

# What's in a pseudonym?



SARAH ANJUM BARI

You're missing out on the perspective that an opposite sex can provide. Much, much more importantly, you're closing yourself off to a plethora of ideas that have nothing to do with gender, because there's no such thing as a woman's topic or a man's topic, contrary to archaic belief.

to make plans after a certain time of the day, while their younger brothers come and go as they please. The article received 2.5k shares online when it was published in this newspaper's SHOUT magazine. The irony? I wrote it under a pseudonym. I didn't have the courage, at the time, to tag my name onto something so controversial yet so relevant to my own life.

Anonymity can be liberating. The pen names Currer and Ellis Bell, respectively, allowed Charlotte and Emily Bronte to use influences from their local neighbourhood to craft *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. George Elliott, the famed writer of *Middlemarch*, was actually Mary Anne Evans. The aliases allowed these women to break into a literary market that was rigidly male-dominated at the time, giving us some of the seminal works of 19th-century western literature. In the decade that followed, Charles Dodgson disrobed the identity of a mathematician to write *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* as Lewis Carroll. The gender-neutral initials of EL James allowed the writer of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy to engage with a particularly notorious topic. And closer to home, Rabindranath Tagore composed poetry in the literary language of Brajabuli as Bhanusimha, a name he found in the torn leaves of an old library book.

The removal of a name tag brings on the freedom to shift genres, write from the perspective of a different gender, or tackle topics that are particularly sensitive or experimental. This makes the pseudonym itself a powerful and useful tool. But it's troubling to think of how we, as readers,

often make writers feel like they can't use their own identity for their work. A talented young writer I know prefers to use a pseudonym for his published fiction pieces. He doesn't want to have to answer probing questions, from relatives in particular, about what his stories might mean about his personal life. Why these questions? Why do fictional works lead to assumptions about an author's private life? Given that this is a concern I've heard on several occasions, it forces us to notice how the hasty judgments and prying nature typical of our society are stifling the creative spirit

writer's audience was similarly found to comprise of women.

It's one thing to respond better to a writer of one's own gender; even natural, one might say. But to deliberately choose not to read works written by a certain kind of author deprives both parties. You're robbing an artist of the chance to share the product of their hard work with you, work that might be just the kind of thing you're looking for. You're missing out on the perspective that an opposite sex can provide. Much, much more importantly, you're closing yourself off to a



SOURCE: THE STRAWFEMINIST.WORDPRESS

of so many aspiring young artists in our midst.

And then there's the battle of the sexes. Joanne Rowling, as we know, was advised by Bloomsbury to use the initials JK for the *Harry Potter* series to appeal to a wider audience—boys in particular, who are seemingly more likely to read books by male authors. This was later supported by a 2014 Goodreads survey, which found 90 percent of men's 50 most read books that year to have been written by men. Eighty percent of a woman

plethora of ideas that have nothing to do with gender, because there's no such thing as a woman's topic or a man's topic, contrary to archaic belief. Some of the biggest bestsellers of the past few years span a range of topics written by women. Gillian Flynn created an entire genre of mystery/thriller, writing from both a man and a woman's perspective, in *Gone Girl*. Zadie Smith has been detangling the nuances of race, identity and academia since the publication of *White Teeth*

to more recently *Swing Time*. And authors like Jhumpa Lahiri and Arundhati Roy have become icons in their rich portrayal of South Asian history. On the flipside, some of the most iconic women in literature have been created by men, from Anna Karenina (Tolstoy) to Madame Bovary (Flaubert) to Binodini (Tagore). Even Hazel Grace Lancaster (John Green), if you like your YA fiction.

*Casual Vacancy* was the first book JK Rowling published in her own name after the end of the Harry Potter series. It didn't work out so well, unfortunately. But, instead of hanging it up simply as a hit-and-miss, readers were quick to pass the judgment that all she's capable of handling is the magical world. Hence the creation of Robert Galbraith, a *nom de plume* she took up yet again, for a fairly successful crime series known as the *Cormoran Strike* novels (starring a gritty male detective, FYI).

But perhaps the most extreme example of pseudonyms gone wrong is that of Elena Ferrante. An Italian writer who kept her identity hidden since her first book of the *Neapolitan Novels*, Ferrante, in many of her interviews, has repeatedly emphasised how the pseudonym allows her to concentrate on her writing, to make her literary identity exclusively about her work. Last year, however, an Italian journalist set about revealing her real name, which set off a media explosion into the personal sphere that she had determinedly preserved since 1992.

As much as we'd like to believe that times have changed, these subtle instances of gender bias, intrusiveness, and hasty judgments continue to stifle creative pursuits in our midst even today. We're all too quick to judge that a woman can write about only a woman and a man about just a man, that an author of magical realism cannot handle crime fiction, and that reading an author's works entitles us to pry into what is off limits.

But the joke's on us—the loss, of missing out on fascinating, manifold literary realms, entirely ours.

Sarah Anjum Bari is a member of the editorial team at *The Daily Star*.

# People, not technology, make cities smart

It makes sense to start with residents, how they live and what they have to say, when drawing up a smart-city vision



LYDIA LIM

**O**n a recent visit to New York City, I lost my way on two separate occasions while walking through Central Park. There was a time when that would have been a far from pleasant experience; in the 1980s, for sure, which was when I first visited the city as a child with my parents and younger brother and wondered why our Chan Brothers Travel package tour included a stop at a park that struck me as dirty, dusty, pockmarked by graffiti and reportedly riddled with crime.

In the decades since then, America's most famous urban park has undergone a remarkable transformation. To get lost in it today is to meander through a 341ha green oasis—more than four times the size of Singapore's Botanic Gardens—that stretches through the heart of northern Manhattan, a place of lush foliage and flowers, running streams, sculptures and playgrounds, full of joggers, sunbathers, picnicking families and city residents walking their dogs and babies.

Just how did the change come about? It was the result of citizens working in partnership with the private sector and city authorities to raise money and mobilise resources to clean up the park and restore it to health, safety and beauty.

Today, the Central Park Conservancy—a private, not-for-profit organisation formed in 1980 by a group of concerned citizens—manages the park under a

contract with the City of New York. Thanks to donations from individuals, corporations and foundations, as well as funds from the city authorities, the Conservancy has invested more than USD 950 million in the park, making it a model for urban parks worldwide. It also takes charge of all aspects of

interesting ones which have been in the news lately are Wecycle in Lagos, a social enterprise that tackles the Nigerian capital's waste crisis and empowers low-income communities to turn trash into cash, which won this year's Le Monde Smart Cities Global Innovation Grand Prize; and the city of Malang in Indonesia,



SOURCE: PINTEREST

park maintenance, capital improvements and restorations.

It is an inspiring example of how energised citizens can rescue and revitalise a part of their city, if empowered to do so by enlightened authorities or, at least, not prevented from doing so by those in charge.

There are many such efforts taking place around the world. Two

shortlisted for the 2016 Guangzhou Urban Innovation Awards for the creative way it responded to floods in a slum area by planting trees and organic vegetables to act as sponges, thereby also providing an additional source of income to its poor residents who were able to sell the vegetables.

What is worth emphasising in these technocentric times, when

smart cities are all the rage, is that successful urban innovation springs from citizen participation and enterprise, and does not always require large investments or new technology.

Even when information technology is involved, it may not be the sophistication of the technology that matters but the sophistication with which a city's residents tap their networks and know-how to solve specific problems they encounter on a daily basis, using whatever technology is available. This is not to discount the important role of technology in helping to bring about change for the better, but to clarify that the proper role of technology is to enable the change that people have imagined and conceived.

That distinction matters because, in the push to develop smart cities, governments can either choose to put technology at the centre of their plans, or people.

That was an insight I gleaned from last month's Smart Cities conference jointly organised by French newspaper *Le Monde*, *The Straits Times* and *Business France*.

I had the privilege of moderating a panel discussion entitled "Which Models in Asia?", during which Dr Sameer Sharma of India's Ministry of Urban Development shared his experience of steering the Smart Cities Challenge, the first time India used an open national competition to allocate funds for urban transformation.

The organisers of the challenge took as their starting position that "there is no universally accepted definition of a smart city", as the term means different things to different people. "The

conceptualisation of Smart City, therefore, varies from city to city and country to country, depending on the level of development, willingness to change and reform, resources and aspirations of the city's residents. A smart city would have a different connotation in India than, say, Europe. Even in India, there is no one way of defining a smart city," they wrote.

Embedded in this statement is the recognition that a city's residents should be free to define a smart city on their own terms, based on their aspirations and other factors such as the pace of change they are comfortable with.

What is equally remarkable is that the winner of the competition's first round, the ancient city of Bhubaneswar in the eastern Indian state of Odisha, has gone on to win this year's Pierre L'Enfant award, a prestigious prize given out by the American Planning Association (APA).

The Bhubaneswar Smart City Plan, the APA said in its citation, "redefines the concept of 'smart cities' and outlines a citizen-driven vision for the future by using technology to help residents gain better access to city services, and improve the overall quality of life." The goal of the Bhubaneswar plan was "to engage residents in discussions to identify which groups had access to technology and city services and which groups did not, and how to close that gap," it added.

As Dr Sharma said during the Le Monde conference held here last month: "Don't start with a vision and work your way down to people. Start with people, and get them to draw up a vision."

I must admit that, as a

Singaporean, I had not expected to learn much about smart cities from India, where basic infrastructure in terms of clean water and uninterrupted power can be in short supply, even in big cities. But in this case, I was happy to be proven wrong.

I think the approach advocated by Dr Sharma is all the more relevant when one considers that the true measure of a smart city is not how technologically advanced it is, but how inclusive and sustainable it is in its practices.

A good way to ensure inclusion and sustainability is to involve a city's residents from the start, since they are the ones who will be living in the smart city and using its services. It is therefore necessary not just to engage a city's residents in the drawing up of a vision, but also to understand how they actually live, as well as what they need and consider important.

Indeed, Professor Saskia Sassen of Columbia University, who was the keynote speaker at the conference, warned against an over-reliance on technology. A sociologist who coined the term "global city", her insight relates to a city's heritage. She observed that many buildings in a city are built to last. However, if, in a bid to ride the smart-city wave, owners kit old buildings out in the latest technology, that might just shorten these buildings' lifespans by rendering them obsolete once the technology needs updating.

These insights are worth reflecting on as Singapore pushes ahead with efforts to make this city both smarter and more liveable.

Lydia Lim is Associate Opinion Editor, *The Straits Times*.

Copyright: *The Straits Times/Asia News Network*

## CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

### ACROSS

- 1 Light wood
- 6 Gave a hoot
- 11 Collectively
- 12 "Ernani," for one
- 13 Cancel
- 14 Domingo, e.g.
- 15 Subjects
- 17 Dedicated work
- 18 Reactor part
- 19 Team newbies
- 22 Gold, to Coronado
- 23 Radio knobs
- 24 Bash
- 25 "Othello" woman
- 27 Tablet program
- 30 Surfing aid
- 31 Spying org.
- 32 Top
- 33 Flour worker
- 35 Figure of speech
- 38 Tea party guest
- 39 Food of the gods
- 40 "Forget it!"
- 41 Beg
- 42 Future flowers
- 43 Cafes' cousin
- 44 News star
- 45 Texas city
- 46 Run-down area
- 47 Some Canadians
- 48 Guest's bed
- 49 Zoo favorite
- 50 Like some showers
- 51 Salt additive
- 52 Busy
- 53 Like quits
- 54 Kitchen gadgets
- 55 Zeppelin's kin
- 56 Run off
- 57 Words before tear or dare
- 58 Fuming

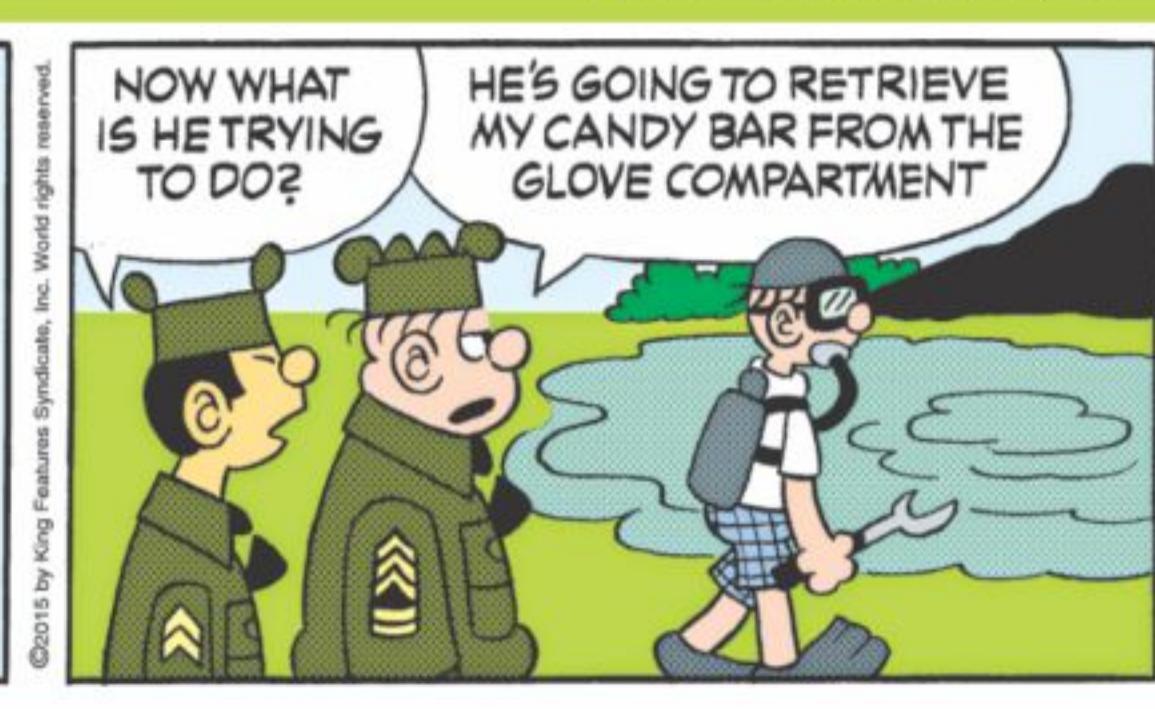
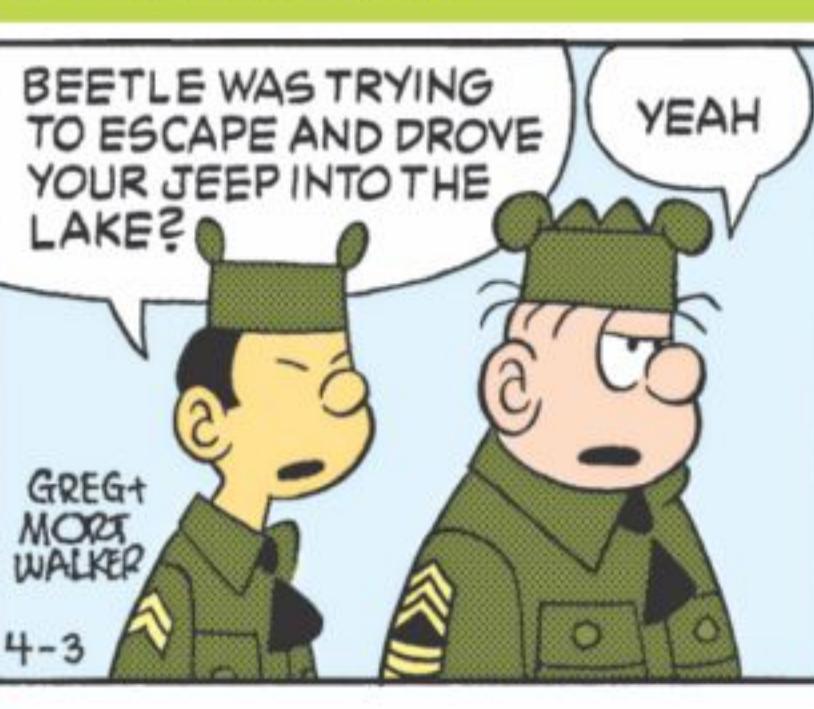
### DOWN

- 5 Across
- 10 Is bold
- 16 Reporter's contacts
- 20 Some Canadians
- 21 Vital
- 24 Fido's foot
- 25 Like some showers
- 26 Salt additive
- 27 Busy
- 28 Like quits
- 29 Kitchen gadgets
- 30 Zeppelin's kin
- 34 Run off
- 36 Words before tear or dare
- 37 Fuming

### YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

T	A	S	T	E	A	M	B	L	E
L	I	T	U	P	M	I	L	A	N
C	R	A	N	E	P	R	O	M	O
T	E	S	T	I	R	A	C	E	S
O	D	E	S	H	O	C	K		
M	A	H	A	T	E	A	S		
R	E	P	O	R	T	S	P		
N	A	T	O	I	N	T	L		
O	P	A	R	T	O	L	I		
M	E	L	E	I	N	E	T		
E	S	S	E	N	N	A	S		

## BEETLE BAILEY



## BY MORT WALKER



## BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT



## QUOTEABLE Quote



JANE AUSTEN

ENGLISH NOVELIST

I hate to hear you talk about all women as if they were fine ladies instead of rational creatures. None of us want to be in calm waters all our lives.