

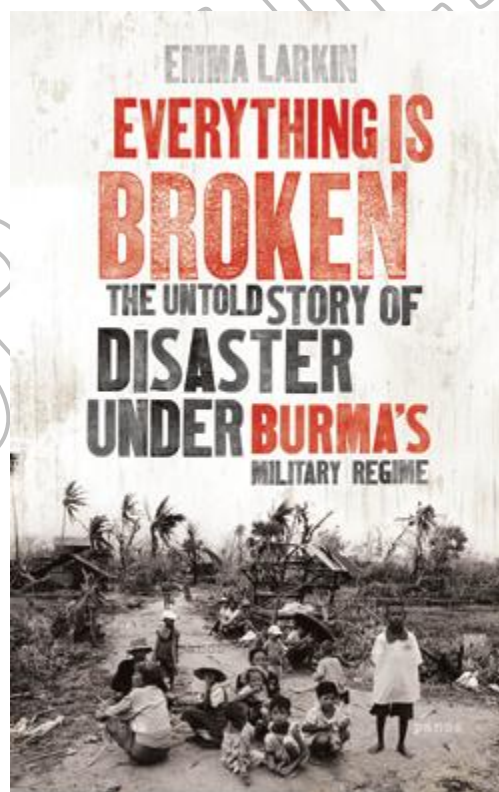
Being Eric/Being George: Or, What it's Really Like to Become Someone Else

By Emma Larkin

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ERIC ARTHUR BLAIR had a variety of different signatures. At times he signed his letters as Eric or Eric A. Blair and at others he was George, George Orwell, or Geo. Orwell. Occasionally, he was both at once – Eric Blair ('George Orwell') – and it's this duality that is the key conundrum of using a pen name. When the "real self" and the "literary self" are interchangeable according to whim or context, how do you distinguish these two, separate entities?

It's a question I've been trying to answer ever since my first book was published under a pen name. The book was a non-fiction account of life in Burma, a country ruled by a military dictatorship that is – I have to say it – truly Orwellian. The regime, known as the State Peace and Development Council, or SPDC, operates a surveillance network of spies and informers to keep tabs on the population. The Press Scrutiny and Registration Board censors every single piece of writing that is published in Burma, from news articles and scientific books to poetry and song lyrics. Meanwhile, pro-regime propaganda appears in newspapers and on billboards brandishing reminders for the people to, "Crush all internal and external destructive elements as the common enemy." These grim details could almost have been lifted straight from the pages of Orwell's final novel, *Nineteen Eighty Four*.



As the SPDC also keeps tabs on all foreigners who enter the country, I used a pen name to protect the people in Burma who helped me with my research. Everywhere I traveled in Burma I left behind an incriminating paper trail. When I checked into a hotel I had to hand over my passport, the details of which were promptly entered into the logbooks of the local Military Intelligence spies (then known as MI). Any train tickets had to be purchased three days in advance, thereby giving the MI time to organize a tail to follow me if they thought I warranted such attention (I did, on at least one occasion that I'm aware of). With these tracking systems in place, the authorities could easily piece together my movements and find out who my friends in Burma were. I've seen it happen to others; I know individuals who have been interrogated by

the authorities after talking to foreign journalists and one man who had to flee the country, seeking asylum as far afield as Chicago.

Using a pen name had the added benefit of enabling me to return to Burma, as journalists and writers known to the regime are often blacklisted and denied entry visas. Yet choosing a literary alter ego for myself was no easy matter. I was forced to make a rather quick decision when my publisher warned me that their catalogue was going to print in a few days. My mother and I happened to be in San Francisco at the time and, running through name choices, we agreed that “Emma” seemed like a nice and totally inoffensive first name. We happened to be driving down Larkin Street at the time, and that gave us the idea for a surname. It seemed to fit; the etymological roots are similar to my real name so it's an honest representation of who I am, to the extent that I'm not laying claim to exotic ancestry or an ethnicity that is not my own. So I became “Emma Larkin”; part choice, part chance.

GEORGE ORWELL'S FIRST published writings were written under his real name. His early book reviews, essays, and poems were signed Eric A. Blair, E. A. Blair, or simply E. A. B. When his manuscript for *Down and Out in Paris and London* found a publisher, he casually suggested in a letter to his agent, Leonard Moore, that the book be published under a pen name:

“I think if it is all the same to everybody I would prefer the book to be published pseudonymously. I have no reputation that is lost by doing this, & if the book has any kind of success I can always use the same pseudonym again.”¹

The following month, in a letter discussing possible titles for the book, Orwell wrote, “I will also think of a good pseudonym – I suppose the thing is to have an easily memorable one – which I could stick to if this book had any success.”² He rejected his publisher's suggestion of using a simple X, as “if this book doesn't flop as I anticipate, it might be better to have a pseudonym I could also use for my next one.”³ Within a few days, he had compiled a list of possible names:

P. S. Burton (the name he used while tramping to research *Down and Out in Paris and London*)
Kenneth Miles
George Orwell
H. Lewis Allways

Indicating that “George Orwell” was his favorite, he left the final decision to his publisher. And so it came to be that, on 9 January 1933, *Down and Out in Paris and London* was published under the byline of an unknown writer called George Orwell.

In those early days, the writerly distinction between Eric Blair and George Orwell was not at all clear-cut and for two years Orwell continued to publish book reviews and poetry under various versions of his real name. It was not until after completing two more books – *Burmese Days* and *A Clergyman's Daughter* – that he began to put the name George Orwell to his journalism. In December 1934, he signed a final book review under his real name with the sparse initials “E. B.”⁴ His next book review appeared in March 1935 with the byline George Orwell.⁵ At some point during those forgotten few months the writer Eric Blair slipped quietly from public view, unnoticed and unacknowledged by the literary world.

IT IS GENERALLY accepted by his biographers that Orwell's decision to use a pen name was connected to a fear of failure. Earlier, Orwell had written to his agent telling him that he wanted

Down and Out in Paris and London published pseudonymously “as I am not proud of it.”⁴ In *The Unknown Orwell*, Peter Stansky and William Abrahams point out that he was probably still smarting from a rejection letter received from T.S. Eliot at Faber & Faber: “If he was to fail in public, he preferred to do so under a nom de plume.”⁵

It has also been suggested that Orwell wanted to shield his family from being associated with a “down and out” son. He already knew that his next book would be critical of British colonial rule in Burma and, given his family's long history in the colonies, he may have wanted to save them any embarrassment.

There was certainly plenty of literary precedent for taking up a pseudonym. The Oxford mathematical professor Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, for instance, was better known to the world as the children's author Lewis Carroll. Likewise, Samuel Langhorne Clemens is more recognizable to readers by his pen name Mark Twain. Some of the writers Orwell admired wrote under pseudonyms when the occasion demanded. Jonathon Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* was initially attributed to Lemuel Gulliver, the main character in the book, and Swift wrote *The Bickerstaff Papers* as Isaac Bickerstaff, Esq. To obscure their gender, the Bronte sisters – Charlotte, Emily, and Anne – first published their work under the names Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. There were also pseudonymous writers who had, like Orwell, spent time in Burma. Hector Hugh Munro, who was born in Burma in 1870 and later took up a position in Burma's imperial police force, became famous for short stories written under the succinct sobriquet, Saki. And the Chilean honorary consul in Rangoon during the late 1920s, Nefaltí Ricardo Reyes Basoalto, wrote heart-wrenching poems under the name Pablo Neruda.

In the case of Orwell, it's worth considering the context of Burma. Like Saki, Orwell was an imperial policeman in Burma and lived there from 1922 to 1927. At that time, the Burmese literary scene was beginning to flourish. Following the introduction of the English education system and modern printing presses, a literary tradition formerly confined to the royal palace and monastic compounds was spreading to the masses. The first novel to be released in Burma was a Burmese translation of *The Count of Monte Cristo* by Alexandre Dumas (born Dumas Davy de la Pailleterie). It was a huge success in Burma and spawned an outpouring of other novels, translations, and short stories. Most Burmese writers chose to use pseudonyms. For those writing critically of the British government, it was a necessary protection against a possible jail sentence. Nationalist writers also assumed multiple pseudonyms in order to make the numbers of scribes agitating for independence seem even larger. Some writers simply wanted to distinguish themselves from their colleagues; as Burma has no system of surnames, individuals are named using letters indicating the day they were born and, as a result, many Burmese names sound rather similar.

The subterfuge of pen names and fiction was sometimes delightfully multilayered. One author, who wrote under the pen name Shwe U Daung, began adapting the Sherlock Holmes stories for a Burmese audience in the 1910s. He turned the ornery English detective into Sone Dauk Maung San Sha or Detective Maung San Sha and gave Holmes' Burmese alter ego a checkered *longyi*, or traditional Burmese sarong, to wear. The sleuth's famous Baker Street address became Bogalay Zay Lan in downtown Rangoon, a street lined with elegant and high-ceilinged colonial shop-houses.

The tradition of pen names remains firmly in place in Burma today as writers still use them to evade the powers that be. A writer working inside Burma who is banned by the regime's

censors may be able to re-emerge under a different name. For those writing abroad, a pen name can protect family members still living inside the country. Interestingly, writers on both sides of the political divide make use of false names; pro-government propaganda scribes are also disguised by pseudonyms, with multiple writers sometimes sharing a single name.

In the East, the names of individuals are far less static than they are in the West. The notorious Burmese dictator Ne Win, who first instigated military rule in Burma and held power from 1962 to 1988, took up the nom de guerre of Ne Win when he joined the Burma Independence Army to fight against invading Japanese forces in World War II. It was a wise move for a future leader; while Ne Win means “Brilliant Sun”, the powerful dictator’s birth name was the far less commanding Shu Maung, which means something akin to “Apple of My Eye”.

In Thailand, where I live, people willingly change their names at the advice of a trusted fortune-teller. One friend recently replaced her name and surname with a more auspicious moniker, a switch conducted to effectively erase her previous self and start afresh with a new name that has a clean and unblemished karmic slate. The theory being that any bad luck or malicious energy would be diverted elsewhere, in search of a person who technically no longer exists. It's a compelling idea; that we can solve our problems by stepping out of the self that caused them in the first place. But the belief also has a deeper spiritual resonance as it acknowledges that our true identities do not reside in random names we are given at birth. In the East, a person's name can be incidental, ephemeral, and malleable.

Orwell once used such theories to explain his decision not to write under his own name. Sir Richard Rees, a colleague and contemporary who edited some of Orwell's early writing in *The Adelphi*, recalled him mentioning that if his real name appeared in print, “an enemy might get hold of [it] and work some kind of magic on it.” According to Rees, Orwell was plagued by an unpleasant feeling when he saw his real name in print because, “how can you be sure your enemy won't cut it out and work some kind of black magic on it?” ⁸

It came to light a few years ago that Orwell had acquired tattoos while he was in Burma – he had tiny blue circles tattooed onto the backs of his hands, one on each knuckle. Still common in Burma, these tattoos were believed to provide protection against British bullets, poisonous snakes, or, indeed, any nefarious or ill-intentioned magic that might be conjured up by one's enemies.

MAINTAINING A PSEUDONYM can be a complicated business. This is especially true if, as in my case, it's important to keep the writer's real name a secret. I can be stumped by seemingly simple questions such as, “What do you do?” (If I don't admit to the side of my life that is Emma Larkin it would appear that I don't do very much at all.) And, though I've been writing under this name since 2004 when my first book was published, I'm still not entirely used to “being Emma”. When I pick up the phone and hear someone at the other end of the line asking to speak to Emma Larkin, I sometimes ask stupidly, “Who?”

Then, of course, I remember and have to respond, “Yes, yes, that's me. Emma speaking...” Pen name confusions tend to escalate when family – the relations with whom the pseudonymous writer no longer shares a name – become involved. While most of my friends, and many acquaintances, probably know the name of my literary alter ego, it's safe to say that all of my parents' friends know with absolute certainty, thanks to my mother's effusive and overly confessional Christmas newsletter.

My mother once accompanied me to a literary festival I was speaking at, and it took us a while to sort out how to introduce her without using our shared surname. Though she pluckily agreed to become “Mrs. Larkin” for the duration of the event, we eventually settled on using just her first name for introductions. Still, I suspect my efforts at discretion were in vain; I was busy for most of the festival and so wasn't able to spend much time with my mother, but I have no doubt she went around the crowd collecting friends to add to her Christmas newsletter list.

These types of concerns would not have bothered Orwell, as he didn't need to worry about being exposed, but I imagine there must have been similar moments of social awkwardness.

To his family, he was always Eric. His sister, Avril Blair, actually disliked people calling her brother George so much that she had at least one serious altercation over the matter. When she was on Jura island in Scotland helping to look after Orwell and his young son, Richard Blair, a dispute arose between her and the nanny. As Richard Blair, Orwell's son, recalls it the problem stemmed from the latter always calling his father “George” and Avril insisting, “No, his name is Eric.” The disagreement became so uncomfortable that the nanny eventually left the island. ⁹

Even Orwell's first wife, Eileen O'Shaughnessy seemed at times uncertain as to how to refer to her husband. In letters to her friend, Norah Myles, she sometimes calls him Eric and sometimes George, one time writing, “Eric (I mean George)” and another, “Eric George (or do you call him Eric?)”. ¹⁰

Sonia Brownell, Orwell's second wife, had no compunction about what to call him. She met and married the writer George Orwell, and went to the unusual extreme of adopting her husband's pen name as her own surname – a habit that survived her subsequent remarriage and divorce.

In direct contrast, Jacintha Buddicom, Orwell's childhood friend and object of his earliest affections, knew him only as Eric and didn't discover that he became George Orwell until after she had read his novel *Animal Farm*. In her memoir of their time together, *Eric & Us*, she emphasized the importance of remembering the real person behind the famous author: “I never met George Orwell myself... But when we were youthful contemporaries I knew Eric Blair very well indeed.” ¹¹

JUST THREE DAYS before he died, Orwell made out his final will requesting that his body be buried under the name he was given at birth. According to his wishes, his gravestone at Sutton Courtenay Church in Oxfordshire reads:

Here lies
Eric Arthur Blair
born June 25th 1903
Died January 21st 1950

There is no mention of George Orwell on the stone and it was as if he decided, on his deathbed, to abandon the literary self he had used in life. In the same way that Eric Blair disappeared from public view all those years ago, so he now quietly returned to claim the wretched body lying on the hospital bed.

In his will, Orwell also stipulated that no biography be written about him. As he stated to a colleague earlier, he believed that biographies could never be completely truthful, “because

every life viewed from the inside would be a series of defeats too humiliating and disgraceful to contemplate".¹² His actions indicate that he was separating, once and for all, his real self from his literary self, leaving the legacy of George Orwell to stand alone on the sole merits of his writings.

It's worth remembering, too, that Orwell always retained Eric Arthur Blair as his legal name. When the novelist Anthony Powell, who was two years behind Orwell at Eton, asked him later in life if he had ever thought about legally adopting his nom de guerre, Orwell replied slowly, "Well I have... But then, of course, I'd have to write under another name if I did."¹³

Footnotes

1. [Item 133 (Letter to Leonard Moore, 6 July 1932) in A Kind of Compulsion: 1903-36, The Complete Works of George Orwell, Vol. X, edited by Peter Davison, Secker & Warburg, London, 1998.]
2. [Item 137 (Letter to Leonard Moore, 12 August 1932) in A Kind of Compulsion: 1903-36, The Complete Works of George Orwell, Vol. X, edited by Peter Davison, Secker & Warburg, London, 1998.]
3. [Item 146 (Letter to Leonard Moore, 15 November 1932) in A Kind of Compulsion: 1903-36, The Complete Works of George Orwell, Vol. X, edited by Peter Davison, Secker & Warburg, London, 1998.]
4. [Item 217 (Review of The Ideals of East and West by Kenneth Saunders, The Adelphi, December 1934) in A Kind of Compulsion: 1903-36, The Complete Works of George Orwell, Vol. X, edited by Peter Davison, Secker & Warburg, London, 1998.]
5. [Item 240 (Review of Caliban Shrieks by Jack Hilton, The Adelphi, March 1935) in A Kind of Compulsion: 1903-36, The Complete Works of George Orwell, Vol. X, edited by Peter Davison, Secker & Warburg, London, 1998.]
6. [Item 124 (Letter to Leonard Moore, 26 April 1932) in A Kind of Compulsion: 1903-36, The Complete Works of George Orwell, Vol. X, edited by Peter Davison, Secker & Warburg, London, 1998.]
7. [Page 304, The Unknown Orwell, Peter Stansky and William Abrahams, Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1972.]
8. [Item 148 (Letter to Leonard Moore, 19 November 1932, footnote 3) in A Kind of Compulsion: 1903-36, The Complete Works of George Orwell, Vol. X, edited by Peter Davison, Secker & Warburg, London, 1998.]
9. [Richard Blair in conversation with Orwell biographer, DJ Taylor, at The Sunday Times Oxford Literary Festival in 2009.]
10. [Section II (Eileen Blair's letters to Norah Myles), The Lost Orwell edited by Peter Davison, Timewell Press, London, 2006.]
11. [Eric & Us: A Remembrance of George Orwell by Jacintha Buddicom, Leslie Frewin Publishers, London, 1974.]
12. [Page 38, George Orwell: A Life by Bernard Crick, Penguin, London, 1980.]
13. ["A Memoir by Anthony Powell" in George Orwell Remembered, compiled by Audrey Coppard and Bernard Crick, Ariel Books, London, 1984.]

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