

**My Name** From *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse--which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female-but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong.

My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild, horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name Magdalena--which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least- -can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza. would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.

FICTION

## SHE UNNAMES THEM

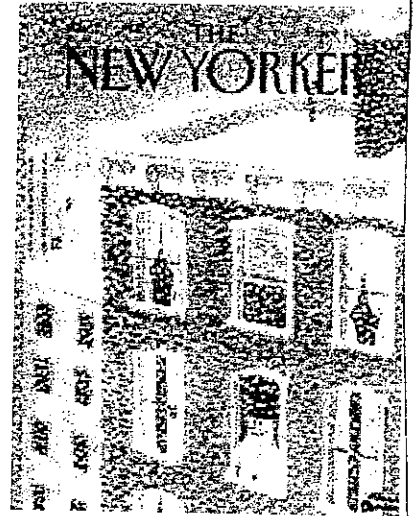
by Ursula K. Le Guin

JANUARY 21, 1985

Ursula K. Le Guin, Fiction, "She Unnames Them," The New Yorker, January 21, 1985, p. 27

Read the full text of this article in the digital edition. (Subscription required.)

**ABSTRACT:** Most of them accepted namelessness with the indifference with which they had so long accepted and ignored their names. A faction of yaks protested. They said that "yak" sounded right. They discussed the matter all summer. The council of elderly females finally agreed that though the name might be useful to others it was so redundant from the yak point of view that they never spoke it themselves, and might as well dispense with it. Most of the domestic animals agreed to give their names back. The cats denied ever having had any name other than their self-given, unspoken personal names. The dogs and the verbally talented birds insisted that their names were important to them until they understood that the issue was one of individual choice. Then not one objected to parting with the generic appellations. None were left now to unname, and they seemed far closer to me than when their names had stood between us: so close that my fear of them and their fear of me became one. And the attraction that many of us felt was one with the fear. The hunter could not be told from the hunted. This was more or less the effect I had been after, and I could not now make an exception of myself. I went to Adam, and said, "You and your father gave me this. It's been really useful, but it doesn't exactly seem to fit." He was not paying much attention, and only said O.K. and went on with what he was doing. I said goodbye and went out. I had only just realized how hard it would have been to explain. My words now must be as slow, new, and tentative as the steps I took going down the path away from the house, between the dark-branched, tall dancers, motionless against the winter shining.



## **“If I had been called Sabrina or Ann, she said”**

by Marge Piercy

I'm the only poet with the name.  
Can you imagine a prima ballerina named  
Marge? Marge Curie, Nobel Prize winner.  
Empress Marge. My lady Marge? Rhymes with  
large/charge/barge. Workingclass?  
Definitely. Any attempt to doll it up  
(Mar-gee? Mar-gette? Margelina?  
Margarine?) makes it worse. Name  
like an oilcan, like a box of baking soda,  
useful, plain; impossible for foreigners,  
from French to Japanese, to pronounce.  
My own grandmother called me what  
could only be rendered in English  
as Mousie. O my parents, what  
you did unto me, forever. Even  
my tombstone will look like a cartoon.

## Jorje

The first day of school is always tough. New teachers and new classmates can make anyone a little nervous. As the teacher begins calling roll, I brace myself for the inevitable. And then it happens, a chill goes up my spine as the teacher calls out, "Is Jorje Chica present?" What's wrong with that, you may ask? Well, if you heard the brutal mispronunciation, you would understand. I find myself saying, "It's just George, with a G." In elementary school, giggles and laughter would follow. This laughter hurt me inside. At that moment, I would wish that I had a normal name. As school went on, my name would take the brunt of much teasing. "George Porgy pudding pie," the other kids would say. And, of course, there's the famous "George of the Jungle, watch out for that tree!"

It's been said that people like to hear their names. Personally, I think it depends on who is saying it. In school and in public, I play it safe by using George. Only at home or with my Hispanic friends am I comfortable with Jorje. Why is this so? I shouldn't have to do this, but hearing my name distorted, accidentally or purposely, hurts inside. I shield myself by settling with the Anglo "George." However, I do like to hear my true name. When my mother or grandmother calls me, my name sounds beautiful. I feel pride for my name, as well as my heritage. However, when someone really screws up on the pronunciation it sounds like a needle being dragged across a record. When this happens, I retreat into my American persona.

I am proud of my name. Either way you say it, it has a long and great history. Jorje comes from the Greek name George. The name George originated from the Georgics, a poetic treatise on agriculture by the Roman poet Virgil. Thus comes the meaning "farmer." In Biblical times, a Roman soldier named George converted a Lybian village to Christianity, after slaying a dragon which victimized the town. He was made a saint, and in the 14th century he was made patron saint of England. This proclamation led to seven British monarchs named George. The name George is also important on American soil. Our first president, George Washington, has been a favorite of Americans for the last 200 years. His popularity will no doubt, ensure the longevity of the name George in the United States.

My name may have a long and celebrated history, but it has more personal meaning to me. It represents a new beginning and a positive future. I'm the first in my family to have the name Jorje, so it's a fresh and unused name. I don't have to live up to the achievements of someone else, just because we share a name. My name is also unique. It differs in spelling from the Spanish Jorje. Another positive aspect of my name is the reason my mother chose it. In Cuba, my parents' homeland, my mother had a friend named Jorje. He had certain qualities that she wanted in her children. She said to me, "He was very noble, and was a good friend." She went on to say, "The name Jorje brings to mind great men and grand achievements. I guess had great expectations for you."

What use do names have for us? Names perform the public task of separating us from others. But, a number could do the same thing. There has to be more to a name than just a means of differentiating us from our fellow man. Names have to fulfill personal needs, too. My name is a part of who I am. Jorje is a reflection of my heritage. My name influences how I look at myself, and is a part of what I want to be, my own person. My name helps me keep one foot in the past, and the other in the future. By having a Hispanic name, I connect myself with my ancestry, while moving forward in life. Names may have literal meanings, and great histories. But, the personal definitions and histories are usually more interesting, and always more special. I hope to carve out my own personal history, one just as worthy as that of the famous Georges the world has seen.

Jorje Chica

From Borron, B. (1996). *My name, my self: Using name to explore identity*. In C.B. Olson (Ed.), *Reading, thinking and writing about multicultural literature* (pp. 596-615). Glenview, IL: Scott Foresman. Reprinted with permission.

## "Sekou"

### Mary

Mary was a hand-me-down  
from Grandma.

I was  
the "Little Mary"  
on holiday packages.  
Merry Christmas:

Mary, mother of God,  
who is a strong woman  
in a male dominated religion.  
Me,  
a lone girl,  
in a world of testosterone.  
Because of her,  
it means sorrow and grief —  
I am very sad about this.

"How does your garden grow?" they often ask.  
With colorful fruit like the pictures  
I attempt to paint,  
and beautiful flowers like the poems  
I try to write.

They had  
three little kids in a row,  
and the middle one's me.

Mary, Mary, not always contrary.

I have a very unusual name. Not as unusual as I used to think because just last year I came face to face with another Sekou. He didn't look much like me, and we probably had very little in common, but when I stood in front of him and shook his hand, I felt we had some kind of secret bond. I could tell he felt the same way.

One day I asked my mom about my name, "How did you come to name me Sekou?"

"Well," she said, "I used to work with convicts, tutoring them, and one day as I walked across the prison courtyard, I heard someone yell, 'Hey, Sekou!' I thought to myself, 'Wow. What great name.' And I remembered it."

I didn't know how I felt being named after some inmate, but I've always been thankful for having it. I couldn't imagine hearing my name and wondering if they were talking to me or the other guy with the same name. I wouldn't like walking into a little gift shop and seeing my name carved onto a key chain. I've heard that somewhere in Northern Africa my name is quite common.

My name has a special meaning. Sekou Shaka, my first and middle name, together mean learned warrior. That's the way I'd like to see myself: Fighting the battle of life with the weapon of knowledge.

Sam Austin wrote his piece after soaking in the flavor of Sandra Cisneros' description:

My name is an all encompassing, fully endowed, drenched and soaked, burnt and charred entity, glazed over with a dark molasses finish. And then given a strong strawberry smoke. It's a sweet song that every time you hear it sounds better than the last.

If spoken correctly, it can get you the sweetest of love or the harshest of hate. Sam to Sammy to Samuel. I've heard those plus some. A man from the streets once told me it's not what you do, but how good you look doing it. And he's halfway right. If you flip my name just right, it gives the feel of an old 1930s gangster Dillinger, or a modern day Casanova. It's the way the girl down the street tosses in that extra long am into my name. "Hey Saaaaam." Or the way that pretty girl with her sensual accent throws that low and long aaah into my name.

I'll go out of my way just to walk by and get that low and steamy, "Hi Saam," from her window. My name really doesn't get any better than that.

I Am a Shadow - Helen from San Francisco

What kind of name is Helen? Simple, boring,  
Practical and plain. I'm not Helen. I'm unique. I'm  
Original. I'm creative and bold....

My Real Name - Elena Noel from Washington, D.C.

Today my name is colorful.  
Yesterday my name was dead souls.  
Tomorrow my name will be lively spirits.  
My friends think my name is fire.  
The police think my name is burden.  
My parents think my name is symphony.  
Secretly I know my name is anything  
I want it to be.