

REFLECTIONS

THE NAMING OF NAMES

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Science fiction fans, like jazz aficionados, like to call their favorites by their first names. In the jazz world, “Miles” or “Louis” or “Wynton” brings instant recognition. In our own microcosm, it’s never a problem identifying “Isaac” or “Harlan” or “Ursula.” But there’s one little complication for science fiction people when it comes to this first-name business. A lot of our best-known writers have nicknames, and prefer to go by them.

Consider the case of Samuel R. Delany, whom people who don’t know him tend to call “Samuel” or, worse, “Sam.” Anybody within the SF world knows that the author of *Dhalgren* may write as Samuel R., but he answers to “Chip.” Why? I’m not sure. One story I heard long ago was that in his family he was considered “a chip off the old block,” and perhaps so. But a later, and more authoritative-sounding version, is that as a child, Delany envied children with nicknames. He took one for himself on the first day of a new summer camp, Camp Woodland, at the age of eleven, by answering “Everybody calls me Chip!” when asked his name. They still do.

A goodly number of science fiction and fantasy writers have come into the world under the name of “Robert.” I can think immediately of Robert Sheckley, Robert E. Howard, Robert Moore Williams, Robert Abernathy, Robert Sawyer, Robert A.W. Lowndes, Robert Bloch, Robert Spencer Carr, and the most eminent of them all, Robert A. Heinlein. (Then, too, there is yours truly.) Many of them were known informally as “Bob”—Sheckley, Bloch, Lowndes (though his oldest friends called him “Doc”) and perhaps Abernathy—I’m not sure, after all these years. Sawyer is “Rob.” I go by “Bob” myself, having adopted the name when I was thirteen after hearing someone call me that and liking the sound of it (though I publish my work as the more formal “Robert”). Heinlein was once a “Bob” too, but midway through life he reverted to his original cognomen of “Robert,” and thereby hangs a tale.

It seems that Heinlein’s second wife, Ginny (actually his third, but the first one came and went so long ago and so briefly that her existence was unknown in the SF field until relatively recently), disliked the casual “Bob,” and let it be known that her husband was to be called “Robert.” I don’t know how Heinlein actually felt about that, after decades of being a Bob, but Ginny Heinlein was not a woman to be trifled with, and everyone who knew Heinlein immediately accepted the change. It happened that one day I found myself on the phone with Heinlein, who lived ninety miles south of me in California, and he addressed me as “Robert,” which I prefer not to hear from people I know. (Nor from people I don’t know, who can call me “Mr. Silverberg” if they like, though I very quickly switch them over to “Bob.”) Anyway, I tried to untangle things by saying, “No, Robert, you are Robert and I am Bob.” Ginny Heinlein went along with that, but I’m not sure her illustrious husband ever sorted out which name he was supposed to call me.

I don’t know what Robert E. Howard’s friends called him. H.P. Lovecraft, who corresponded with him, but never met him, liked to call him “Two-Gun Bob.” I doubt that anyone else did. (Don’t try calling me that, either!)

Roberts who become Bobs are hardly uncommon. But some members of our crowd venture much farther afield when choosing nicknames.

John Varley, for example, who cut quite a swath through science fiction in the 1970s and 1980s, is “Herb” to his friends. Herbert is his middle name and I suppose

he likes it better.

Algis Budrys was of Lithuanian heritage. ("Algis" is actually short for "Algirdas," a common Lithuanian name.) That was the name he wrote under. But everybody simply called him "Ajay."

The strangest case of all, though, is that of Lester del Rey, who first appeared among us in the 1930s with some letters published in *Astounding Stories*, the leading magazine of the era, and then became a regular contributor to that magazine from the late 1930s on. (His name survives in that of Del Rey Books, though that publishing company was named for his wife, Judy-Lynn del Rey, its editor.) Lester was called "Les" by some of his friends, "Lester" by others, but he let it be known at some point that his true name was not Lester at all, but in fact an astonishing string of cognomens: Ramon Felipe San Juan Mario Silvio Enrico Smith y Alvarez del Rey y de los Verdes. Out of all that he carved an assortment of pseudonyms for his published stories: Philip St. John, John Alvarez, Marion Henry, and perhaps more. Lester and I had a warm friendship for more than thirty years, and I would often call him by one or another of those names—"Mario" or "Ramon" or "Felipe." The interesting thing about him was that his name was not Ramon Felipe etc., or even Lester del Rey. After he died, his sister, settling his estate, revealed that he had been born as Leonard Knapp, in a small town in Minnesota, and just about everything he had told us about his life, from his name on, was a fabrication. Why he had chosen to sign those early letters to *Astounding*, and then a lifetime of stories, as "Lester del Rey" is something we are not likely ever to know. (Theodore Sturgeon also came into the world under a different name, but no deception was involved in the switch. He was born as Edward Hamilton Waldo, but when his mother divorced and then married William Sturgeon, the eleven-year-old Edward's name was changed to Theodore Sturgeon (though he occasionally would use "E. Hunter Waldo" as a pseudonym).)

There are other first-initial people: L. Ron Hubbard, for instance, who wrote quite a lot of excellent science fiction before giving the world first the science of Dianetics and then its successor, the religion of Scientology. That first initial stood for "Lafayette," but no one, not even the Scientology people, ever called him that—he was always "Ron," although he did publish some stories under the byline of "Rene Lafayette" and made no secret of it. Also L. Sprague de Camp, whose first name was "Lyon." (It was a family custom to name males of each alternating generation as "Lyon" or "Lyman," so they were all "L. Sprague de Camp.")

He never used "Lyon" as his name; everybody who knew him called him "Sprague," with the one exception of Catherine, his wife, who called him "Spraguey." (De Camp was a man of formidable military bearing and booming voice, whom one would hardly think of calling "Spraguey," but she did.)

Another initialed fellow, of course, was H.P. Lovecraft: Howard Phillips Lovecraft, and I suppose his friends called him Howard, but that was before my time and I can't say for sure. "HPL" is as universally recognized for him as "FDR" and "JFK" are for Presidents Roosevelt and Kennedy. I should add in this area of nomenclature the once-famous fantasy novelist, A. Merritt, who did not use his actual name of Abraham, perhaps to prevent people from thinking he was Jewish, which he wasn't. (Another well-known non-Jewish Abraham who generally signed himself simply with his first initial was A. Lincoln.) We also have H.L. Gold, who edited what was probably the best science fiction magazine of the 1950s, *Galaxy*, and who always signed himself with his initials, though he was "Horace" to his friends. And the grand master of initialing was A.E. Van Vogt—never publishing anything under the names that went with those initials, Alfred and Elton. (On his birth certificate he was simply "Alfred Vogt"; he added the "Elton" when he began writing fiction in the mid-1930s, and, I know not why, improved his social status with the "Van" a few years later. Those

who knew him called him just plain “Van.”)

Jack Vance’s birth name was “John,” but he always wrote as “Jack.” (His son’s name is John.) Jerry Pournelle was born as Jerry, but his collaborator, Laurence van Cott Niven, is always “Larry.” The fellow who actually wrote a story called “The Naming of Names,” Ray Bradbury, was really just “Ray,” not “Raymond,” though the old-time SF writer Ray Cummings was a Raymond, and that other writer of early SF, Raymond Z. Gallun, was never a “Ray.” Keeping it all straight—it’s not easy, is it?

On the other side of the ledger, we have people in the world of science fiction who went without nicknames, because their names did not lend themselves to abbreviation, and who, in fact, could be recognized by their first names alone: “Ursula Le Guin,” “Harlan Ellison,” “Poul Anderson.” “Poul” is a fairly common Danish name, but Anderson was the only Dane in our field, and the first name sufficed. There are plenty of Harlans around—Harlan Coben is a best-selling thriller writer, and Harlan Fiske Stone was Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court—but Harlan Ellison was the only Harlan in science fiction, and, considering how energetic and turbulent he was, that was quite sufficient. There is at least one other Ursula who writes fantasy and science fiction, Ursula Vernon, quite an estimable writer who has won the Hugo award for best novel, but, good as she is, she is not the Ursula whom one thinks of when one speaks of “Ursula” as a science fiction writer.

“Isaac” is another member of our gang who needs no last name to be identified, especially among readers of *Asimov’s Science Fiction Magazine*. His name can be misspelled—“Issac” was an all-too-common error, and annoyed him immensely—but it can’t really be abbreviated. There was a time, though, when his friends in the science fiction world tried to do it, calling him “Ike.” Though he hated the nickname, he tolerated it for a while, and then, somewhere in the late 1950s, let it be known that his name was Isaac, nothing but Isaac, and he didn’t want to hear “Ike” any more. (Dwight D. Eisenhower was familiarly known as “Ike,” and it didn’t bother him—“I Like Ike” was one of the slogans of his presidential campaign in 1952—but Isaac Asimov felt strongly otherwise, and the nickname disappeared.)

As for me—well, if you regard me with the awe and humility that a writer of my lofty stature deserves, I’m “Mr. Silverberg.” Otherwise, I’ll settle for “Bob.” But—please—don’t greet me as “Robert.” That was Heinlein—Mr. Heinlein, to you. All clear now?