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A Note on Perceived Male/Female Differences in the Giving of Less-Than-Perfect Names

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Although gender is not usually considered to be a matter of ethnicity, in American popular culture, especially as it is portrayed in books for young readers, authors spell out different expectations for the naming skills and attitudes of fathers and mothers in much the same way that we expect differences between ethnic groups.

In general, we expect women to be kind-hearted and supportive much like Charlotte, the barnyard spider who in E.B. White's 1951 *Charlotte's Web* saves the life of the piglet Wilbur by weaving names for him in the web that hangs over his pen. She begins with *SOME PIG*, and then goes on to *TERRIFIC*, *RADIANT*, and finally at the County Fair, to *HUMBLE*.

But most often in children's literature, which is written from the child's point of view, the giving of names is brought into a story's plot as a way of negatively characterizing whichever parent chooses the name, as with Shel Silverstein's 'A Boy Named Sue.' The poem is a tall tale about a man's quest for revenge on his long-absent father who gave him a ridiculous (i.e., a girl's name) and then left home. In 1969, Johnny Cash put it to music and sang the song for a BBC broadcast, which was turned into an album, *Johnny Cash at San Quentin*. The song was immediately popular, reaching number 1 on the country charts and number 2 on the pop charts, helping to cement the idea that fathers are not to be trusted when it comes to naming babies.

Joan Bauer, a popular writer for teenagers, has a 2003 story entitled 'Hardware' (published in *Joyful Noise*, edited by Michael Cart) which is a twist on 'A Boy Named Sue.' An adult woman in the story, Aunt Phil, remembers her father telling her, 'Phil, I've given you a hard name for a girl because I want you to remember that life is hard' (7).

Polly Horvath, in *The Canning Season*, which won the 2003 National Book Award for young readers, starts with the assumption that men are not to be trusted when naming babies, but at the same time she shows that women too can slip up. When the mother in the book suggests such names for her new daughter as Eugenie, the father suggests Stinko, and then asks, 'How about Fart? Fart Clark!' When the mother suggests Yvonne, the father responds with Belch. Then the mother happens to see that workmen have left a tool on the windowsill of her hospital room

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and demands to know why a ratchet is in her room. The husband, who is still in an argumentative mood, insists that it isn't a ratchet, 'it's a lug wrench.'

The argument about whether it is a lug wrench or a ratchet grows almost violent, but is interrupted by someone shouting in the hallway that Havana cigars are being passed out in the waiting room. As the father rushes out for his free cigar, a hospital official comes in to collect the information for the baby's birth certificate. The mother, who is still angry, grabs the pen and gets the last word in the argument by writing Ratchet Ratchet in the spaces for first and middle names.

Another misguided but well intentioned mother is described in Bruce Brooks's 1986 *Midnight Hour Encores*. The book's protagonist is a sixteen-year-old world-class cello player. Her parents had been 1960s flower children in California, and when the girl was born her mother named her Esalen Starness Blue and then left the baby to be raised by her father. Another 'flower-child' mother who failed both as a parent and as a name giver is the mother in Katherine Paterson's 1978 *The Great Gilly Hopkins*, who just before handing her daughter over to foster care named her Galadriel, in honor of the royal elf in J.R.R. Tolkien's 1954 *The Lord of the Rings*.

In several children's books, men are shown to give 'tough' names or teasing names to their friends. In Karen Cushman's 1996 *The Ballad of Lucy Whipple*, set in California during the Gold Rush, the frontiersmen give each other such names as Poker John Lewis (he is a card player), Snowshoe Ballou (he has big feet), Rattlesnake Jake (he is a villain), Jimmy Whiskers (he has a big beard), and The Gent (he shaves).

Christopher Paul Curtis's *Bud, Not Buddy*, is set in Depression era Michigan. In it, an African American boy runs away from some cruel foster parents in search of a jazz musician that he thinks might be his father — he's actually his grandfather. He finds the band he's looking for and players who have named each other Doo-Doo Bug, The Thug, Steady Eddie, Dirty Deed, and Lefty Lewis. Of course with such names as these, they are not going to call the boy plain old Bud, and he won't let them call him Buddy because his late mother had instructed him that Buddy was a name for a dog or a friend who doesn't mean much. The men toy with the idea of calling the boy Sleepy, but then they decide to make it a little classier and so they add a French touch and name him Sleepy LaBone. Miss Thomas, the band's secretary and vocalist, is amused at the importance the men attach to nicknames, which she says is an example of 'one of those man things' that women 'have absolutely no interest in' (195).

Occasionally authors will blame 'the parents' instead of either the father or the mother. This is what C.S. Lewis did in his 1952 *Chronicles of Narnia* when he begins the fifth book by writing about a boy named Eustace Clarence Scrubb, who almost deserved his name. Teachers called him Scrubb, while his parents used his full name. Lewis couldn't say what the boy's friends called him because he didn't have any.

Gary Paulsen is his 2003 short story 'Orvis Orvisen and the Crash and Bash' (published in a Paulsen collection *How Angel Peterson Got His Name*) writes that if 'a boy's last name is Orvisen, and his parents are silly or addled or just plain cruel enough to give him the first name of Orvis so he has to say, "Hello, my name is Orvis Orvisen," they might as well just rub him with raw liver and throw him into a pit of starving wolves' (56).

Finding these negative comments on how parents name their children has caused us to wonder whether in real life, as opposed to fiction, men and women really do approach the creation of unusual names in different fashions. It occurred to us that the best people to help us answer this question may be members of the American Name Society. If you have an unusual given name, or one that is spelled in an unusual way, we would love to hear a brief account of how you got your name. Please send a note to my mentor (Alleen.Nilsen@asu.edu) telling us your given name, what is unusual about it, how you came to have the name, and whether your father or your mother was mainly responsible for it. Many thanks.

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