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A Rose by Any Other Name

A look at the Process of Choosing a Name

by Catherine S.

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Some transpeople adopt a female name in childhood. For others it only became necessary when they realised Ralph isn't all that suitable for a person wearing a sequined little black dress and four-inch stilettos. Catherine (make sure you don't call her Cathy or Cate) talks to a few name droppers.

Names come and go in cycles and reflect their era. Whatever happened to the Roys, Alfs, Corals, Pearls and Aileens of this world?

I was there when Rob became Laura, in name at least. It happened when a group of us were sitting around talking at the now defunct Centennial Hotel. (Newcomers must be sick to death of us old-timers dribbling in our bras and reminiscing about the good old days at 'The Cent'. Tough! And be careful who you call an old-timer, junior.)

"It was a little bit difficult because you don't normally choose your own name, somebody gives you one," she recalls. "I got out a couple of books that had lists of names. I went through these and wrote down the possibilities because there were ones that are obviously unsuitable."

As a fan of Lauren Bacall, she was attracted to that name at first "but it wasn't quite suitable, it didn't hit the spot". After exhausting the name books and rejecting names directly linked to her family or friends she finally announced her choice at the Centennial.

Laura also took the unusual step of legally adopting a new surname to replace her distinctive former name. Partly this was because she returned to live in the regional city of her childhood. However Laura denies she buried her past. "I just want to live my life now as I am, to pass, to mingle in society, without anybody taking any particular notice of me, just as an ordinary person."

Names come and go in cycles and reflect their era. Whatever happened to the Roys, Alfs, Corals, Pearls and Aileens of this world? Rest assured that one day their places in the nursing home will be taken by Kylies, Jasons, Trents and, yes, even Madonnas. Scary, isn't it!

Of course the drag queens have it all over us when it comes to names. Their handles are as unrestrained as their appearance. Consider Barbara Quicksand, Amanda Diefore, Kitten Kaboodle and my favourite, Maude Boate. Oh, to be that imaginative.

In some ways, names are a bit like that Holy Grail of cross-dressing, passing. If you want to pass, wear something that doesn't attract attention. Similarly choose a name that reflects your era, ethnicity and personality.

The simple and most obvious way is to choose the feminine version of your male name: Michael to Michelle, Andrew to Andrea, etc. Some recommend retaining your initial, for example John can become Jacinta, Joanne, Jasmine or even Jamilla. I suppose it saves on initialled hankies. It may even be possible to rearrange your male name, for example Katherine Cummings in her biography *Katherine's Diary* mentions a friend Ernie who became Irene.

Don't care for that? Then go for it, call yourself Candee-Soo and wear that sequined little black dress and four-inch stilettos to the shops. It's a free country but don't be too surprised if you attract some attention. (Note to editor: please check the Seahorse membership register to ensure I haven't libelled any Candee-Soos.)

Sarah adopted her name in her mid-teens. "I just thought it was a nice name for a girl," she recalls. "It seemed distinctly feminine and sophisticated."

She believes the inspiration may have been a song, *Me and Sarah Jane* by Genesis. "When I was dressing up and didn't feel like my male self any more I would sing it to myself. I liked the name and so if I had a spare moment to myself (as you do) I would always think "Oh, I might do a Sarah Jane".

Twenty years later she is still happy with the choice. "I love it," Sarah contends, "having this extra dimension to my life." She has toyed with variations including (wait for it) "Sarah Gun-in-your-pocket".

Thirty years ago Lyn T (of The Sex Changers cartoon series fame) lived in a small town and needed a name to allow her to receive correspondence without arousing local comment. She adopted her sister-in-law's name (with permission). "She got married about two weeks later, moved interstate, changed her name and I've kept it ever since." Lyn, a graphic artist, has since adopted a second given name, Sue. "And the reason for that was graphical. 'L', 'S' and 'T' fit together in a graphic symbol. The 'S' is the ideal link."

Lyn believes that her given names are appropriate to her age. "When I was born, Lyn and Sue were the most common female names." She has adopted the name progressively over the past fifteen years but hasn't bothered with the legal processes.

Some people go through a number of names before finding the right one. Katherine, a recent visitor to Seahorse from Adelaide, called herself Natasha Katherine when she first started dressing in late '95. "I thought Natasha Katherine sounded fine. But then I went into denial and in '98 when I started coming out of that Natasha seemed to be not all that serious as a name."

She chose to rearrange her male name. "I thought why not have a name that's close to my male name, Neville. And so I mixed up the letters and come up with Evellin." She used that name, sometimes shortened to Evie, for a little while and then rejected it "because Neville's the guy and I'm not the guy. My masculinity is skin deep. I mean you cut me and a woman bleeds."

Finally she reverted to Katherine which she calls a "very versatile name: Katherine, Kate, Kay, Katie, Kat. I use it in different ways and almost in different moods." She has adopted a second given name, Yvonne. "It just has a lovely ring to it: 'Katherine Yvonne'. It almost sings," she says lyrically.

My own selection, Catherine, came about through a mixture of laziness, default and science. Back in the old days (there I go again) before ultrasound tests became routine, expectant parents didn't know what they were getting until they got it. So most selected a boy's name and a girl's. According to family history my alternative name was Catherine (or maybe Katherine). Simple, really.

I preferred the softer look of the 'C' to the 'K' and I'm one of these pedants who insist on the full name: not Cathy, Cath, Cate or even Catie. And make sure you don't swallow the vowels and call me 'Cath-rn'. It's nothing like my male name but that's okay, my female appearance is nothing like my male self either, at least I hope not!

I toyed with the idea of becoming Emma, a play on my given name initials, M.A., but frankly I can't be bothered. I haven't chosen a second name but it would probably be Mary, my mother's second name. Catherine Mary ... hmmm, it has a nice Catholic schoolgirl ring about it. I can see myself in my school dress, 10AA cup training bra, straw hat, black patent Mary Janes ... down girl! Control yourself!

What to choose? Well, it's your call. At least you have a choice, which is more than you had all those years ago when some fascist yanked you out of that nice, warm place, whacked your backside and made you cry.

"What's in a name?" as Will Shakespeare wrote in Romeo and Juliet. "That which we call a rose, by any other name would smell as sweet." That's all very well but I prefer W.C. Fields response when Mae West introduced herself in the film My Little Chickadee: 'Flowerbelle-Lee', he says, barely able to contain his lust. "What a euphonious appellation." Hmmm ... Flowerbelle ... I wonder if I could

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