
 THE SECRET NAMES OF OBJECTS

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What if every object had a name? A sock called Steve
or Eugene or Genevieve?

Each jacket-sleeve Celine;
Each run in the stocking a Gulshan or Maybelline.

Each T-shirt armpit hole Laurent; Each stain a Kristine;
Each forgotten moment

a random Antonio or Eve.
There could be names for where air's no longer there

or for meatloaf sandwiches & their Daniel wreathes
of festive toothpicks,

their 2 slices of bread
& pickles baptised Ludvig, names to ameliorate

the intolerable loneliness of not being Ted or Rick.
A secret history of objects

so step-stools could be Jude;
a breath for inorganic life, for neglected multitudes

floundering in anonymity but rechristened Yuzuki;
an intimate link to launch

paper & ink into posterity,
a poem named Mohammed or Luca or Beckett.

How would you introduce yourself as a writer to those who may not know you.

My name is Alan McMonagle and I write short stories, radio dramas and (more recently) novels that may best be described as comedies of desperation.

When did you start writing?

From early childhood I remember hearing a lunchtime radio drama called *Harbour Hotel*. There was a nosey fuss bucket of a woman (I forget her name) who wanted to be in everyone's business. I decided to churn out my own version of *Harbour Hotel* and in the opening scene I produced the dead body of this woman. This outrageous happening allowed me introduce my very own Hercule Poirot style sleuth who (from memory) went by the auspicious name of Hercules.

Do you have a writing routine?

They say Dostoevsky wrote at night and Tolstoy wrote during the day. I have been both.

When you write, do you picture somehow a potential audience or do you just write?

Just write – the responsibility is to the work.

Some writers describe themselves as planners, while others plunge right in to the writing. Would you consider yourself a planner or a plunger?

A plunger.

How important are names to you in your books? Do you choose the names based on liking the way they sound or for the meaning? Do you have any name-choosing resources you recommend?

Very important, and I choose both for the sound and meaning. At the moment I use Twitter, old movie cast listings and Ragoon Cemetery in

Galway.

Is there a certain type of scene that's harder for you to write than others? Love? Action? Erotic?

Every scene I write is difficult.

Tell us a bit about your non-literary work experience please.

I have worked as an office slave, a greeting card seller, and a travel writer. I remember an editor of a travel magazine saying to me, 'Alan, this is supposed to be a paragliding article, not *War and Peace*.'

What do you like to read in your free time?

Novels, short stories, poetry, plays. The whole bit. I also listen to radio drama.

What one book do you wish you had written?

Pedro Páramo, a fragile, enchanting miracle of a book and only novel by the Mexican author Juan Rulfo. Also Flann O'Brien's anarchic *The Third Policeman*.

Do you see writing short stories as practice for writing novels?

The notion that short stories should be regarded as some sort of potty training for the novel is ludicrous. They are separate and equally valid forms. They pose their own and singular challenges.

Do you think writers have a social role to play in society or is their role solely artistic?

You are going to invest yourself in what is of interest to you and what is preoccupying you. In my case this has been character, voice, tone, place. So much of writing is bearing witness. So to some extent it is inevitable artistic sensibility and wider social context will touch off each other, however fleetingly. But for me the initial spark or urge to set something down comes from a very intrinsic place, a place that is light years away from the wider world around me.

Tell us something about your latest publication, please.

My latest publication is my first novel, *Ithaca*. Essentially, it is a quest story, and of the measures my young narrator is prepared to take as he begins to realise that who or what it is he is looking for is possibly a lot closer to home than he initially believes.

Can writing be taught?

I think close reading can be taught. Plus, from a good writing course, I think one can acquire useful habits such as focus and discipline and concentration.

Have you given or attended creative writing workshops? And if you have, share your experiences a bit please.

Eleven years ago I did the MA in Writing at NUI Galway. It allows you sample modules in every writing genre from poetry to hard news journalism – perfect if you are uncertain (as I was) as to what form you want to devote yourself to.

I have also given workshops to beginner writers at the Writers' Centre in Dublin and at various venues nationwide. Recently, I visited a school near my home town. I gave this writing prompt to a class of twelve year olds: *I saw Chopper Fallon walking up the Battery Road carrying an axe.* Straightaway the very first boy in the very first row added this seven-word sentence: *There are no trees where we live.* Genius.

Flash fiction – how driven is the popularity of this form by social media like Twitter and its word limits? Do you see Twitter as somehow leading to shorter fiction?

It was popular before Twitter, surely.

No, I don't. An effective story is as long or as short as it needs to be.

Finally, what question do you wish that someone would ask about your writing, and how would you answer it?

In the run-up to publication of my novel I was asked a question on a radio show that more or less drew a complete blank from me: *What is Ithaca?* Almost one year on and I am in possession of a very snazzy answer to this

question (at least I think I am), and no one is bothered asking me! My snazzy answer paraphrases a quote from the French painter George Braque who was offering an interpretation of his own art: Ithaca is a wound turned towards light.

Finally, finally, some Quick Pick Questions:

E-books or print?

Print.

Dog or cat?

Dog.

Reviews – read or don't read?

Read.

Best city to inspire a writer: London, Dublin, New York (Other)?

Buenos Aires.

Favourite meal out: breakfast, lunch, dinner?

Dinner.

Weekly series or box sets?

Box sets.

Favourite colour?

Red.

Rolling Stones or Beatles?

Beatles.

Night or day?

Night.