

GENERIC NAMES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

LITERARY & HISTORICAL NAMES

ANANÁ

Ancient Babylonian

The all-purpose beneficiary for ritual incantations. The priestly ritual followed a pattern reminiscent of cookbook recipes and speed-dating. You start with the Incanter's credentials, then describe the Incantee with *his* credentials, then name the chant to be chanted (and for whom it was appropriate), then recite the chant from there. "For whom it was appropriate" might mean a chant used only on pregnant women, or children in danger of dying. But the heaviest-rotation, most useful chants were appropriate for "anyone," *Ananá*.

PLONI ALMONI

Ancient Hebrew

This generic name from Jewish scripture happens to rhyme with "phony baloney." *Ploni Almoni* gets fifteen minutes of fame in the Book of Ruth chapter 4, as the uncaring in-law(s) Ruth is sposta join after her husband dies. Jilted by Ploni Almoni, Ruth saves her husband's estate from marauding strangers and assures a home for her former mother-in-law, Naomi, by marrying another kinsman, Boaz.

AH Q

Mandarin Chinese

Literally "Little Q." Add the character *Ah* to the simple surname *Q*, and you've got the classic Chinese illiterate, laughable figure. Many Chinese jokes involve protagonists with names like *Ah Mou*, *Ah Bing*, and so forth. In "The True Story of Ah Q," a famed 1921 satirical short story by Lu Xun, *Ah Q* is an uneducated everyman: self-delusional, craven, and in desperate need of education.

COLIN

British English

English pastoral poetry is replete with verdant hills, rustic stiles, nuzzling livestock, and ruddy-cheeked, curly headed shepherd youths, nearly all of whom seem to be named *Colin*. The tradition starts in Edmund Spenser's *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1579) and continues with the poem "Colin Clout's Come Home Again" (1595), *Colin's* first blockbuster role.

GIL

Spanish

Spanish pastoral poetry glows with olive groves, nuzzling (but different) livestock, and swarthy, muscled shepherd youths named *Gil*. Unlike the Oxonian-sounding *Colin*, *Gil* survives in modern Spanish only as an insult.

GROUP-BASED NAMES

TOM, DICK, & HARRY

American & British English

This classic gaggle boasts fame elsewhere: as a chain of mountain peaks in the Cascade Range in Oregon; as the three Galapagos turtles Darwin brought back on the *HMS Beagle*, and the names of the three male characters on the '90s sitcom *3rd Rock from the Sun*.

FULANO, ZUTANO, Y MENGANO

Castilian & South American Spanish

The former Spanish empire's version of *Tom, Dick, and Harry*. The diminutive form is also used: *Fulanito, Mengano, y Zutano*. Less popular hangers-on to the gang include *Perengano* or *Perencejito/a* and, in Cuba, *Ciclano, y Esperancejo*. In Portugal it's *Fulano, Cicrano, e Beltrano*.

In all cases, *Fulano* was borrowed from the Arabic, and, while *un fulan* is merely a male nobody, *una fulana* refers exclusively to prostitutes.

TIZIO, CAIO, E SEMPRONIO

Italian

With a lowercase *t*, *tizio* means "some guy." With a capital *T*, *Tizio* is the Italian version of the Latin name *Titius*, commonly used in (continued below)

ancient Roman law books as a generic name when giving examples. The list *Tizio, Caio, e Sempronio* can also include *Mevio, Filano, and Calpurnio*, but these additional names are usually unspoken, sort of like *Pierce, Fenner, and Smith*—the unsung partners of Merrill and Lynch.

ALAN SMITHEE, GEORGE SPELVIN, WALTER PLINGE, DAVID AGNEW

American & British English

Alan Smithee was the pseudonym from 1968 through the late '90s for any Hollywood director who wanted to disavow credit for a film over which he'd lost creative control. Trying for sternness and integrity, the Directors Guild of America invented the name and placed rules on its usage: the director must keep his reasons for disavowal secret, and the name cannot be used merely to hide a director's flops.

The practice ended after the release of the 1998 comedy *An Alan Smithee Film: Burn Hollywood Burn*, which chronicles a fictional director who wants to disavow his work but can't follow the usual escape clause because his real name is *Alan Smithee*. Director Arthur Hiller took an *Alan Smithee* credit for the film.

In a similar vein, stage actors (and, to a lesser degree, film actors) who wish to go unbillied or who play two different characters in the same production are often billed as *George Spelvin* (in the U.S.) or *Walter Plinge* (in London).

David Agnew was a Smithee-spirited pseudonym used by writers of '70s BBC TV dramas.

NAMES WITH REGAL MYSTERY

LORD & LADY MUCK

British English

Generic names for high-falutin men and women who swan about with their nostrils pointed skyward. Popular variants include *muckety-muck*.

WU MING SHI

Mandarin Chinese

An alluring, unnamed stranger, akin to *Anonymous*. Literally "nameless gentleman."

NECKTO

Russian

An unnamed person with an air of mystery about him, a little more magnetic than *Chktoto*, a neutral somebody, and clearly more Tolstoyan and imposing than *Takoto*, a dismissive, peasantry term like *What's-his-face*.

FULAN IBN FULAN AL-FULANI

Modern Arabic

Literally "Somebody, son of Somebody, of the House of Somebody." A fancy tarting-up of *Fulano*.

JOCK TAMSON'S BAIRNS

Scottish

From the colloquial phrase "We're aw Jock Tamson's bairns," which is a scrapper and rather more cheerfully nationalistic way of saying "We're all God's children;" i.e., nobody is more important than anyone else.

LITTLE-OLD-LADY NAMES

TÄDI MAALI

Estonian

Literally "Aunt Maali," a generic old lady. In our wised-up, post-dot-com world, Estonian business plans might well be judged by whether they're explainable to *Tädi Maali*.

PIHTIPUTAAN MUMMO

Finnish

Literally "the grandma [or "old lady"] from Pihtipudas." Another benighted senior citizen, *Pihtiputaan Mummo* doesn't understand modern lingo and requires extremely clear explanations of everything. While she partakes not of iPods, satellite dishes, or HDTV, being Finnish, her cell phone leaves even the Japanese whiz-kids in the dust.

NAMES IN THE "EVERYMAN" SPIRIT

ZHANGSAN LISI

Mandarin Chinese

Literally "Zhang the Third" and "Li the Fourth," these two common, generic names mash together into this single name, meaning "everyman."

THE MAN ON THE CLAPHAM OMNIBUS

British English

The reasonably educated nonspecialist. In British law, negligence is determined in light of the "standard of care" that *the man on the Clapham omnibus* would apply in a given situation. The term was first used legally in the early twentieth century but dates to the nineteenth, when journalist Walter Bagehot used "the bald-headed man at the back of the omnibus" to invoke a normal Londoner.

PERICO DE LOS PALOTES

Chilean Spanish

Impossible to translate literally—"Little Pero" or even "Chamberpot of the Drumsticks" is close—this phrase refers to a very stupid person: one who beats drums incessantly and slowly. *Perico* also translates as "parakeet," suggesting a stupid, chattering person.

NAI GOR

Thai

Essentially "Mr. A." Highly useful for the mega-forgetful. When one is telling a story featuring several people whose names are all slipping one's mind, the first person's name is *Nai* ("Mr.") *gor* (the first letter in the Thai alphabet). Other unnamed people in the story are called by alphabetically subsequent letters.

DINGSBUMS

German

A slightly dismissive placeholder for a name one has forgotten. A play on the word *Dings*, for "things," the term is sometimes lengthened to *Dingskirchen*, "Things' Church" (a generic place), or *Dingsdabumsda* (a nonsense lengthening). *Dingsbums* got a shot in the arm recently as the slogan for a Swiss anti-AIDS campaign, "*Ohne Dings Kein Bums*"—more or less, "No glove, no love."

PIET POMPIES & KOOS VAN DER MERWE

Afrikaans

The "Joe Blows" of South Africa.

MASHMO

Modern Hebrew

What's-his-name. Female counterpart: *mashma*. He also goes by *hahoo/hahi* ("the him/her") and, in lower "street" Hebrew, *Makorimoto/a* (one word made of three—*ma korim oto/ota*).

FULANO

Arabic

When feeling kicky, this everyman goes by *Fulan-Fulan* and gave rise to the Spanish-speaking gang *Fulano, Zutano, y Mengano*. His sister, *Fulana*, is always a slut.

NAMES OF JURIDICAL-POLITICAL ORIGIN

JOHN DOE

American & British English

This aptly homely king of generic names was originally used in Britain under Edward III during the legal debate over "The Acts of Ejectment." The debate centered around a hypothetical landowner, John Doe, who leases land to the backstabbing Richard Roe, who forcibly evicts Doe from his own land thereafter. *John Doe* gained popularity later as a general term for an unknown or average person. Case in point is Frank Capra's 1941 film *Meet John Doe*, starring Gary Cooper, in which a complaint letter signed *John Doe* sparks a broadscale political movement.

JANE DOE

American & British English

Ordinarily, the female legal pseudonym *Jane Doe* appears only in state-level cases; federal cases refer to their anonymous ladies as *Mary Major*. A close relative, *Jane Roe*, came to national attention as the unnamed plaintiff in the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, *Roe v. Wade*.

PRECIOUS DOE

American English

A variant of *Baby Doe*, a pseudonym for unidentified infant corpses in a morgue. *Precious Doe* became indelibly associated with the 2001 murder of a three-year-old from Kansas City, Missouri, whose decapitated corpse remained unidentified for four years. After several stints on *America's Most Wanted*, *Precious* was finally identified as Erica Green. Her stepfather, Harrell Johnson, confessed to killing Erica with a mortal kick to the head, after which he decapitated her with hedge clippers, wrapped her body in a trash bag, and pushed her out of the house in a stroller, supposedly delivering her, with Erica's mother's help, to the woman who previously raised her.

N. N.

Latin

For *Nomen nescio*, "name unknown." Refers to unnamed parties in lawsuits, yet-to-be-determined professors in university class schedules, dead soldiers in military morgues, and untitled challengers in chess matches. The Dutch, Belgian, and other Latin-loving countries of northern Europe favor *N. N.* in its original form, while other countries alternate *N. N.* with indigenous alternatives: *Nönnönnö* in Finland, *Ningún Nombre* in Chile, and *Nepoznati Netko* in Croatia.

DOZAEMON

Japanese

This police term for an unidentified drowned person refers to sumo wrestler *Narusegawa Dozaemon*, of the *Kyoho* era (1716–1736), whose extreme pallor and bloated face provoked comparisons to the drowned.

NA MAALUM

Hindi

Literally "do not know." You might find this *Doe*-evoking phrase pinch-hitting on Indian paperwork for an unknown person's name.

ERIKA MUSTERMANN

German

Literally "Erika Pattern-person." *Erika* and her relatives *Hans* and *Bernd* appeared as the generic names on ID cards in advertisements starting in 1987, when the German federal government first issued centralized identification. Like Aunt *Jemima*, Betty Crocker, and *Tony the Tiger*, her appearance has been changed several times to update hairdos, remove or add shoulder pads, and so forth. Her various actresses are minor celebrities in Germany.