

What's in a Christian name that can be used for either sex?

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It is rather well known that the famous English novelist Evelyn Waugh was once briefly married to a woman who was also called Evelyn.

The couple were known to their friends as he-Evelyn and she-Evelyn.

This was an unusual situation, since in our culture it is normal for given names to be gender specific – it is obviously helpful to be able to tell what sex someone is from their name.

I am made very aware of this if someone writes to me from, say, Japan, where names are totally unrelated to the ones we know.

Is a Japanese person called Kazuhiko a man or a woman? Similarly, is a Finn with the name of Terttu male or female? What about a Thai person called Nattapong?

But there are a number of English language names which can be equally confusing. We have just noted Evelyn. Hilary is another.

The famous British novelist Hilary Mantel is female, but the famous British politician Hilary Benn is male.

The American actor and comedian Robin Williams was a man, but in the USA Robin is much more often a woman's name – even though it was originally a diminutive



■ Same name, different sex – novelist Hilary Mantel and the politician Hilary Benn. Hilary was a boy's name for centuries and only began to be given to girls fairly recently.

form of Robert – and it is almost entirely used for boys and men over here.

How did we end up with ambiguous names like Robin and Evelyn and Hilary? Why wouldn't we try to avoid the confusion that this might produce? Well, there is a very interesting pattern to this development.

Nearly all of our ambiguous names started off being given to boys and were only later transferred to girls.

Hilary was a boy's name for centuries and only began to be given to girls fairly recently – the transfer has been fairly rapid and is now almost complete, so that today it is Mr Benn's name that surprises us, not Ms Mantel's.

There are several other originally male names which have become ambiguous or even gone over to being entirely female: Ashley, Beverly, Joyce, Leslie, Lindsey ...

Why is this? Why do parents give boys' names to girls, but not girls' names to boys?

Notice that we do this especially with the shortened, familiar forms of names. There are plenty of girls these days who, whatever their official names, are known to their friends as Sam, or Eddy, or Stevie, or Charley.

But, except in the well-known Johnny Cash song, there are absolutely no boys named Sue.