

Who Am I to Say?

Don Kunze, also known as Francis/Frances Conrad

My alias, Francis Conrad, is a registered pen name with an Orcid number 0000-0001-8397-4262 (same as mine). I have not yet published under Francis's name, other than in self-posted short works, but in 2016 proposed a novel project about Francis, a minor academic who studies psychoanalysis and returns to his home town (mine) to run a practice devoted to artists, poets, and fiction writers. The American Academy in Berlin gave this proposal high marks but did not accept it. In the meantime, I have thought about other uses of Francis Conrad, none of them intended to be even mildly deceptive. Apart from a work-in-progress that features Francis as a character that is likely to be male, I have not thought much about Conrad's gender. The aim is to create an ambiguity, not to subscribe to the idea that it would be better for Frances to be a man or woman. Judgements of quality based on gender are, to me, offensive. My model on this topic is Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando*, whose title character not only spans centuries but sexes.

Lacan is clear about sexual difference. Fundamentally, whether one is a man or woman is not dependent on biological equipment; nor is it able to be a matter of choice, although for the most part those who *choose* to call themselves a man or woman do so successfully. Complications come with interaction, where, as Freud observed, there are at least four personæ involved, with variable gender assignments. There are the two "literal" partners; then there are the partners each imagines the other to be, whose gender may be different from what the partner identifies as or thinks him or herself to be.

Given these base-line complexities, I defer to a model set in place by Gore Vidal who, when an interviewer asked whether his first sexual encounter was with a man or woman, he replied "I was too polite to ask." Of course, this was one way of telling the interviewer that the question went over the line, but it subtly endorsed the idea that the public side sexual identity is one thing, actual sexual behavior and identification is private and "no one's business."

A pen-name is, therefore, not about pretending to be one sex or another (which doesn't seem to bother anyone when one pretends to be the gender most associated with one's *name*) but, rather, about creating an ambiguity that belongs, properly, to the individual.

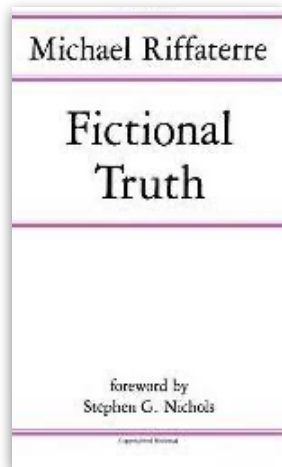
Pen-Names in History

Who were: Richard Bachman, Paul French, Mary Westmacott, Clive Hamilton?

You may have heard of them: Stephen King, Isaac Asimov, Agatha Christie, C. S. Lewis.

These famous authors have received numerous awards and benefitted from a literary career; their names were their brand, their real ("natural") names were in fact less real than the pen-names they used as authors. I don't plan on being famous but, rather, I am interested in the psychoanalytical value of a fictional persona. Those outside the literary world associate the word fiction with what is factually false, but this is not the case. As you probably know, fiction means "constructed," and if you are a Lacanian you claim that there is nothing more constructed than the ego associated with one's natural name. The "name of the father" in fact is a cornerstone of psychoanalysis. This is the idea that every name involves constructions within the Symbolic register, intensified at the Mirror Stage, where the subject acquires a fictional ego allowing it to relate to family, society, and culture. My use of a pen-name is invested with this theoretic perspective.

For many years now I have been interested in another fictional device, that of the unreliable narrator. Following the masterful use of this technique by Somerset Maugham and Raymond Carver, I experimented in a piece solicited by Daniel Libeskind for a special issue of the art journal *New*



Observations (1987). “Briefly Noted” was a caustic review of a non-existent book, David Ben Liebana’s *The Sciagraphy of the Infinite* (New York and London: Gnomon Publications, 1987, 365 pp.). Although I gave many clues to alert the reader to the use of the unreliable narrator device, several people got in touch with me later to ask how to get a copy of the book. My negative review allowed me to promote interesting ideas by condemning them, which is easier than the direct approach. The context of an art journal, which also published poetry and visual arts, provided a perfect frame. Other essays in that special issue were also constructions and thus also technically fictions but mine, directly advertising its fictionality, was in this sense more honest. I allowed the reader to come to his or her conclusions on their own, to think speculatively about what the “author” seemed to condemn. This is the value of irony in the device of the unreliable narrator, which extends to the use of a pen-name. It gives up any didactic claim to truth while giving the reader the right to discern what may or may not be the case. This position has been defended by many literary critics; my favorite has been Michael Riffaterre’s *Fictional Truth*.

Writing a contribution for *Lacan+Architecture* calls for Francis to re-appear, this time as “Frances,” since as one reviewer recommended, we needed more female *names* in the list of authors. Since I have no idea whether Francis/Frances is a man or a woman, it seems to be a good time to allow a trans-gender element to serve the purposes of scholarship. The reviewer was not versed in Lacanian psychoanalysis. Otherwise she/he would have known that Lacan teaches that gender and sex identification are two entirely different things. Biology does not determine whether one calls oneself a man or a woman or anything else. Assigning an uninformed reviewer to decide on our book’s publish-ability raises questions far more serious than the use of a pen-name, but I am happy that we were able to accept this advice while rejecting the theoretically mistaken remarks.

In the particular situation of Lacanian scholarship, topology has been misunderstood by the majority of Lacanians, due in part to the attribution of topology’s origins to Euler’s treatment of the Königsburg Bridge Problem. Lacan himself makes no reference to this Problem and establishes that, in fact, he knows the correct founders of projective geometry, Pappus of Alexandria and Girard Desargues, two figures that Lacanians have yet to mention even once. This is a radical error, calling for a nuanced approach. The question of origins is a matter of historical fact, not opinion. The implications of it are severe, given that the “rubber sheet geometry” substituted by would-be Lacanian topologists is really Affine Geometry, not the Projective Geometry defines in Seminars IX, XIII, and XIV.

However, the audience of our book is intended to include the very Lacanians we need to persuade to re-evaluate their positions.

What was illegal about this practice? Absolutely nothing. What was unethical? Absolutely nothing. The use of a pen name is as ancient as Homer. I might have cited several religious traditions about the name(s) of the Almighty, but that would be heavy-handed.

What I am puzzled by is that a publisher would consider the use of a pen-name an ethical question and demand that any author should have to justify this use as legal. If there is any legal basis against the use pen-names, I would like to hear the jurisprudential reasoning behind it, for I suspect that it is nothing short of a confusion between using a pen-name and forging a check. An author using a pen-name is not

instituting a fraud but relying on a considerably ancient convention. I have O. Henry's advice on the matter.

My use of Frances/Francis Conrad was inspired by the master of English prose writing, Joseph Conrad, Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski. For Lacanians, what is called the Name of the Father, which is not fully synonymous with one's surname, is a big deal. It has to do with affiliation, provenance, and fidelity; the name is not to be taken lightly. A fictional name does not shed the *gravitas* that comes with natural names. People change their legal names through a decree of the court do so typically when they cannot shed black marks accrued under their original names and wish for a new start. Authors use pen-names when they wish to develop a style of writing, or manner of reasoning, that wish will come to be identified exclusively with the name used for a body of work intended to be coherent, integral, and consistent. We pick up a novel by Charles Dickens and we say we are "reading a Dickens." The name becomes synonymous with the material attributed to it. The choice is the author's, and until this moment I did not realize it was up for debate.

My school background began with the study of architecture, then moved to geography, then philosophy, then back to architecture criticism/theory, then to Lacanian psychoanalysis. Even now I am specializing within that field, and I need another personality as a brand. I do not wish to disassociate from my natural name. Rather, I would like to experiment from the point of view of someone different, with no debts owed to my actual lived background.

I have not undertaken the idea of a pen-name frivolously. In 1987 I published "Briefly Noted," a serious review of a fictitious book, in a special issue of *New Observations*. The reader's only knowledge of David Ben Liebana's *The Sciagraphy of the Infinite* (New York and London: Gnomon Publications, 1987, 365 pp.) was that I, the opinionated reviewer, found it deficient. I used the device of the unreliable narrator in the same way that I was taught by Raymond Carver, particularly with his story "What Do You Do in San Francisco," told by a clueless postman, through whom readers can discover everything they need to know about a troubled couple, the Marstons. The book I disliked as a disgruntled reviewer was actually filled with ideas I hoped the reader would find fascinating, thanks to my offhand rejection.

This essay was by invitation. Daniel Libeskind, the not yet the famous architect, asked me to write something special, and he liked the piece very much. I did not use a pseudonym for myself. Since the book was fictional, that was enough irony. Several people actually asked me how to get a copy of it, and I said (truthfully) that it was out of print.

I believe that this literary artifice establishes me as a writer in the tradition of what *Fictional Truth*. Michael Riffaterre, the author, is a highly respected literary critic. I am not asking to use a pen-name frivolously. I am continuing a long-standing interest in the role of the identity in the practice of authorship. Those who have no training in philosophy or literature often mistake the term "fiction" to mean non-truthful. Nothing could be further from the truth. The greatest truths rely on the story form to be understood at the many levels where the reader is engaged personally and retroactively.

If the names Daniel Libeskind or Michael Riffaterre cut no mustard, I might cite a clever experiment I witnessed at the National Art Education Association, where a respectable-looking art historian presented her work as curator for a wealthy industrialist, whose large collection commanded her attention for over five years. With photos from the magnate's family, accounts of specific works in his collection, and stories of the provenance of selected other works, she fascinated the audience to the point where the weight of coincidence and unlikelihoods tipped the balance and we realized the hoax all at once, breaking into laughter and delight.

No one was offended. Rather, they were enlightened and amused. They felt honored that the presenter thought them sufficiently sophisticated to understand the relation of these layers of reality and fiction. It was more ethical than most presentations, for it laid its cards on the table, *all of them*.

This piece of performance art produced a key insight: that our built-in over-reverence for convention often supports unfounded, inconsistent claims and outright fraud. Our expectations claim to be objective and innocent, but they are far from being so. It takes parody and clever demonstrations such as the one presented by the “fake curator” to remember that truth is composite, an act of giving and receiving; that trust is undermined by conventional expectation. The fake, in effect, was more authentic than the other presenters in her session. She presented the truth in terms of things that the audience came to realize on their own; not things hidden behind the veil of presumed authority.

It is the fictional ruse that cleanses us of our misconceptions. The pen-name forces the question of “just who *is* the author, anyway” by reminding us that we should always question the fictionality of those who use their real names as pegs for assembling credentials that would be better taken with a grain of salt. As for the writing I do under my real (natural) name, all I can say is that no one can doubt it is uniquely my work, because no one would bother to make the kinds of mistakes I habitually make. I am an original thinker, in that I use conjecture, experiment, and hypotheticals to provoke the reader into being original on his or her own. I do not care to convince anyone, rather I would like to say that I gave them a reason to think for themselves. Whether this might be for or against me is absolutely none of my business.

What is my business is the issue of authenticity, which you seem to wish to limit. It is an author’s choice whether to use or not to use his natural name in assigning authorship. To give that choice to someone else would mean that I am not an author but a scribe. To take away the author’s choice is to cease to be a Publisher, who by definition must by definition defend the rights of authors, and become an Inquisitor, who is the reverse. I am always honored to be in the presence of the former, ashamed to be in the presence of the latter, but not so stupid as to say whose presence I am in at any present moment. As Gore Vidal replied to a journalist who asked him what was the gender of his first sexual partner, “I was too polite to ask.”

“Frances Conrad,” formerly “Francis,” was the author of a research application for the American Academy in Berlin (not approved). I proposed constructing a novel under Conrad’s name to fictionalize my own research, under the guise of a failed academic (not far off!) who had turned to being a psychoanalyst dedicated to treating artists and fiction writers. Conrad’s ideas were to be a bit wacky but theoretically defensible. The novel would have been overburdened by technical discussions, so I’m glad I didn’t get the fellowship. I’m mentioning this because the application was submitted in 2016. This plus the early date of “Briefly Considered” establishes that I have been interested in the implicit fictionality of names and works for some time and make the decision to resuscitate Francis/Frances (this time switching gender, as did the hero of Woolf’s *Orlando*) to take up a more specialized kind of writing. I am not doing this lightly, just to arouse your suspicions.

If you still believe I must first prove the validity of doing such a thing, then I would ask to be removed from your considerations under both my pen-name and natural name. You would not be my Publisher any longer. I will be happy to take my names elsewhere.