

A Case of Mistaken Identity

It's sometimes said of writers that we only ever write about two characters: ourselves and everyone else. This is an exercise in which we'll try to write about *both*, at the same time.

I was once mistaken for Kazuo Ishiguro. I'm an Asian-looking writer with a British accent, which I guess made it an understandable mistake. I'm also a fan of Ishiguro's so it was a flattering mistake, albeit that I had to break the disappointing news that this was a case of mistaken identity.

Kazuo Ishiguro, incidentally, when I confessed this to him, told me he was once mistaken for Jackie Chan¹, which got me to thinking...

Mistaken identity is a traditional well-spring of fiction (perhaps not surprisingly since fiction writers habitually assume other identities) from Shakespearean comedy to Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* to Dickens' *Our Mutual Friend*, from Hitchcock's *North-by-Northwest*, to John Guare's *Six Degrees of Separation* to Jerzy Kosinski's *Being There*. Many folk and fairytales - Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella - trade in related cases of mistaken (sometimes disguised) identities and their eventual revelation. Even Paul Simon's "Call Me Al," is based on a case of mistaken identity (he and then wife, Peggy Harper, were addressed at a party as Al and Betty). Comedy arises from many such mistakes, but also drama and even danger.

For example, for many minorities – I'm an Asian-American, myself, a group often stereotyped as "all looking alike" – the issue of being mistaken for another has other charged resonances. Consider the old (and racist) joke included in a section of my novel *The Fortunes* about the hate crime murder of Vincent Chin:

A horse walks into a bar and the bartender says, "Why the long face?"

And this version:

Two Asians walk into a bar, and the bartender says, "Why the same face?"

What follows is a exercise to tap into the possibilities – lighter or darker, or even both (as in, say, Spike Lee's *Black Klansman*) – of mistaken identity.

¹ In a limo at Cannes, where Ishiguro was a judge at the film festival one year, so also understandable.

The Exercise

Parts 1-3 can take the form of preparatory thinking/notes; parts 3-6 should be addressed in written scenes.

1. Think of a moment - in person, on the phone, on line etc - when you (or someone you know, or a character you're writing about) were mistaken for someone else. This might include being mistaken for a specific person (famous or otherwise), mistaken in relationship to another (taken for a friend, rather than a partner or vice versa, say), or mistaken in a role ("Excuse me, do you work here?"), mistaken in your ethnicity ("Where are you from?" "Do you speak X?"), or mistaken in your age, sexuality or even gender.

2. Revisit the moment. How did it make you (or your protagonist) feel, how did you react? Surprised or pleased (sometimes, after all, we want to seem other than we are?) Confused or embarrassed? Insulted or flattered? Amused or outraged? Liberated or stereotyped?

3. Your feelings will likely be shaped by your sense of the person making the mistake, and the context in which they make it. Explore these. You might speculate as to how and why the mistake arose. Was it an understandable/innocent mistake? Was it indicative of something else? How did that contribute to your feelings in the moment, or afterwards (which may differ)?

4. Rewrite (which is to say, *fictionalize*) the moment. If you corrected the mistake in reality, reimagine the moment if you hadn't, but instead had played along (what if I had pretended to be Ishiguro? Or he'd pretended to be Jackie Chan!?!). Alternatively, if you didn't correct the mistake imagine if you had. What consequences might have followed?

5. Rewrite the moment from another point of view, that of the person who makes the mistake, or a third party, an observer who recognizes the mistake, and can choose to play along or reveal it (remember tension also arises from the potential revelation of a secret or lie).

6. Rewrite the moment in a different tone - if it was serious, make it comic, if comic, make it serious or even tragic (naturally reactions, outcomes and indeed characters may alter in this rewriting).