

The Heroine's Name

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At first I wrote that I give my protagonists ordinary names. Like Heizou, Heita, Sanpei, Santarou, etc. This, however, is for my books (there are a few people who actually read all of my books in general, even though they fall into different categories) that I write for middle-aged people. It's important that these names are easy to understand so they can emphasize anonymity. The more ordinary, the better.

Love stories are different, however. Names already make up part of the love story. A long time ago I saw an American teen romance film. I don't remember the title but I remember the heroine's name, which was Marjorie Morningstar. Doesn't that make you imagine a blossoming beauty? Well, in romance movies (love stories too), I have to say that the names already set the stage for drama.

I once wrote something along these lines: The names of real life characters in historical novels cannot be altered but no matter how an author names her fictional heroines, naming those women "makes the author's literary sense and repertoire stand out." This too is one of the enjoyable parts about writing a story.

Take the characters Otsu and Akemi who appear in Eiji Yoshikawa's *Musashi Miyamoto*¹, for example. Otsu seems so faithful and innocent that she'd probably cling to Musashi and say, "Please profess your love to me." On the other hand, Akemi gives you the perfect impression of a flapper. The character named Old Woman Osugi makes you think of a stubborn old woman who doesn't hold back. The brilliance of an author's literary sense shines through the names of her female characters.

"Women's names are tricky..." I once was told by a male author. He's a contemporary novelist. Apparently, he mulls over the list of graduates from his wife's all-girl high school. I too have a list of names from my class reunion but it doesn't really serve much of a purpose in my case. You have to consider the multiple meanings and references connected to names when wanting to use names with depth. When looking at that list, you can notice which names were popular during certain periods of time.

The school I attended was old so during the Taisho era,² there were women named "Hatsu," "Yasu," "Kou," and "Chiyo." "Meiko" and "Kazuko" became pretty popular during the Showa era³. "Kiko" and "Motoko" became trendy in 1985, when the ceremony commemorating Japan's 2600th year as a nation was held. After the war, "Mari" became popular because everything became westernized and full of stage names. Although it's fun to observe those trends to try and come up with a name that will suit the story and the character's personality, it's very tricky.

I've written a series of books called *The Noriko Series: Iiyoru* (To Seduce), *Watashi-teki Seikatsu* (My Lifestyle), *Ichigo wo Tsubushinagara* (As I Stomp Strawberries). Noriko stars as the heroine in all of them. The radio talk show hostess, Noriko Koyama, said for quite some time, "Didn't you use my name!?"

It was just a coincidence. The Noriko in these novels is much livelier than the real life “Niko-chan.” The Noriko in my book is a bit two-faced. *Mado wo Akemasuka (Will You Open A Window?)* had Akiko, *Ai no Genmetsu (Love’s Disillusionment)* had Mako, and *Neko mo Shakushi mo (Even The Cat and the Bamboo Ladle Too)* had Asako—I wonder if there’s a bit of a common thread here?

Let’s say, for example, the main character’s name just isn’t doing it for you but you’re pressed for time and have to go with that name—to me, that’s a tragedy. Your best-laid plans just won’t come together. Deciding the heroine’s name is the first step. Then the editor is sure to be on edge because this is the first draft. An editor can look at your first draft and understand where the story is headed. Not only that, the most seasoned editors can get a feel for how well the whole story will perform for the magazine. Therefore, the first serialized story draft is not just the author. The editors are biting their nails too.

On top of that, my stories usually have illustrations. If a women’s fashion magazine publishes my story, then the pictures will be in color. This process takes a while. I have to get the draft to the illustrator as soon as possible so as not to waste that illustrator’s time. The illustrator’s imagination won’t be of any use if I don’t know the female protagonist’s age, personality, or occupation (the heroine’s occupation has become a major theme these days but it’s not that housewives don’t make a good story...).

Even though everyone is tired of being on pins and needles waiting for my first draft, I can’t conjure anything up. My frustrated editor calls me.

”You’ve got half of it done, right? Can you send it to me, even if it’s just half?”

Half or nothing, as long as I haven’t decided the heroine’s name, I can’t write a single page. The story isn’t going anywhere. Editors struggle to comprehend this.

“You just need a name, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. The outline is finished.”

“Why don’t I just have you leave a space for the name? And then when you think you’re finished, we can just go back and fill in the blank parts. That’ll work—actually, I’ll take care of filling them in so if I could have you call me later—”

That’s not going to happen.

Basically, I have the secret to making a love story here in my pen, which swiftly writes to bring characters to life. This is *because* the female protagonist has a name that I really like.

Leaving a blank space means having a faceless heroine. How could I develop any attachment to a protagonist without a face?

Let’s say, for example, that since I can’t think of a name, I decide to go with “Osugi.”

(Not the Osugi from *Osugi and Peeco*³ but the Osugi from *Miyamoto Musashi*.)

Osugi asks the waiter for a campari and soda. Tonight under the city's twilight sky, a bittersweet campari is fitting for her.

It would turn out like this. Regardless of how far I've gotten, I've come to a stalemate.

Instead, it should go like this:

Lulu orders a campari and soda. The bittersweet campari hits the spot for her troubled heart.

I used Lulu to mean, "I'll respond tomorrow." It's a girl named, "Lulu."⁴ This kind of name chooses a personality. It's a way to show that my story is progressing. Whether male protagonists are named Heiza or Heizo, you can't say that it's fine either way - they're completely different people. The name makes the person, or I should say that sometimes it's the other way around. "Saisaka Sumire" is the name I used for *Aishitemo ii desu ka? (Is it Alright to Love You?)* and *Kaze wo kudasai (Give me The Wind)*.

(Just a side note here: none of my works, not a single one, have ever been translated into another language. A translator told me that it's because "the Osaka dialect⁵ is hard to translate." That translator specialized in the French language. But I have had one of my titles translated into English. *Aishite Yoroshii desu ka?* became *Is It Alright to Love You?*)

No matter what, hearing "Sumire" would make you think of a delicate beauty. I decided to make this heroine anything but that—she's lean and tough, like a man. She's an older, unmarried woman who's good at her job. Even though she's confident, this woman's weakness is that her name happens to be "Sumire." If a man asks her what her name is, she replies, "It's Sumire," but she's shy despite herself. Even *she* doesn't think that her name suits. So she hesitates for a moment. Her voice ends up becoming small.

As soon as men hear, "Sumire," they say, "huh?" Sumire has experienced this countless times. But when one man kindly says, "That's a cute name," *Miss Sumire* falls in love with him. He, unlike the *other* men, didn't judge her by her looks. This man had the power to see her character. Underneath it all, *Miss Sumire* was tender and kind. He saw through her womanly heart and determined that a name like "Sumire" was perfect.

Not many men have this kind of insight. Most men are so deliberately and thoroughly busy that they don't even have the liberty to see a woman for her true self. Instead they all casually judge a book by its cover and can only draw conclusions that follow vulgar social norms. For those reasons, they are attracted to young and perky gals but turn away from grim-looking middle-aged women who are still single. The likelihood of Japanese men in particular going for trashy women is high. It's a pitiful sight.

How do I move forward with the situation that I established earlier? A man sees a woman for who she is and values her worth, or the woman understands a man's good character. Now here's the real question: What kind of relationship do I want for them?

I made the man a college student who isn't a full-fledged adult yet. Students have free time. Don't boys and girls who have started working after graduating school say the same things? Things like, I didn't think I'd be this busy. When you're a student, it's obvious that you have more free time than you can control. When you have free time, you have plenty of time to conduct research about the characteristics of the opposite sex. Well, there's probably a lot that hasn't been sullied by the influence of vulgar social norms (But there are plenty of students that are perverted—).

If it's that kind of man, he has the privilege to acquire a lover in modern-day Japan, where romance doesn't blossom. This is how a long-time working woman like *Miss Sumire*, who's unmarried and middle-aged, took a student as her lover.

The Heroine of the novel *Beddo no Omowaku (Bed of Speculation)* is "Akari Wada." I favor this name a little. This character is also an unmarried older woman. Why in the world do I write about so many older unmarried women? It's because young women don't make a good story. Those kinds of women who say, "I'll go out and meet someone. If we marry, I'll become a housewife. *He* is hoping for that too. *Yes*, I'll put on an apron everyday and tell *him*, 'welcome home!'" don't do much story development. The story ends with an "uh-huh" or "thanks but no thanks."

The kinds of women that make a good story are the older women who are hot messes. She wants to put on an apron and welcome her husband home but she doesn't have anyone coming home to her. She wants to become a housewife but she still wants to have a career. Better yet, she starts to pine after a man but can't pick between one man that she likes and another that she doesn't want to slip away. Everything ends up taking a turn for the worse and she gets dumped by every single man. A woman like that is my kind of story.

A woman like that *becomes* the story. A woman with nowhere to hide and no way to move on ends up facing the inevitable. By the time she realizes this, the woman has reached her mid forties without a ring on her finger. When her age has required her to calm down then her thoughts will be calmer too. Although young people don't make a good story, I'm not saying that the "marry me syndrome" is something that I despise.

Young women grow up and live their day to day with marriage constantly on their minds. More than anything, they think about a house with a swing set in the backyard, a climbing rose arbor, a red and white checkered tablecloth, knitted sweaters that their husbands are forced to wear (men don't wear those things, their wives make them do it), and a little boy and girl—I don't mean to laugh at women who picture themselves like this.

I don't think that the "marry me" mindset contradicts the possible future trend of housewives being seen as working women contributing to society. A girl wanting to marry is as natural as a budding flower

blossoming in the springtime. God buries that seed in girls when they're very small so that the seed can sprout and flourish alongside the girls as they quickly develop.

As the girls become women, wanting to get married is probably a part of divine providence. You could say that this part failed to blossom for older, unmarried women, There was a mistake somewhere along the lines. In order to call that mistake a drama, there are many things that you have to observe. I love turning *that* into a story. There is femininity in a woman who appears to have missed her chance. She reveals the true colors of her womanhood.

On the other hand, women who naturally blossom like flowers and bear fruit never reveal their true nature. There are many Japanese women (men too) who, instead of becoming women, turn into housekeepers when they marry. Rather than a housewife, this is a privileged person (today the roles of father, head of the house, or man of the house are becoming obsolete and housekeepers are rising up and taking their place). Women, not housekeepers, make the story. Writing middle-aged single women as my heroines is my way of doing this—but I digress.

The name Akari is so hopeful and abundant in radiance that you can feel the disposition to succeed (there was a singer who had that name). She is the heroine of *Beddo no Omowaku (Bed of Speculation)* and can somehow lift herself out of the deepest of slumps. I made her a smooth talking woman, however.

I realized that I'm a smooth talker too and yet there are many Japanese people who are reserved. There are chatterboxes too but I'm just a talkative person as you can see from the way that I write. I don't say *important* things. I believe in the quality of words over the quantity of words. If someone is talking about something with actual substance, no matter how much of a long-winded speech it may seem, I can't see that person as talkative. From beginning to end, I would want to give that person my undivided attention.

Japanese people have things like expressions, thoughts, smiles, actions, body language, and telepathic bonds. It seems like these things become a part of the conversation and turn into a habit. We have no tradition of communicating or arguing with words.

Sometimes when I look at television shows from other countries, I see how women present these articulate, irrefutable arguments, particularly when a woman is going on and on about her reasons without any remorse. That's amazing. My husband will look at a show like that and feel compelled to say with deep sympathy, "That man can't win. Not at work, and not even at home."

If you were to ask me, Japanese families should hold balanced conversations. Family gathered around staring at a TV without exchanging a single word—it's a painful sight. Turning off the TV and having a family debate is better. That's why I made the unmarried heroine "Akari" quick-witted against men's advances. This woman, who could never lose an argument, could also protect herself with her eloquence.

It's not enough for the names of the heroine's in my stories to be beautiful. The names have to be quite mischievous too but it's difficult finding a name that invokes such a feeling.

I don't feel that Akari is too charming but I only give names like "Shou Kigen" and "Sakura Yukino" to beautiful women characters with the intention of drawing a line between the feelings of elegance and mischief. For mischievous single women, there's Kaoru of *Dansu to Kuusou (Dance and Dream)* and Madoka of *Koi ni Appu Appu (Drowning in Love)*. I don't just write about unmarried women. Mori Asano of *Choukakiyuzu (The Map of Butterflies, Flowers, and Diversions)* and Akira of *Koi ni Appu Appu (Drowning in Love)* are married but live freely. That's why they're some of my favorites.

For a mischievous and usual woman, I have used the name "Kuneko." If you ask me, I think names like that of the violinist Neijko Suwa are wonderful. The symbols⁷ are unique and the name is imaginative. No matter what, real names lead with a presence and an aroma.

I'll keep getting lost as I search for all the names in the forest of romance.

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Notes:

- 1 Published in 1935, Eiji Yoshikawa's epic historical novel detailed the life and legend of the samurai Musashi Miyamoto.
- 2 An era of Japanese history spanning from 1912 to 1926.
- 3 An era of Japanese history spanning from 1926 to 1989.
- 4 Ru means "absence" in Japanese, which has no "L" sound. The author originally wrote "Ruru."
- 5 Osugi and Peeco are twin celebrity personalities who have appeared on several Japanese television programs to offer witty commentary on pop culture.
- 6 Seiko Tanabe is known for writing her in *Osaka-ben* (Osaka-dialect), which does appear throughout this essay.
- 7 The author is referring to kanji or Chinese characters. The characters in the name sound beautiful as well as look beautiful when written.