

A Heroine's Name

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I once wrote that I prefer to give my protagonists ordinary names. *Heizo, Heita, Sanpei, Santaro...*

This applies to my 'middle-aged stories', a category created by the few readers who have read most, if not all, of my works. In these generational stories, plain names help to emphasize anonymity. The more ordinary, the better.

This is not the case, however, with romance novels. In romance novels, the protagonist's name plays a key role in the story. I once saw an American film of which I've forgotten the title...but I do remember the heroine's name. It was a coming-of-age love story and the character was named, if I recall correctly, *Marjorie Morningstar*. Doesn't that name alone summon up visions of a fresh-faced beauty? See, when it comes to romantic movies (and novels), the story begins unfolding in the title character's name.

I've also written that while names of historical figures in period novels cannot be altered, fictional heroines can be given any name under the sun. These female names demonstrate a writer's literary instinct and experience and are, in part, what make novels so gratifying.

In Yoshikawa Eiji's *Miyamoto Musashi*, for example, two women named Otsu and Akemi feature prominently. Otsu is proper and chaste. You can almost hear her begging Musashi, *Please call me your wife, just once*. The name Akemi, on the other hand, dazzles readers with a flapper-like feel. A third character, Osugi-Baba, is a stubborn, perplexing old woman with a name that reminds—aptly—of an oak tree. Do you see? The author's literary gift is on full display here.

"Women's names are tricky," I once heard a male contemporary novelist express. For inspiration, he says he flips through his wife's all-girls high school alumni directory among other name-seeking methods. I too own a high school alumni directory, but mine hasn't proven very useful. My heroine names have a slight twist to them, and a myriad of factors must be considered.

An alumni list chronicles the popular names of each era, showing distinct trends. My school goes all the way back to the Taisho Era (1912-1926) when many women had simple, two-syllable names such as Ha-tsu, Ya-su, Ko-u, and Chi-yo. The Showa Era (1926-1989) gave rise to names such as Akiko (昭子) and Kazuko (和子), both borrowing a kanji character from *Showa* (昭和). In 1940, the 2,600th Anniversary of Kigen (the traditional Japanese calendar, written as 紀元) was celebrated to great fanfare

and inspired such names as Noriko (紀子) and Motoko (元子). And following World War II, women's names suddenly became Westernized or sounded ready for the stage, such as Mari.

I keep an eye on these trends, but my job is to deliver names that serve a story and personality, which is both exciting and more of a challenge than one may think.

I've written a trilogy known as the 'Noriko Series', which includes *Pursuit (Iiyoru)*, *Private life (Shiteki seikatsu)*, and *While crushing strawberries (Ichigo o tsubushinagara)*, and chronicles the life of a woman named Noriko. The media personality Koyama Noriko often jokes, "You took my name, didn't you?" But the overlap is pure coincidence. The real 'Noko-chan', as Koyama is known, is much sunnier and more upbeat than the Noriko of my novels, who has something of a split personality. Along with Noriko, a few other female protagonists include Akiko in *Shall I open the window? (Mado o akemasuka?)*, Mayuko in *Disillusion of love (Ai no genmetsu)*, and Asako in *Every last one (Neko mo shakushimo)*. Do you sense a theme here?

Now, let's say I am pressed for time and must begin writing, though I've yet to determine the protagonist's name. I assure you this is a recipe for disaster. I find myself unable to propel the story in the planned direction. Deciding what to call my heroine is step number one.

If I am in the process of searching for the right name, it means I am at the start of a novel series, and if I am at the start of a series, it means my editor is on edge. The first installment of a series sets the novel's tone and direction, and an experienced magazine editor can instantly size up its potential to grab a reader, as well as how much it will contribute to a publication. Thus, both the author and editor await anxiously for the arrival of the first manuscript.

Additionally, my stories are often accompanied by illustrations. If the piece has been commissioned by a women's fashion magazine, the artwork will need to be in color. This takes time. The text must be sent swiftly to illustrators as they too have schedules to manage. However, without specifics regarding the protagonist's age, personality, and profession (the heroine's work life was a central theme around this time—not that a novel about a housewife cannot be written), the illustrator's imagination could stall as well. So everyone waits breathlessly for the manuscript, which they are not receiving from me.

My editor calls. "Is even half of it done? I'm happy with anything you have, even just half of the story." *Half?* Without the protagonist's name, I can't write a single page. My editor seems to have trouble understanding that the story has no chance of moving forward. Period.

"Is the name the only thing that has you stuck?"

"Yes, yes. I have the plot."

“Is there any way you can begin writing the story, leaving the name blank for now? You can fill in the name after you’ve finished, if it comes to you then. In fact, *I* can fill in the name, if you can just tell me over the telephone later...”

I wish things worked that way.

And therein lies the secret of my romance-themed novels. When I am happy with the heroine’s name, my pen sails across the page, the character taking on a life of her own. Writing without a name means writing about a faceless woman. How am I to care about a faceless woman?

Let’s say I haven’t quite tracked down the right name, and I insert ‘Osugi’ for the time being. (As inspired by Osugi-Baba in *Miyamoto Musashi*, not Osugi from the media personality duo Osugi and Peeco.) I might somehow drum up a beginning: *Osugi called the waiter over and ordered a Campari soda. The bittersweet Campari and metropolitan sunset make a perfect pairing.* But where am I to go from there, with an antiquated name like Osugi?

For the scene to make sense, it has to be: *Lulu sips a Campari soda. The bittersweet cocktail soothes her ragged soul.* I used the name ‘Lulu’ in my novel *Reply tomorrow (Henji wa ashita)*. It doesn’t suit every personality, but when the name fits, the novel moves. Unlike a male protagonist, who could be called Heita or Heizo and it wouldn’t make a drop of difference.

The name reveals a personality. And sometimes I use that to opposite effect.

‘Saisaka Sumire’ is the protagonist of my novels *May I love you? (Aishite yoroshiidesuka?)* and *Please give me the wind (Kaze o kudasai)*. (As an aside, my work has never been translated into another language, not even a chapter. A French translator once said to me, “There’s no way around that Osaka dialect!” Asked to translate the title of the aforementioned novel into English, they offered up the very literal *IS IT ALRIGHT TO LOVE YOU?*)

A name like Sumire (*violet* in Japanese) calls to mind a frail, sensitive young beauty. But my Sumire is tall, big-boned and rough around the edges. She is what the Japanese call *haimisu* (derived from ‘high-miss’, a term once used to describe a single, independent woman of a certain age), and she has the confidence, attitude and mouth to prove it. Her only weakness is her delicate-sounding name: Sumire.

When men ask her name, she is embarrassed to answer them. She knows she is not the Sumire type, so she hesitates before mumbling her name in a barely audible tone. More than once, men have burst out laughing. Only one ever said, “That’s a charming name.” Naturally, a romance developed between the two. Unlike the others, this man could see beyond a woman’s appearance, possessing the sense and ability to look within. He viewed ‘Sumire-san’ as gentle, caring and womanly, concluding the name suited her just fine.

Men are rarely equipped with this insight. They pretend life is busy and they are short on time, when what they really lack is the breadth of mind to appreciate a woman for who she is. Unable to see beyond society's nearsighted stereotypes, they judge easily and superficially, chasing the young and beautiful with their eyes while the *haimisu* woman escapes their fields of vision entirely. This explains why so many Japanese men end up with lousy women. Serves them right.

Now, how do I avoid the harmful effects laid out above in my novels? A man who seeks out and embraces a woman's truth, and a woman who knows a good man when she sees one...what kind of pairing makes such a relationship realistic?

I decided to make the male lead a college student. He has yet to see the world. And as a student, he has hours upon hours to burn. (Why is it that as soon as they hit the workforce, these boys and girls start to whine about how they didn't expect to be so busy? It proves just how idle they were in school.) With all of that time on his hands, a college boy can devote himself to the study of a woman's inner workings. Further, a young man is less likely to be tainted by the ill conventions of the world (though many students have already seen too much). In modern Japan where romance struggles to bloom, only a man in this position stands a chance at winning the honor of Love Interest. And that is how a college student became the boyfriend of seasoned *haimisu* businesswoman 'Sumire-san'.

In another of my novels called *Speculation of bed (Beddo no omowaku)*, the protagonist's name is Wada Akari. I rather like this name. She too is a *haimisu*. The reason I write so often about *haimisu* women is because frankly, their younger counterparts don't make interesting novels. What story could I possibly tell about a young woman whose only wish is to marry and be a housewife? "That's his wish too," I can hear her say. "I'll wear an apron and greet him at the door every night after work." Oh really? That's nice. The end.

A woman worth writing about would don an apron and greet her partner at the door if she had a partner to greet. Or maybe she's a woman who wants to be a housewife *and* keep her position at the company. Or perhaps she has a partner and a 'plaything' on the side. Not to mention a third man as a safety net. She has it all worked out, you see, until every last one of them dumps her. These women make good novels. Women who find themselves stranded atop a cliff with nowhere to go? That's a story. The thing is, by the time they arrive in that particular spot, they have reached a certain age. They are *haimisu*. A woman must mature in age in order to mature in thought, after all.

But just because they don't interest me as novel subjects doesn't mean I look down on young women afflicted with Marry Me Syndrome. I don't mock those dreams of wedded bliss, the visions of a house with a swing on a grassy lawn, a rose-covered arch in the garden, red-and-white checkered

tablecloth, a husband to dress in a handknitted sweater (note he is not wearing a sweater so much as being dressed in one, as that is her wish), with a little boy and a girl to round out the family. Who am I to make light of such aspirations?

I do imagine most housewives will be working outside of the home in the future. I don't, however, think that trend is a threat to the marriage-pining spirit. A girl wishing to marry is as natural as buds forming and flowers blooming in spring. The seeds are planted in girls at a very tender age, and as they grow, so too do the seeds until they begin to sprout. It is simply a law of nature that girls blossom into young women with a potent desire to marry.

The *haimisu*, it could be said, is someone who missed out on the chance to bloom. The gods have overlooked her, something got in their way. It is precisely in that *something* that stories reside. There lies the rich drama I enjoy exploring in my novels. In the woman who walks unsteadily down a rocky path, I recognize a certain quality, a woman's essence, if you will.

Women who bloom and wed effortlessly do not possess this particular essence. Once married, a Japanese woman (and man) often transitions into the head of a household, a much more powerful role than the average housewife. (As Japanese society evolves, the 'man of the house' is being replaced by the 'woman of the house'.) The head of any household is rarely as compelling as a woman who remains adrift, explaining why so many of my novels feature *haimisu* women...but excuse me, I've veered off-topic.

Back to Akari. The name 'Akari' is filled with hope and sunshine, suggesting she is someone who doesn't back down from a challenge. (I'm reminded of a famous singer with the same name.) In *Speculation of bed (Beddo no omowaku)*, Akari invariably finds a way, somehow, to lift herself out of a slump. I also made sure she an articulate woman.

Many Japanese, myself included, are not very effective when it comes to verbal communication. Chatty people exist, to be sure, but just because they are talkative does not mean anything of substance leaves their mouths. Eloquent and gabby are like night and day. Well-spoken people never strike me as 'gabby' no matter how long they go on. They have my attention from start to finish.

Often, Japanese people appear to read each other's minds, relying on non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, polite smiles and gestures to fill in parts of a conversation. There is no tradition of debate in our culture, of expressing views thoroughly with words. In foreign television shows, characters are so busy refuting, proving and defending their cases, it seems, at any cost. Women in particular deliver speeches without so much as taking a breath, with such sharp rationale there is no room for rebuttal. It's quite remarkable. My husband watches with me, shaking his head in disbelief. With a deep, sympathetic sigh he says, "These Western guys can't get a word in edgewise. First at the office and then at home...."

If you ask me, Japanese families need to engage in more lively conversations at home. The thought of family members seated wordlessly in front of the television pains me. They'd be much better off setting the TV aside and going head-to-head in a heated discussion. Which is why my witty *haimisu* Akari has a snappy comeback for any man who attempts to wheedle his way into her life. A single, independent woman can—and will—protect herself with wit and eloquence.

For my colorful heroines, I seek out names that are not only beautiful but also exude fun and playfulness. Capturing that nuance is no easy feat. Even 'Akari' can come off as a little sweet, depending on who you ask. But I draw a clear line between Akari and the women known only for their beauty. I give those women pretty names such as Kihara Kozue and Yukino Sakura, evoking images of wispy tree twigs, ephemeral snowflakes, and cherry blossoms.

Rounding out my cast of free-spirited *haimisu* women are Kaoru from *Dance and fantasy (Dansu to kuusou)* and Madoka from *Drowning in love (Koi ni appu-appu)*. Other favorites, characters who are not *haimisu* but who don't let men stop them from living as they wish, include Asano Mori in *Butterflies and flowers (Chokakiyuzu)* and Akira in *Drowning in love (Koi ni appu-appu)*. I once named a charming, quirky character Kuneko, a name that looks and sounds as unconventional as she is.

If you ask me, the violinist Suwa Nejiko has a magnificent name. The unusual mix of kanji characters (諏訪根自子) is striking, and spoken aloud, the five characters create a wondrous, whimsical sound. *Suwa Nejiko*. Real-life names have an undeniable presence to them, a fragrance, if you will. As for me, I will continue to wander through vast forests of dreams and romance, always on the lookout for the perfect name.