

Two Men Named Charles

KB Inglee

If you are writing a short story, your first two pages are a significant percentage of the whole. There is a lot of introduction to be done right off the bat. I try to get all the significant characters and a feel for the setting on those two pages. In the case of this story, I set a difficult task for myself. I combined a fictional and a real character and ended up with two men named Charles.

The eclipse in “Women’s Work,” my short story in *Day of the Darkness*, would have been hardly noticeable in the District of Columbia. Charles and Emily Lawrence (fictional) join Charles Peirce (real) to observe this very real eclipse.

Here are the first few paragraphs in which I try to sort out the two men.

Charles Lawrence had cajoled Emily into coming along to observe the eclipse with a team of scientists.

“It will be fun,” he had said. “We have little enough of that these days. You will learn something as well.”

Charles Peirce had sent the invitation two weeks earlier. Emily Lawrence was surprised when her husband accepted it. The two Charleses had become friends at Harvard when Charles Lawrence had taken a course from Peirce’s father. Emily had known Mrs. Peirce, Zena, since their school days.

Why on earth did I decide to have two characters named Charles? That’s something I won’t do again. There are simple reasons that I cannot change either name.

Charles Lawrence is part of the Charles and Emily team. There are probably 50 short stories in which he appears. No way to change his name now.

Many of my stories have historical characters in them, so when the call came for a short story about an eclipse, Charles Sanders Peirce (pronounced 'purse') came to mind at once. Peirce was a brilliant but difficult man, the originator of Pragmatism, friend of William James. For me, the important thing was that he worked at the Naval Observatory in Washington, and had traveled the world looking at eclipses. The Peirces, Benjamin, Charles and James, appear now and again in the other Emily stories. Charles was perfect for this story. His wife (real) had gone to the same school Emily (fictional) did but was a few years ahead of her. Do you see how I am mixing historical fact with fictional whimsy?

Turns out there were a couple of problems with using Peirce as my scientist.

In an age when Charles Lawrence would have been called Mr. Lawrence by clients, I have no idea what title Charles Peirce held. He earned the highest degree Harvard granted at that time, a masters. So I can’t call him Doctor Peirce. He never taught anywhere long enough to earn the

title of Professor. Mister seems far too lowly for such an accomplished man. I solved it by calling him Peirce without a title of any kind.

My biggest problem with having the tale of two men named Charles was that the name ends in 'S'. When I was in school, the proper way to designate ownership to someone whose name ended in "S" was to add an apostrophe at the end. Now it is to add an apostrophe then an 'S'. Now I have a story in which I have Charles possessive and Charles plural.

This is where the editor comes in. As far as I am concerned, the editor has the final say. I can argue with the editor to make my point or I can withdraw the story. I was prepared to fictionalize Peirce if I had to, but I believe having an historical person in the work makes it stronger. In this case the editor didn't ask me to take him out or to fictionalize him.



KB Inglee works as an historical interpreter at a water powered grist mill in Pennsylvania. She has tried pretty much everything her characters do, including watch a total solar eclipse. She lives in Delaware with her family and a houseful of pets.