

2008 Name of the Year

CLEVELAND EVANS

Bellevue University, Nebraska, USA

The fourth annual Name of the Year voting was held at the American Name Society meeting in San Francisco on January 9, 2009.

For the first time, members of the Society present voted on the winners in four separate categories before choosing the overall Name of the Year. The four categories, chosen to correspond with the four interest groups who meet informally during the annual meeting, were Place Names, Trade Names, Fictional Names, and Personal Names.

The nominees for Place Name of the Year were “Beijing” and “Wasilla.” Beijing was nominated because of its prominence as the site of the 2008 Summer Olympics, and its symbolism of the rise of China as an economic and cultural competitor for the United States and Canada. Wasilla was nominated because of how the name of that Alaska city became iconic for small-town America during the 2008 Presidential campaign, because of its connection with the Republican Vice Presidential Nominee, Sarah Palin. Wasilla was the winner of the vote.

The nominees for Trade Name of the Year were all associated with the financial crisis of 2008. They were “Fannie Mae & Freddie Mac” (nominated as a pair), the government-sponsored enterprises that had major problems because of the mortgage crisis; “Lehman Brothers,” the name of a global investment bank that filed for bankruptcy as a result of the crisis; and “AIG,” the name of a reinsurance company that nearly collapsed due to the crisis. After discussion pointed out that the name Fannie Mae was chosen as the informal form of “Federal National Mortgage Association” when it was founded in 1938 precisely because its folksy quality was expected to make Americans feel more secure about the mortgage industry, Fannie Mae & Freddie Mac were voted in as Trade Names of the Year unanimously.

The nominees for Fictional Name of the Year were all connected with the young adult book series *Twilight* by Stephenie Meyer, and the film released in late 2008 based on the first of the four books in the series. Prior to the meeting, both Cullen, the surname of many of the vampire characters in the series, and Isabella “Bella” Swan, the name of the teenage heroine, had been nominated. At the meeting, Edward, the given name of the forever-teenage member of the Cullen family who is Bella’s love interest, was nominated from the floor. After discussion pointed out that many teenage girls were wearing shirts with slogans like “Looking for my Edward,” with the name having become representative for many of the ideal boyfriend, Edward was the overwhelming winner in the Fictional Name category.

There were five nominees for Personal Name of the Year:

Ocho Cinco was nominated because the former Chad Johnson, wide receiver for the Cincinnati Bengals in the National Football League, legally changed his name to Chad Ocho Cinco to match the Spanish words for “eight” and “five,” because 85 is the number on his football uniform.

Zuma Nesta Rock Rossdale, the name of the son of the singers Gwen Stefani and Gavin Rossdale (born in August 2008), was nominated as a representative example of an unusual celebrity baby name.

Track, Bristol, Willow, Piper, and Trig Palin, the names of the children of Sarah Palin, were nominated as a group because of how their uncommon but Alaska-centered flavor became part of the discussion about Sarah Palin, her cultural background, and her perceived fitness for the Vice Presidency.

Finally, “Hussein” and “Barack Hussein Obama” were both nominated separately because of how the name of the Democratic Presidential candidate in 2008 became part of the discussion about him during the campaign for the White House. The main discussion before the vote revolved around these two choices. Some argued that it was better to choose just “Hussein,” because of how the candidate’s middle name received particular attention because of its association with Islam and Saddam Hussein, eventually leading to some of the candidate’s supporters informally adopting Hussein as their own middle name on websites. Others argued that it was better to choose the full form as Name of the Year, because there also was comment during the campaign about Barack and Obama because of their obvious non-European origins, and the phonetic similarity of Obama to “Osama.” Although the vote between these two was the closest contest this year, the full “Barack Hussein Obama” won decisively as Personal Name of the Year.

The four category winners were automatically entered in the final Name of the Year vote. There were no other nominees from the floor for that honor. “Barack Hussein Obama” won overwhelmingly as Name of the Year for 2008, with each of the other nominees receiving only one vote apiece.

For the 2009 Name of the Year, the American Name Society will again vote on Names of the Year in the four categories of Brand Names, Fictional Names, Place Names, and Personal Names before choosing an overall winner. Please send your nominations to Cleveland Evans, either by email at cleveland.evans@bellevue.edu, or by postal mail to him at Psychology Department, Bellevue University, 1000 Galvin Road South, Bellevue, NE 68005-3098, USA.