

What's in a Name?

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I realize I'm late to the Karen bashing party, but I was too reluctant to engage in the debate for fear of being labeled as one. You see, my name IS Karen and I've spent the last few years apologizing for it. I've gotten in the habit of introducing myself as, "Karen, but one of the nice ones." It's a quick way to deflect any immediate profiling. But why Karen? How did that particular name become the pejorative term for an obnoxious white woman that flaunts her privilege with unreasonable demands? I know plenty of Lindas, and Susans, and one particular Debbie that can cause you to stick a needle in your eye as soon as their shrill voices hit the air. Their names could serve just the same purpose.

I know, I know-people love labels. They may be mean, but they're easy and get the point across quickly. But it made me start to think about names, how they shape us and how others judge us. I'm no angel in this respect either. For example, do you know any Ira's that are quarterbacks? Or have you met a Seymour that isn't an accountant? I'm sure there are thousands of Iras and Seymours that rightfully cringe at these presumptions. Names do bring along their own preconceived connotations, whether they are deserved or not.

Of course, there's more to a name than just our first names. How they fit with our last names really fleshes out a fuller picture. Mine is Katz, like the deli, not the Broadway musical. I share the same name with the recently retired CEO of Neiman Marcus, a successful children's book author, a book cover illustrator, and seventy-four other women living in Manhattan. I've toyed with the idea of starting a *Karen Katz Club* or making a documentary about people with the same name.

How many Julia Roberts or Anne Hathaways are out there and how do their lives compare? Karen Katz might not be as ubiquitous as John Smith, but if you live in New York, you probably know one of us.

But I don't mind sharing my name. I like it. I like it a lot. It has a nice cadence to it. The crisp, hard sounds of the two "K's" back to back are strong and self-assured. Many people actually call me KK, as if I'm an agent from the forties negotiating a deal with Louis B. Mayer. Or they call me Double K or *Katzala*. It's the kind of name that's just made for nicknames.

I can thank my mother for my first name, although I don't think she put a ton of thought into it. In the Jewish tradition, you're supposed to be named after a family member who has passed on. I was the third of three, so by the time I came along the only dead person's name left was my mom's grandfather Sam, *Schmuel*, in Hebrew. He was a brusque, emotionless man from the old country and my mom had little affection for him. She didn't want to be constantly reminded of him, so she feminized Sam into Sue and that became my middle name. My Hebrew name was also feminized into *Schmuela*, causing some of my friends to tease me with the nickname, *Schmoo*, an unfortunate Yiddish word that means fool or jerk. Fortunately, it didn't stick.

My mother says she loved the name Carol, but that had been the name of my father's ex-girlfriend and she didn't want to be reminded of her either, so she felt the name Karen was close enough. My mom has a very thick Brooklyn accent seasoned with a touch of Long Island, so when she shortens my name in haste, it becomes *Kah*, the *a* drawn out nasally as in the word *gnat*. And if you shorten my last name too, the nickname becomes *KahKah*, not to be confused with *Caca*, the Spanish name for a certain body waste.

So I remain a founding member of the *Karen Katz Club*. My name is as much a part of me as my arm or leg or slightly chubby midsection. I can hear it easily over the loud speaker when I'm getting called for my colonoscopy. People don't mangle it at the DMV. I can even convince people that I'm related to the famous deli owner and that there's a sandwich named after me. It's called the *Katzala* and it's full of baloney.

My name is Karen Katz and I'm proud of it. But you can call me KK because we're friends now.

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