous or escapist, was a subject of great public concern and debate. Any novel reading that might detract from a woman’s role as a wife and mother within the home was perceived as a threat to the very foundation of society.

Likewise, women authors challenged expectations of women’s domestic and maternal roles. Budding writer Charlotte Brontë received the following comments in a discouraging letter from English poet laureate Robert Southey in 1837:

*Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity.*

Jane Austen published her first novel in 1811. The four novels that were published during her lifetime appeared anonymously, as were those of many early women writers. Although women who wrote educative or didactic fiction, such as Maria Edgeworth, or less respected genres such as the Gothic romance, as in the case of Ann Radcliffe, were not similarly compelled to hide their gender or identity.

From the twentieth century onwards, women novelists' use of pseudonyms seems to have acquired a more focused purpose: to avoid pre-judgement of women's fiction as inferior. V.S. Naipaul has embarrassingly said that no woman writer is his equal and that "within a paragraph or two" he knows whether a work "is by a woman or not".

Naipaul might have found a friend in Henry Lawson. Lawson read Miles Franklin's *My Brilliant Career* in manuscript form and wrote to Franklin eagerly: "Will you write and tell me what you really are? Man or woman?" When the novel was published in 1901, in his preface Lawson rewrites history: "I hadn't read three pages when I saw what you will no doubt see at once — that the story had been written by a girl".

The most enduring fictions of literary history hold that a woman writer's voice is readily detectable and less perceptive and sophisticated than a man's. These ideas buttress more recent views about narratives by women about girls' and women being of interest to female readers only.

The use of a male pseudonym or ambiguous initials removes the gender prejudiced lens through which much women's fiction is viewed. Yet it does not help to transform that prejudice as it is exhibited in literary magazines and reader "preferences" in certain genres of fiction.

As the majority of books are read by women, there must be a way for us to influence the publishing industry and reviewing practices that shape literary culture.