

What's in a Name?

Contributed by Kate Pepper and Katia Spiegelman

My name is Katia. Her name is Kate. We live at the same address, share the same family, and write the same books. On the scale of professional accomplishment, one being failure and ten being success, I hover comfortably around two. Kate is restless closer to six and has her eye on nine, minimum.

For years, much of my fiction has featured a heroine named Kate, Katie, Catherine, or Cat; there are seemingly endless common variations to the translation of my given name. French-born to American parents, I was given a Russian nickname no one can pronounce. On the first day of school, it was always my name nestled into the teacher's awkward pause when reciting the class roster. I became accustomed to the frozen smiles of new acquaintances, and learned to enunciate my name when introduced, spelling it and breaking it down phonetically. Having often been asked, "Can I just call you Kaye?" I learned to answer, "You can call me whatever you want, but my name is Katia."

I grew up hoisting that name around with the stubborn pride of a mother whose child is not quite right. The name on my master's degree reads Katia Charna Spiegelman. The post-marriage name on my Social Security card reads Katia Charna Spiegelman Lief. In my life as a teacher, I remain Katia Spiegelman; as a mother, I am Katia Lief. Then, at the age of forty, I capitulated to the burdens of so many unpronounceable names, and in an impulsive gesture at reinvention, took a pseudonym.

Kate Pepper writes thrillers, extending a greater presence into the commercial world than I ever did. Below the surface of her uber-pronounceable name, she is my amalgam of self and lost-self; Kate being, as always, me, and Pepper being the beloved childhood cat lost, along with my innocence, in my parents' divorce. Her name and work slips and slides effortlessly through the world, and in theory she is me, yet I feel she is someone else. Aside from the excuses about pronunciation and shielding myself and my family from either great success or great failure, I still question her invention. But now that she's off and running, and it is clearly too late to pull her back, my need to understand her role in the new triumvirate of my identity has trumped any pretense of clarity or privacy.

You might say that my identity split in two long before I took a pseudonym. A lifelong feminist, I didn't think twice when the clerk at the city hall where we went for our marriage license asked me what name I'd be using. Of course, I would keep my own name, and without hesitation answered, "Katia Spiegelman." Less than a year later, pregnant with our first child, I decided I wanted to have the same last name as my children. It was an urge I didn't analyze; perhaps it was a deep yearning for the intact family I didn't have as a child. I went to the local Social Security office and added my husband's last name to mine, officially becoming Katia Charna Spiegelman Lief. I spent a morning phoning all my credit cards, and slowly began to use my new name.

Even now, a decade later, it's often confusing; I'm not always sure who I am in different situations. When I deal with medical insurance or any other legal process, the road gets particularly murky. Nurses search for my files. One of my children was mislabeled at birth by the hospital (we fixed that). Recently, a large check from my publisher was rejected as a deposit at my bank because it wouldn't recognize Katia Spiegelman on an account that read Katia S. Lief.

More puzzling than the pas de deux of dancing through life with two names was the sense, as a married mother, that my relationship with society had changed. Instead of being an aspiring novelist and single woman -- double pox on me -- I was suddenly a devoted at-home mother who won nothing but approval and praise, even from strangers on the street. I was part of a club: it was Us versus Them, and We knew best because We valued family above all else. Well, I do value my family above all else, but through my decade of parenthood, I have come to understand how quickly mothers become invisible; you have your baby, get a huge round of applause, and the lights dim on your future. You come to understand how hard it is for the different sub-plots of your life to flow together. You learn to compartmentalize. It's a deep, dark pitfall that the feminist movement of my youth urged married women to avoid by keeping our own names, as a claim on our original, authentic identities.

Given what I'd already experienced of the burdens in carrying two names, why did I then take on a third? I thought a pseudonym for my commercial novels might simplify my life, but in fact it had the opposite effect. I had already published two small-press novels and developed a teaching career as Katia Spiegelman. Meanwhile I had a busy family life as Katia Lief. People in the university knew little of me outside the classroom, and those in my domestic world were shocked if they found out about my writing life, which they rarely did -- not because I was uncomfortable telling them, but once you're a mother, especially a home-bound mother, people just stop asking. I found this conspiracy of invisibility somewhat perverse, and came to take pleasure in the jaw-dropped response of acquaintances from my mommy life when they learned that I had not only written a novel, but it had sold in a bidding war to a major publisher. At the same time, I developed a sense of shame at my self-defying pseudonym and the secrecy under which I had come to veil my working life. I felt like a poster child for a feminist movement that had slipped far below its own standards. People continue to ask me, "Why do you publish as Kate Pepper?" I'm not sure what the answer is, exactly, but perhaps as both a woman and a novelist I have revised my self one too many times.

A novelist synthesizes the strengths and weaknesses of a society, and contemplates the vast potential of a life. We disassemble truths, strip them to their elements, then reassemble them into brighter expressions of themselves. We seek to unravel and reweave so that each thread carries vivid importance. In writing fiction, revision is essential. In real life, however, it comes at the cost of personal integrity.

To be integral is to be woven-in -- to a fabric, or a self, or a balanced society. Each strand of integrity we forfeit plucks another thread in a gradual dissemblance. Growing up in the nineteen-sixties and -seventies, I was supposed to have learned to hold myself together as a woman, thus in my core I feel shame at having quibbled with my own identity, my integrity, which in the end is all any of us really have to bank on.

Of course, there could be other ways to look at this. Maybe my betrayal of self embodies more than personal confusion, but is an expression of a uniquely American pride in adaptation. In our beloved country, the possibilities are endless. You can start out poor and end up rich, or vice versa; you can go from secretary to CEO; from infertility to

parenthood; from slum to celebrity. It's reassuring to think of my quandary as emblematic of the American mindset, but is it true?

Kate doesn't worry too much about any of this; she thinks reinvention is fabulous and empowering. She's out there, walking the walk. Katia stays home, worries and wonders, and does the heavy lifting. Questions bubble endlessly: How is it that hypocrisy can equal success? How have I become the heart beating in a soulless robber barren, who is also me? It's always possible that in the voice of my pseudonymous self I have hit my best stride; when Kate writes about a psycho killer, Katia writes about every mother's worst fears and the anxieties that haunt each of us when we lie in bed at night. Could it be that, together, we are a more integrated voice than mine alone?

But like everything else in life, it isn't that simple.

After all these years of wishing for an easier name, I now feel nostalgia for the one I was born with. I can't justify the confusion I've caused myself and my family. How do you explain to a seven-year-old that Katia Spiegelman is Katia Lief, and both are Kate Pepper? I am all three, all at once: a struggling literary writer; a successful commercial author; and a stay-at-home mom. The truth is it doesn't make much sense. Why didn't I just stick with one name?

I've fantasized about a dinner party with other identity-drifters who could discuss the complexities of being two or three people at once. Daniel Edward Agraluscasacra would be good for a laugh (ahem, Dan Aykroyd). And if being alive isn't required, Nathan Birnbaum and Leonard Alfred Schneider (George Burns and Lenny Bruce) would certainly liven up the conversation. Truman Streckfus Persons and Giovanni Giacomo Girolomo de Seingalt (Truman Capote and Casanova) would keep things nicely weird. And back to the living, we might balance the evening with a meaningful film starring Edna Rae Gilhooly and Maurice Joseph Micklewhite (Ellen Burstyn and Michael Caine). If we get bored, we could ask Cherilyn Sarkisian La Piere (Cher) for a song.

This may not be the crowd to solve anyone's identity crisis, but it would be a lot of fun, and for a few hours it might lighten the load of having split off from the authenticity of a given name.

As Katia Lief, I sometimes receive mail addressed to Katie Lies and I want to shout, "No, she doesn't!" Then I think again and realize that, well, maybe she does.

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Kate Pepper is the pseudonym of author Katia Spiegelman, who teaches

fiction writing at New School University and lives in Brooklyn, NY with her husband and two children. Her most recent novel, *Seven Minutes to Noon*, was published in May 2005 by Signet/Penguin.

For more information, please visit the author's website at www.katepepper.com