

# Becoming

## Danielle Wood on pseudonyms and the divide between literary and commercial writing

One day at my writing desk, I became Minnie Darke. It was as easy as that. Either I knew, or I decided, that she was a Gemini – a twin. Also, that she was a librarian, although she had once wanted to be an actor. She owned two British giant rabbits and a street terrier, was a formidable Scrabble player and drank a lot of Russian Caravan tea.

At the time I became Minnie, I would have been about eighteen years into my writing career. Steadily, book by book, I had pieced together a minor reputation as a ‘literary’ writer, while at the same time holding down a day job and raising three children. Now I wanted to do something different. Something new. I wanted to write what is called a ‘commercial’ book – a joyful romantic comedy complete with astrology, a huge cast of characters, a pervasive sense of destiny, a thoughtful dog and a cathartic, tied-up-with-a-bow happy ending.

So I slipped on Minnie, as you would a costume; and like any magic dress, she fitted me perfectly. If anything was surprising, it was how much *fun* it all was. I felt a surge of that special mischief that I’ve learned to recognise as the harbinger of a sustained period of creativity and enthusiasm. Had I stood up from my desk and twirled, a cloud of tiny gold





# Minnie Darke



and silver stars might easily have spiraled up, Disney-style, off my/Minnie's skirts.

The book Minnie and I wrote is called *Star-crossed*, and since it arrived on Australian bookshelves, Minnie Darke has been variously described as my pen name, my nom de plume, and my pseudonym. These are not inaccurate terms, but neither do they fully describe the relationship between Minnie and *Star-crossed* and me.

The history of pen names is a smorgasbord of motivations.

The Bronte sisters published as the Bell brothers because, as Charlotte said, 'We had a vague impression that author-esses are liable to be looked on with prejudice'. Early in his career, the prolific Stephen King wrote as Richard Bachman so that he could produce two books a year rather than the one that his publishing house thought was reasonable. Nelson DeMille wrote books under pseudonyms because he wanted to save his own name for the better books he hoped to write in the future.

English writer Anna Maxted, who writes both as herself and as the Jackie Collins-esque Sasha Blake, describes the nom de plume as 'a witness protection program for authors', a shield to defend genre-hopping storytellers against critics and readers who are 'notoriously unforgiving of writers who don't do as previously said on the tin'. When Agatha Christie wrote romance novels, she published them under the name Mary Westmacott, presumably to keep those works separate from the crime novels she wrote under her own name. Likewise, JK Rowling wrote as Robert Galbraith in an attempt to



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make a hype-free transition from children's fiction to crime fiction.

Writers have different ways of handling and interacting with their pen names. Some – like the writer behind the pen name Elena Ferrante – are very serious about secrecy, sending their second selves out into the world in order to preserve their own privacy and freedom. Other writers – such as Catherine Webb, who writes as herself, as Claire North (author of *The First Fifteen Lives of Harry August*) and Katie Griffin – are quite open about dividing themselves into multiple identities in order to pursue different kinds of writing.

At first, I imagined that I really would be able to hide – anonymously – behind Minnie Darke, and I liked this idea not because I wanted to distance myself from the work that I would produce under her name, but because I thought she might offer me a pleasant buffer between myself and the world, as well as providing respite from some of the more public aspects of the job of 'being a writer', which – even if enjoyable – often leave me feeling vulnerable and drained. Soon, however, I realised that I simply didn't have the Ferrante-style determination that would be needed to keep Minnie Darke's identity a true secret. Instead, I would need to be one of those authors – like North and Maxted – who are entirely open about their various writing identities. While it's clear that both these women use pen names primarily to separate their various 'brands', I wonder if their alternative identities also have other – more complicated – dimensions.

Who exactly is Minnie Darke? What exactly is Minnie Darke?

One way to answer this is to say that she is the ideal writer for *Star-crossed*. This makes her a kind of fictional character, the first one that I invented as the *Star-crossed* universe began to take shape. Or, if not a fictional character, then maybe a metafictional feature – a way of naming up a shadowy part of the mysterious process of creating fiction. Because it is mysterious, when you start to think about it.

Is the narrator of a novel the same person as the author? When the narrator is simultaneously a character inside the novel, then no, clearly not. But what about a third person narrator who exists outside the world of the story? Is that the writer speaking? Or must the writer first invent some kind of persona to do the speaking? If so, is Minnie Darke simply a name for the teller of *Star-crossed*?

We have some characteristics in common, Minnie and I, most notably the tea drinking, but we also have one very important difference. My purpose in life can become fractured and contested, split between family, paid work, writing, extended family and community commitments, while hers is focused and clear. Perhaps this, most of all, is why I needed her, because she came into being for the sole purpose of writing fiction.

As a mother of three children, with a husband, a day job and a three-acre property, I have to worry about who wormed the dog, and when I'm going to find time to read that entire PhD thesis for the ninth time, and what time Scouts is on, and whether or not I've prepared the questions for Friday



night's panel discussion, and who needs their sports uniform today, and where the hell the library books have got to, and when the alpacas want shearing, and who needs a birthday present to take to a party on the weekend, and whether or not anything is growing mould in the fridge. Minnie, on the other hand, has only two rabbits and a dog, and since they're entirely fictional, they don't require vaccinations, exercise, or even meals.

Becoming Minnie meant, for me, becoming someone else – someone lighter, someone not so terribly stretched, someone a little less serious, someone more willing to take risks and make jokes. She was the someone that I needed to be in order to write a light-hearted novel about astrology that was supposed to lift the spirits of its readers. Seen this way, she might be described as the outer manifestation of my method-writing mind games.

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It's become apparent from my conversations about Minnie Darke that many people think the main purpose of a pseudonym is to distance one's actual self from a particular work, perhaps because of shame. Or if not shame, precisely, then at least an emotion that lurks somewhere in the shame spectrum. Certainly, there is a perception that an author might choose a pen name so that someone else can take responsibility for work that they consider to be of a lower quality than the work they write, or would ideally write, as themselves. Equally certainly, the idea persists that 'literary' work has a higher intrinsic value than 'commercial' work.

Since finishing *Star-crossed*, I've had entirely well-meaning friends and colleagues ask questions and make comments that reveal the depth and pervasiveness of such hierarchical thinking. One person asked, 'Does writing a commercial novel make you feel a bit grubby?' Another said, 'It must be bittersweet for you to have this success with a commercial book rather than a literary one.' I've also been surprised by the number of intelligent and well-read people, who live and

work outside the bubble of the publishing industry, who've asked me – with complete sincerity – to explain the meaning of the terms 'literary' and 'commercial'.

The ways I have answered their questions have been entirely (to me) unsatisfying. To define a thing in the way that includes all the permutations of it, and all of the inevitable exceptions to the rule, usually gets you nothing but a definition that is so broad as to be meaningless. Truisms are that literary fiction is more interested in the quality of sentence-level writing, in thematic concerns and innovation, while commercial fiction is more focused on readers' expectations, genre conventions and sales. In a 1981 article for the *New York Times*, novelist Joyce Carol Oates offered up a different, though related, dichotomy, proposing a distinction between 'serious writers' and 'entertainers and propagandists'. Serious writers, she went on, 'take for their natural subjects the complexity of the world, its evils as well as its goods'.

Literary fiction, then, might be categorised as the work of 'serious writers', while commercial fiction might be seen as the domain of the entertainer. Literary fiction, it is generally understood, is meatier, weightier, and part of literary fiction's claim to precedence is that it is generally understood to be harder, and more time-consuming, to create.

In order to tell you what I know about all of that, let's go back to the deeply suburban home where I grew up. In 1986,





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**And now we come to the notion of the guilty pleasure – the book that you slip into a fabric cover so you can read it on the train or bus**

I was fourteen years old. Following an altercation about a topic that is lost to the mists of time, my mother grabbed hold of me and washed my mouth out with soap. That is, with partial success, she tried to get a freshly unwrapped bar of Sapoderm past my clenched teeth. What I learned from this event was that if I was ever again going to eat soap, I would pick a different brand. What I did not learn was any greater restraint when it came to the use of four-letter words. The one that's caused me the most trouble, though, has not been the predictable f-word (the culprit in the Sapoderm incident), nor even the reliably shocking c-bomb. For me, the one that's always packed the most serious consequences is the j-curse.

Like other favourite four-letter expressions, the word 'just' is ridiculously versatile. The Oxford English Dictionary includes twenty-five distinct usages just (!) for the word's adverbial applications. It's the usage that the OED designates '6a' that leads me into strife – the one where 'just' is an adverb used 'to weaken the force of the action expressed by a verb, and so to represent it as unimportant'. Employed this way, 'just' comes to mean 'merely' or 'simply', making it the four-letter-word of choice of deluded optimists everywhere.

When my now-husband and I were newly partnered and furnishing a home on a shoe-string budget, we went to a garage sale in suburban Perth where we found a cheap and serviceable but ugly dining setting. I walked around it, thought, and said, 'We could just strip it and stain it.' We started with the chairs, and had nothing to sit on for months. Even before we turned our attention to the matching table, we'd spent twice the price of the dining setting on sandpaper

and varnish. We bought a tablecloth, but I didn't learn. When our daughter was about two, I said, 'we could just have one more kid, couldn't we?' What followed was a set of twins.

These are not tales of regret. They are stories about the gap between rose-coloured imagination and the grit of reality, and they point to the vast amount of labour that slips, unseen, into the cutaway that comes just before the television DIY show host says, 'and here's one that I prepared earlier'. Which brings me to the confession that I did, for years before I became Minnie Darke, harbour the fantasy that I would one day 'just' write a commercial novel. In my dream, this book would be easy to write. It would be nearly effortless. And, oh so quick! Plus, it would *sell*. I strongly doubt that I am the only so-called literary writer to nurture this dream of easy pickings, of money for jam. The idea that underpins it, of course, is the arrogant one that you could 'just' write a successful commercial book, provided you were prepared to lower your artistic standards.

That I hung on for so long to the dream of 'just' writing a commercial novel was a triumph of hope over experience, because the disappointing truth is that I have never found any form of creative writing to be easy. When my friend Heather Rose and I began co-writing for children under the pen name of Angelica Banks, we expected that the toil of producing a book would be halved. What we discovered, however, was that in a writing partnership, both parties end up doing seventy-five per cent of the work. If ever we imagined that writing for children would be easier than writing for adults, we soon discovered that this was nonsense, too. On this point, we could have saved ourselves from learn-

ing by experience if we'd listened to Ursula Le Guin, who famously said that writing for children was only as easy as raising them.

The least difficult book of my career was *Housewife Superstar: the Very Best of Marjorie Bligh*, which is my only work of non-fiction. The reason it was easier than the others, I think, is because the world of the story was already extant, which meant there was no need to do the (for me) difficult and demanding job of imagining a whole world into being. Instead, there was the (for me) enjoyable and relatively painless job of sculpting scenes and paragraphs and sentences so that they came together in a satisfying (for me) intellectual and emotional shape.

As it turned out, *Star-crossed* was written no faster than my other books. Nor was its creation any less difficult or exacting. There were skills – scene setting, characterisation, sentence construction, writing dialogue – that were transferable from my previous writing experience. Other skills – faster pacing, the hitting of requisite plot points – had to be learned by trial and error.

To complicate matters, I had set myself an ambitious and restrictive structure – a chapter for each of the sun signs in the zodiac, with interleaving sections titled 'cusp'. This schematic required that the action of the novel be stretched over a full year, when eight months would really have done the trick. As I sweated over the problems I had caused myself with this rigid, but very pleasing (to me), structure, I often had cause to recall TS Eliot's advice, 'When forced to work within a strict framework the imagination is taxed to its utmost and will provide its richest ideas.'

The novel came in at around 100 000 words, and there would have been at least as many words on the cutting room floor. Although *Star-crossed* should be a quick, easy read – and I trust that it will prove suitable for plane and beach reading – to pull it off was a painstaking work of three-dimensional plotting that exhausted the ink of several whiteboard markers and destroyed more notepad pages than I care to remember.

What I think I know, now, having written books that are described as 'literary', and one that is described as 'commercial' is that when you embark on a work of literary fiction, you set out to create something entirely new, with virtually no constraints. But when you start out on a work of commercial fiction, your task is to create something fresh and new, with many constraints.

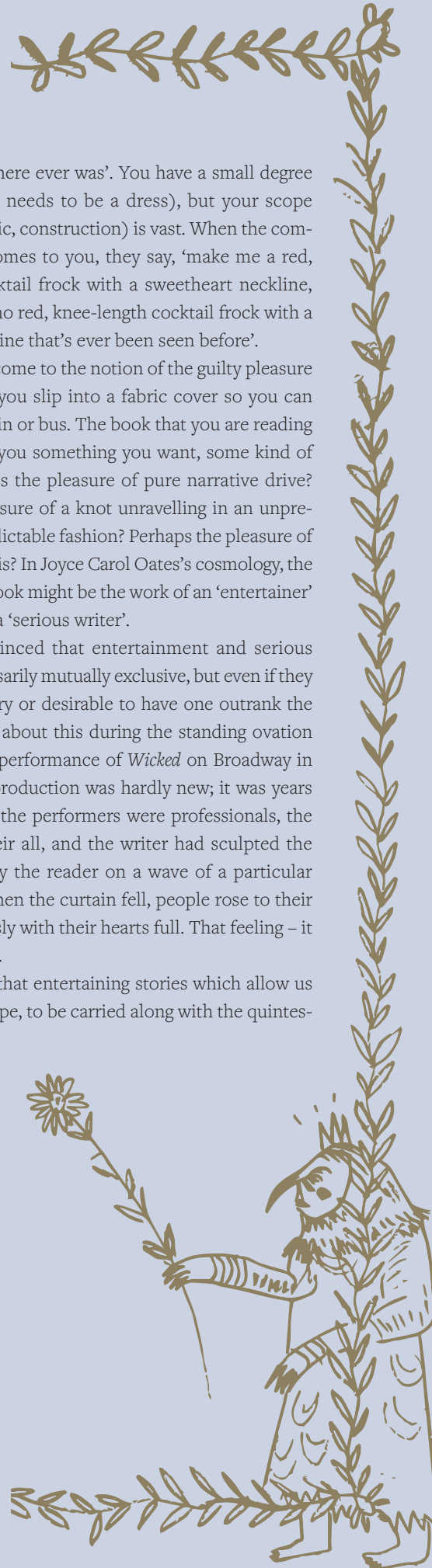
Imagine you are a dressmaker. The literary client comes to you and says, 'make me a dress, and make it the most

beautiful dress there ever was'. You have a small degree of restriction (it needs to be a dress), but your scope (cut, colour, fabric, construction) is vast. When the commercial client comes to you, they say, 'make me a red, knee-length cocktail frock with a sweetheart neckline, but make it like no red, knee-length cocktail frock with a sweetheart neckline that's ever been seen before'.

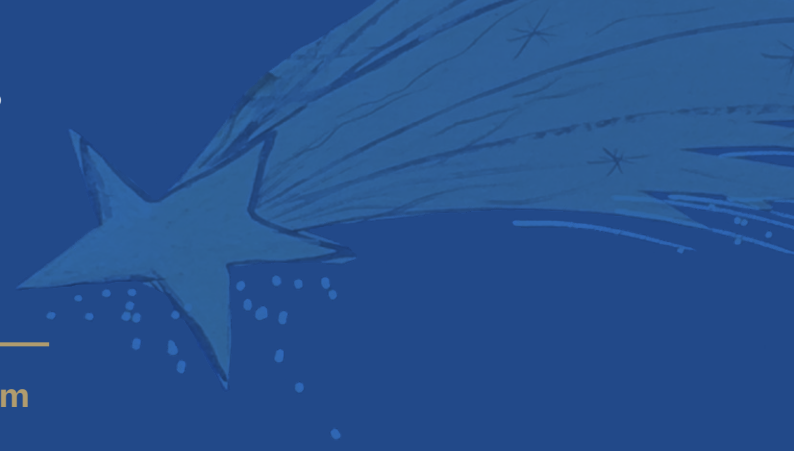
And now we come to the notion of the guilty pleasure – the book that you slip into a fabric cover so you can read it on the train or bus. The book that you are reading because it gives you something you want, some kind of pleasure. Perhaps the pleasure of pure narrative drive? Perhaps the pleasure of a knot unravelling in an unpredictable-yet-predictable fashion? Perhaps the pleasure of romantic catharsis? In Joyce Carol Oates's cosmology, the guilty pleasure book might be the work of an 'entertainer' as distinct from a 'serious writer'.

I'm not convinced that entertainment and serious writing are necessarily mutually exclusive, but even if they are, is it necessary or desirable to have one outrank the other? I thought about this during the standing ovation I witnessed at a performance of *Wicked* on Broadway in New York. The production was hardly new; it was years into its run. But the performers were professionals, the dancers gave their all, and the writer had sculpted the story arc to carry the reader on a wave of a particular shape, so that when the curtain fell, people rose to their feet spontaneously with their hearts full. That feeling – it was no small gift.

Is it the case that entertaining stories which allow us to escape – to hope, to be carried along with the quintes-








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sential hero/ine's journey of the triumph of good over evil, to be assured of eternal existence of love – are just as valuable to us as the works of serious writers, the books that make us question, despair, think and rewire our brains?

As a child reader, I relished the high-speed narrative hit afforded by Enid Blyton's avalanche of productivity as much as I was moved by the poetic, emotional undertow of books like Katherine Paterson's *Jacob Have I Loved* and Paul Gallico's *The Snow Goose*. As a teenager, I was a voracious consumer of Sweet Valley High books, and well-thumbed piles of these romances were crammed into my bookshelves alongside novels by the Bronte sisters, poetry by Sylvia Plath and TS Eliot, and plays by Tennessee Williams.

When I grew up and became a writer, I defaulted to writing in a literary style, almost certainly because during my formative years I was influenced by the idea that serious writing was more important than entertainment. Attempts are being made, in some quarters, to turn this idea inside out. In writing about her decision to give up writing literary fiction and pursue a career in commercial fiction, the North American writer Tantra Bensko says, 'Statistically, literary interests have dipped so far down as to be arguably pathetic. What to do? If you grew up inspired by the geniuses taught in school ... you may have realized by now that emulating those authors is no longer likely going to get you many readers.'

She goes on to say that literary fiction is described in commercial circles as:

'those books where nothing happens.' Or, 'all the thoughts of academic professorial characters experiencing existential angst in middle aged crisis.' 'Language being inexcusably flowery.' 'The land where semi-colons go to die.' 'Snob city.' It's nuanced motifs and ambiguity. Depressing endings and lots of pondering.

But I don't see that there's any need to draw up the battle lines. The same person who takes pleasure, one day, in slowly pondering the universe with Marcel Proust, might

on the very next day take pleasure in hyper-paced antics of a Scott Lynch novel; the same person who is moved to tears by Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* might find themselves blubbering over Jojo Moyes's *Me Before You*.

Sometimes when I go to the cinema, I want to see a melancholy drama, and other times I want to see a weep-with-happiness rom-com. Sometimes I want intrigue, sometimes laugh-out-loud humour. I'm sure most movie-goers are the same, but I do wonder why it is that cinema audiences find it easier to accept that a work in any genre has the potential to be excellent.

For me, the desire to write widely has always seemed as natural as the desire to read widely, and this is evidenced by an output that ranges from non-fiction to short fiction, children's fiction to prose poems, academic articles to romantic comedies. No matter which side of the page you're on, different forms provide different pleasures. I'd like to think that there's plenty of room for storytelling of all kinds, even on the bookshelves of a single reader, and even in the soul of a single writer.

I'd like to think that a person can be a serious writer and an entertainer, perhaps simultaneously, or at the very least on different days of the week. And if a writer wishes to magic herself up a new name in order to let one of those stories, or selves, out into the world, then that's just part of the fun, isn't it? ▼

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Danielle Wood is the author, co-author, editor or co-editor of eleven books. *Star-crossed*, by her alter ego Minnie Darke, is published in Australia by Penguin Random House. Rights to the book have sold in twenty territories worldwide, and a Hollywood production company has optioned the screen rights.

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