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Creative Penning: Women Choosing To Write As Women Or Men

 Cheryl Isaac, Contributor

[It's 2012 already: why is opinion writing still mostly male?](#) This was the question Erika Fry recently asked in a *Columbia Journalism Review* article. After the American Society of Magazine Editors (ASME) announced nominations for its annual award, this debate was spurred: [Where are the women writers?](#) And my favorite: [Women can't write, says ASME.](#)

In 2010, best-selling author Jodi Picoult spoke out about what she called favoritism towards “white male literary darlings.” Just a few months ago, *Vida*, the magazine for women in literary arts, published [these statistics](#) to highlight gender bias within the literary industry.

The answer? Write as men, some women writers say.

Gender ambiguity is the way to go, some say.

Get a platform and feature women writers, others choose to do.

I interviewed **three women** who were so uncomfortable with the gender issues writers sometimes face, that they chose different—and surprising—ways to counter this issue.

Write as a woman. Build a platform for women.

A few months ago, I talked to [Sarah Menkedick](#), who had recently founded [Vela Mag](#), an online magazine of creative non-fiction inspired by travel, and written by women. Menkedick who spent six years traveling abroad visiting five different continents, met her husband in Mexico, taught writing in Beijing, and was penning a book about “the end of backpacking,” told me that she was sick of the “male aesthetic” that dominated the travel writing world, and decided to create a space for women travel writers—outside of the publishing world.

Try searching the table of contents in a travel writing book, she tells me, you’ll come across only a handful of female writers, compared to male writers.

I searched my bookshelf, pulled out *Best Travel Writing of 2009*, and flipped through it. I remembered that I had enjoyed reading Jay Kirk’s brilliantly written “Hotels Rwanda,” his attention-grabbing essay that takes you through the Rwandan jungle to spy on the mountain gorilla. Then I also remembered feeling my insides pull at me as I read, “A Dip In The Cold,” the

masterpiece by endurance swimmer Lynne Cox, who swims around icebergs in the cold waters of the Northwest passage—waters where human beings don't dare swim—and lets you know her every thought while it happens.

Yet out of roughly 25 essays in the book, only approximately 5 were written by women (I could not verify whether one of the names were male or female). The essays are hand-picked from various publications, a series editor reviews the essays submitted and chooses a few that he thinks are the best, and an editor makes the final picks.

So either there is a lack of female travel writing essays to choose from, or there is a lack of female editors involved in the process; because based on recent travel statistics, we know that there is no lack of female travelers.

Another explanation: editors are hypothesizing that readers are just more comfortable reading travel essays written by men.

These two women seem to think so (although they write in different genres).

Write as a man.

If you're a copywriter, you've probably heard of the blog: [Men With Pens](#). (*In fact if you pen anything, how could you not have?*) The site is chockfull of tips for entrepreneurs and bloggers.

But here's the twist: the male brains behind it all is actually James Chartrand—the pen name of the *female* founder (interestingly enough, she still does not use her real name on the blog and when I asked, she didn't tell me her name but said that she believes that there is no actual value of revealing her real name online).

Why the male pen name?

James—or whatever her real female name is—tells me that within the copywriting and freelancing world, “all the big names and successful business people are predominantly men. There weren't any female copywriters in the top ten. There weren't many female-operated blogs among the big dogs.”

She wanted to have what those men had, she said: “respect, credibility and opportunity.”

Chartrand, who revealed her female identity on [this post](#) in 2009, began her freelance writing in 2006 and took on the pen name in 2007.

Asked if she had any public backlash once she revealed her gender, she said there were some “aggressive, hurtful and defamatory posts.” But she's content because when she wrote as a female, her ideas were questioned, her rates haggled with, and a client actually assumed that she was operating from a kitchen table with “two kids hanging off my leg as I worked,” she tells me.

“Sorry folks, no flowery dresses or nurturing mother personality here,” she adds. (Although just for the record, I should add that Chartrand is a mother).

“How can we continue to make changes in this century if women don't start demanding to be seen and heard as *women*? If we can't even be comfortable being women?” A female writer and coach asked me when we discussed the subject. And she is not the only one who wonders. A simple [Google](#) search will show you the online debate.

Write as a woman, but have some gender ambiguity.

Although we may like it to be, gender bias in publishing is not just a thing of the past. Writers like Hilda Doolittle and Louisa May Alcott were known to write with initials, and so does one of the more popular writers of our time: [J.K. Rowling](#). Susan Eloise Hinton published under the initials S. E. Hinton because her publishers feared that readers wouldn't respect a "macho story" written by a woman. After decades, Hinton's *The Outsiders* is still a widely read classic. And just last year, Alison Potter [blogged](#) about being told that her name was "just not right."

For similar reasons, Joanna Penn of *The Creative Penn*, recently [announced](#) that her thriller would be published under the initials: J.F. Penn. She uses the initials because she doesn't want to give her readers "any barriers to experiencing the adventure," she tells me. Her books, she fears, may not be for the faint-hearted. For instance, in *Pentecost*, a nun is burned alive.

Writing within a genre like action-adventure thriller, with male influences that include Clive Cussler, James Rollins, Steve Berry, Andy McDermott and Matthew Reilly, Penn wants someone to pick up her book and just read. Don't compare the author to the content, just read and judge the content.

And I would assume that she would prefer to have fewer reviews like this one that—although a decent review—has to do with more about the female who penned the book, and less about the book:

...this kind of sprawling, globe trotting, religious themed, action adventure thriller is historically the province of men; retired marines, mercenaries or CIA analysts. Or Dan Brown. It's what you expect. And Joanna is, self-evidently to my well trained eye, a woman. So then my not entirely foolish expectation when perusing her first novel was of something a little more, you know, delicate in character...But wow, beneath her pleasant and chirpy demeanor lurks the black heart of a terrorist interrogator, a fearless adventurer.

Penn does not hide her name or picture on her [website](#). In fact her award-winning blog (The Creative Penn) that showcases the woman behind the blog and her story, has won a couple of awards, including this one: '[Top 10 Blogs for Writers 2011/2012](#).'

Your thoughts?