

Sense and Serendipity: Some Ways Fiction Writers Choose Character Names

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In order to find out how and why authors choose names for characters, published sources were reviewed and semi-structured interviews were conducted with four authors of fictional works for children and adolescents: Shannon Hale, Brandon Mull, Michael O. Tunnell, and Chris Crowe. From analysis of interview transcripts, analytic works, and articles by other contemporary authors, five themes emerged: (1) These authors recognized the importance of character names, and they made conscious and deliberate choices. (2) They wanted names to be easily accessible to their readers. (3) They were concerned that names fit the characters' personalities, backgrounds, and actions. (4) They went to a variety of sources for accurate, appropriate, and interesting names beyond their own background, imagination, and energy. (5) They chose names that had personal significance for them, some related to personal acquaintances and some conveying personal humor. Rather than examining each theme in depth, this article presents an overview of these five aspects of choice.

KEYWORDS author craft, character names, children's literature, adolescent literature, fictional naming practices

Most people choose their children's names very carefully. Some go through long lists of different sorts of names; some examine every name used in their families back several generations; some think about their favorite cultural icons and heroes. They use every sensible method they can think of. Others find the right name purely by serendipity: in the activities of daily life they simply encounter it. Whether by sense or serendipity, they must finally decide on something that is just right.

When authors of fiction choose names for their characters, they face quandaries similar to those of parents; and high levels of sense and/or serendipity are generally involved. Scott Nicholson (2000), author of multiple novels and screenplays, expresses the writer's particular challenge. When a character first enters, a reader does not

receive as many immediate nuances of appearance, expressions, voice, carriage, and charisma as someone who is actually meeting a new individual. Such multiple impressions can somewhat dilute the impact of a name; the author does not have this luxury. As Nicholson (2000: 1) expresses it, “Names do matter. [. . .] You don’t want the name to throw up a speed bump for the reader. [. . .] The name doesn’t have to do all of the work of character building, but it’s an important part of the package deal.” Finnish scholar Yvonne Bertills (2003: 42) is more specific as to function:

Just as naming is an aid to human orientation in the environment, the names of fictional characters function as orientation signs in the fictive world. [. . .] Name elements orientate the reader to the character and enable the reader to orientate herself or himself in the narrative.

Readers generally orient themselves subconsciously, but writers are very conscious and deliberate about how they provide that orientation.

Names and literature

Acknowledging a process as being deliberate and an outcome as being important is usually followed quickly by “how?” — even for a process the questioner realizes does not have a consistent *how*. Selecting character names is such a process (Ragussis, 1986). Experienced fiction writers acknowledge that “names have magic” (VanRooy, 2000), and, as with most “magic,” when *how*’s do exist they generally are not understood. Some writers begin with a name and then build a character around it; others first compile a “detailed worksheet extolling all the beliefs, dislikes, and loves of their character, even down to their favorite brand of peanut butter” (Tucker, 2008). Some stress that “it has to feel right” (Orson Scott Card as qtd. in Nilsen and Nilsen, 2007: 98). Most writers are some place in the middle, but the extremes do exist (Tucker, 2008).

Perhaps the most inimitable *how* in name selection for characters was that of J.R.R. Tolkien. In his *Lord of the Rings* trilogy (1993) he dealt with hobbits, orcs, ents, wizards, elves, dwarves, dragons, and all sorts of creatures and monsters who coexist with humans in a place called Middle Earth, and each group has its independent and consistent lexicon. As Tolkien was a linguist who was fluent in both medieval and modern versions of Germanic and Celtic languages (as well as a number of others such as Latin, Welsh, and Old Norse), he had plenty of sounds and structures to work with, along with elements thought to be derived from his interest in German and Celtic mythology (Chance, 2004). When former and existing languages were not enough for him, he created a number of languages of his own, including more than one Elvish tongue. So one way of finding character names is to create new languages from which they can be derived. Fortunately for the less linguistically astute, there are other methods.

Charles Dickens, referred to in an online library catalogue as “the ‘master’ of the onomastic pun,” created names to encapsulate many people’s characters and characteristics: thus the unforgettable *Lady Honoria Dedlock* from *Bleak House*, whose conflict between her current honor and past discrepancies deadlocks her thoughts, actions, and personality (Dickens, 1889). In the same novel Dickens includes *Mr Krook*, a man of sneaky, greedy dishonesty; *Mr Smallweed*, a shriveled, poisonous,

and very dispensable pawnbroker; *Miss Flite*, a flighty sort of woman who raises birds; and an arch villain lawyer named *Mr Tulkynghorn* (which if pronounced with a good British accent comes out *Talkynghorn*). *Volumnia Dedlock* and *Mrs Badger* do not need further description.

Oscar Wilde focused attention on the name issue with his popular play *The Importance of Being Earnest* (1988), centered around issues that make it imperative that the main character be named *Earnest* rather than *Jack*. The happily-ever-after ending could not have been achieved if it had not been discovered that the name Jack (given to him as an infant left in a handbag at a railway station) should have been Earnest, as the first son of his real father, General Earnest Moncrieff. Wilde's preference of Earnest over Jack is not surprising, given the names of the other characters: *Gwendolen*, *Algernon*, *Cecily*, *Lady Augusta Bracknell*, *Dr Chasuble*, and *Miss Prism*.

About the time today's adolescents and young adults are encountering Tolkien and Dickens, and in some places Wilde, in their literature classes, many of them are becoming engrossed outside of class in modern fiction written especially for them. Characters in these books are not named Gandalf, Algernon, or Lady Dedlock; however, some of their names have been chosen just as carefully. Some of these names are encountered often in the students' social lives; others are exotic and strange.

Exploratory study

Having experienced amusement as well as fascination with names of characters in fiction written for adults, we desired to learn more about the names in books written for children and adolescents. We wanted to find out, as scholars advise, what the names originally meant to the authors (Alvarez-Altman, 1987: 1; Ashley, 1987: 17). Thus the purpose of this study was to determine how some authors who specialize in writing for children and young people select names and why.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four authors of fictional works for children and adolescents. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and examined for common themes, which were compared to similar themes and practices described by contemporary fiction writers and recognized by some noted scholars in literary name selection and meaning. As onomastician Leonard R.N. Ashley (1987: 28) has expressed, "Names require serious and sensitive handling."

Participants

Shannon Hale. Shannon Hale was so intrigued by Robin McKinley's *Beauty* that she decided to try adapting and extending a fairy tale of her own, *The Goose Girl* (2003), which initiated a series that includes *Enna Burning*, *River Secrets*, and *Forest Born*. In the process she has created nations and cultures — all of which require names: and she has taken great care to give the names for the various cultures lexical consistency. Her standalone books include names more bound to existing cultures: *Book of a Thousand Days* (2006) (with Mongolian names to match its setting) and *Princess Academy* (2007) (which uses Scandinavian background and names). These books have received the kinds of recognition that confirm her artistry: the former won a CYBILS award, and the latter was named a Newbery Honor Book.

Brandon Mull. Brandon Mull went from imaginative, daydreaming child to creator of imaginative worlds. For his five-book fantasy series, *Fablehaven* (2007b), he created some names (e.g. giving the centaurs names that sound as if their own tongue had been translated into English) and chose others because of a character's age or personality (e.g. *Murial*, the antiquated witch, and *Selia*, the villain whose name sounds like a hiss). Mull's *The Candy Shop War* (2007a) involves magical happenings but has a contemporary setting, so he chose realistic names for his realistic context. The *Fablehaven* series, with its carefully crafted fantasy names, made the New York Times list of "bestsellers."

Michael O. Tunnell. Michael O. Tunnell is an analyst as well as a creator of literature for young readers. He teaches university classes in children's literature and writes professional books and journal articles on the topic — including the widely used textbook *Children's Literature, Briefly*. He has served twice on the national committee that selects the books that receive the Newbery Award. In addition, Tunnell has written many books for children and adolescents. His nonfiction works — *Candy Bomber: The Story of the Berlin Airlift's "Chocolate Pilot"* and *The Children of Topaz* — did not require creative naming, but his picture books — *Chinook*, *Halloween Pie*, and *Beauty and the Beastly Children* — did. For his novels *School Spirits*, *Brothers in Valor*, and the *Moon* series, he selected names in a number of ways for a number of purposes.

Chris Crowe. As a former high school English teacher and a current university English professor, Chris Crowe has written a biography of Mildred Taylor, a Newbery Award-winning author who focused on racial mistreatment, as well as a biography of Thurgood Marshall, the first African American to serve as a justice on the US Supreme Court. He also authored a nonfiction account of *Getting Away with Murder: The True Story of the Emmett Till Case* (2003), an incident of ultimate racial mistreatment and ultimate avoidance of justice. Crowe incorporated historical data into the names of fictional characters; for his historical novel *Mississippi Trial, 1955* (2002), based on the Till case, he crafts fictional names from nonfiction historical and cultural content.

Emergent themes

From close analysis of recordings and transcriptions of the interviews, articles by other contemporary authors, and analytic works by some noted researchers and scholars, five themes emerged. These are presented as an overview of some ways fiction writers choose character names.

1. These authors recognized the importance of character names, and they made conscious and deliberate choices.
2. They wanted names to be easily accessible to their readers; they spent time on character names so their readers would not have to spend time reviewing and rereading to keep them straight.
3. They were concerned that names fit the characters' personalities, backgrounds, and actions.
4. They went to a variety of sources for accurate, appropriate, and interesting names beyond their own background and imagination.

5. They chose names that had personal significance for them: some related to personal acquaintances and experiences, and some conveying a personal humor — individual or shared.

Themes and discussion

People's real-life names can reveal quite a bit about them: gender (usually), race/ethnicity, time and sometimes place of birth, even some of the hopes, dreams, and attitudes of their parents. Names in fiction reveal more information more reliably because authors know the past, present, and future of their characters (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2007: 104). The kinds of thought and consideration given to the selection of names by the authors in this study are discussed by theme, insofar as inseparable processes may be separately described. Because the purpose of this study was to present an overview, themes will not be discussed in depth.

Importance

All authors consulted, both through their writings and through interviews, agreed that naming characters is very important and that it must be done deliberately with careful consideration. Novelist Scott Nicholson notes that a quick way to spoil a work of fiction is to have a character who is unbelievable, and the character's name can make an important difference (2000: 1). In his essay "Mudpies Which Endure," onomastics scholar Leonard R.N. Ashley quipped, "And names are necessary: even Dogpatch's unnecessary mountain has a name (Onnecessary Mountain)" (1987: 28).

Tunnell explained that the process of finding names varies: sometimes a name comes quickly to him and "seems right," but he must "labor" over most of them. Similarly, Crowe commented, "The names I give are not just deliberate choices, they are *very* deliberate choices." These authors seem to be in good company, considering that Cervantes spent four days laboring over a name for Don Quixote's horse before he decided on *Rocinante* (Ashley, 1987: 23).

Scott Nicholson (2000: 2) does not always start with a name that necessarily meets all of his specifications. Having a name to begin with helps him start creating the character; then he can change the name if it does not quite fit the final character. Shannon Hale and Brandon Mull have the same outlook. They agree that names are important, but they like to let names evolve as their characters evolve. Hale commented in her interview that she initially names characters quickly and spontaneously — "the first name that pops into my brain" — assigning everyday names for contemporary novels and made-up names for fantasies. She does not want to spend "first draft energy" on names, but she ends up renaming almost all of her characters "later when I can think about it and make more conscious choices." She added that at times she had lived with a character through two years of rewrites but still changed the name right before going to press. Mull also believes in necessary name change. He affirms that the names have to "portray in a word who that character is"; "they are not minor details." So as the characterization develops for Mull, so does the name. Sometimes he changes the name totally for one that seems to him to be a better fit. Other times he makes gradual changes until it "tastes better."

Accessibility

A common observation in the twenty-first century is that readers want everything easily accessible — especially adolescents. Cynthia VanRooy, a contemporary writer

of novels, explains that names need to be pronounceable by target readers: “They’ll be calling this character by name in their heads as they read [...] Every time the unpronounceable name comes up, the reader will halt, then stumble over it.” She adds that readers will not discuss the book with their friends if they are afraid of mispronouncing the names (2000: 1).

Exotic, foreign, or foreign-sounding names are important to books with exotic settings and particularly important to science fiction and fantasy. Names can be exotic if they are easy to figure out phonetically. Michael Tunnell summed up the challenge: “I’m searching for names that are exotic, but accessible.” However, sometimes Tunnell (and others) violate their own rules. Tunnell named a bad princess *Badr al-Budur*, which means “the full moon of full moons.” He explained, “Even though it was difficult to pronounce, I still chose it because it is so ironic. It is a beautiful name given to a character who is so opposite. It seemed perfect.”

Both Brandon Mull and Shannon Hale help readers tell characters apart by using names with different sounds, particularly at the beginning. Mull attributes this point of emphasis to his own frustration with Tolkien’s *Sauron* and *Saruman* — both evil characters seeking the ring of power. Mull is consistently careful to ensure that his characters’ names begin with different sounds. Hale shared a personal strategy:

I sometimes look at my keyboard until I see a letter that I have not used on other names, and then I start with that letter and start building from there. I try to keep variety — names with different sounds, different endings, different first letters — so the reader can tell them apart.

Characterization

Authors in this study insisted that the name *must* be right for the specific character. Tunnell uses the question “Does it *fit*?” Mull asks, “Does the name *taste* good?” Hale tells herself, “The names just have to *feel* right.” Regardless of the word used to express the need, authors and analysts agree that there can be no incongruity between the character and the name.

Mull remarked during his interview that his goal is for names to fit characters so well that they cannot be separated: “You can’t hear those names without thinking of the character, and no one else would dare use the name for any other character.” He used examples of *Gilligan* (from *Gilligan’s Island*), *Fonzie* (from *Happy Days*), and *Gandalf* (from *Lord of the Rings*). Yvonne Bertills (2003) stated that it is rare for literary characters to be given the names of other literary characters because of recognition and association. She noted that no author after Astrid Lindgren dared use the name Pippi Longstocking. Pippi’s image is indeed vivid and lasting.

Crowe reported that he uses sounds and backgrounds of words in portraying a character. For example, he created a 1950s “white trash” bully named R.C. *Rydell*. It sounded like a hard, tough, rugged name. Crowe noticed by looking through newspapers of the period that uneducated whites would go by their initials to make themselves seem more important. R.C. *Cola* was a popular drink of the period, and *Rydell* was a brand of athletic shoes. Crowe hoped that these name references would bring up images for some of the readers, with associations which, though they might be subconscious, would reinforce R.C. *Rydell*’s characteristics. In a novel he is currently writing, Crowe has named a biracial character *Ashe*. Crowe commented in his interview that he hopes the name will “bring up images of [tennis player] Arthur

Ashe.” He was also interested in the symbolism of ash being gray — a mixture of black and white. The spiritual meaning of the name is particularly important to the character: in one of the African languages, *Ashe* relates to a spirit (as *ha* in the Hawaiian *aloha*).

In addition to fitting the individuals’ personalities and behavior, character names need to fit the time and place in which the characters live. Leonard R.N. Ashley claimed that in studying names “we see words releasing their magic.” He explained that “names help create the characters in a work of fiction and connect them with [...] the readership and its experience, the ‘cultural context’ and the rest of the real frame of reference” (1987: 11–12).

To orient a reader within the cultural frame of reference, names must be congruent with that culture — realistic or fictitious. Bertills asserted, “Proper names are, to some degree, culturally and linguistically specific,” although some of them (e.g. names from the Bible or from history) can be the same across languages and nationalities (2003: 17).

Sources

During his interview, Brandon Mull admitted, “When you have to come up with name after name, you just can’t do it on your own without them sounding alike.” Various authors have favorite sources including news headlines, telephone books, obituaries, and even tombstones. And the Internet seems to be the source of innumerable lists as well as interactive devices known as *name generators*, including “Evil Name Generator,” “Humorous Name Generator,” “Fantasy Name Generator,” and “Pirate Name Generator.”

Brandon Mull indicated that, when he gets frustrated over finding names, he will “turn to lists.” Name lists seem to be popular among writers; a number mention on their websites that these lists are important sources. These writers are in good company: J.K. Rowling took *Gilderoy* from the *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and *Lockhart* from a war memorial. She later said of *Gilderoy Lockhart*, “The two together said everything I wanted about the character” (as qtd. by Frazer, 2000: 39).

Shannon Hale related that for the settings of *Book of a Thousand Days* (2006) and *Princess Academy* (2007) she “used inspiration” from Mongolia and Scandinavia respectively, so she wanted names used in or based on the cultures. She went to the Internet for lists of names and root words from those cultures. For *Book of a Thousand Days* (2006), she created names from Mongolian root words, since Mongolian names tend to be long and potentially confusing for her readers. She gave special attention to the meanings of the words. The narrating character, a servant girl who stays with her mistress while imprisoned in a tower, is *Dashti*, meaning “one who is good luck.” The mistress, who refuses to marry the man of her father’s choice, is *Saran*, meaning “moon.” Other names are *Batu* (“loyal”), *Checheg* (“flower”), *Erdene* (“jewel”), *Chinua* (“wolf”), *Vachir* (“thunderbolt”), and *Khasar* (“terrible dog”). The fairy tale on which the book is based is *The Tale of Maid Maleen*; however, Hale renamed *Maleen* because it sounded too European (Hale, n.d.).

Mull, like Hale, goes to Internet lists of foreign names, even for the inhabitants of *Fablehaven* (2007). Also like Hale, he pays particular attention to what the names mean. Sometimes he tweaks the sounds a bit to make them fit the characters more closely. To get the names he wanted for the *Moon* series (2004), Tunnell spent time

with the history of the ninth-century Arab world. He went through many lists until he found one name that really fit the main character.

Ironically, Orson Scott Card went to history for the name of one of the main characters of his futuristic novel *Ender's Game* — *Mazer Rackham*. Also ironically, the individuals whose names were chosen represented culture, scholarship, and art, though this was to be one of the most brutal, inhuman, and uncultured of the individuals who torment Ender. *Mazer Rackham* sounds brutal. However, Mazer was adapted from Karl G. Maeser, a gentle German scholar who founded Brigham Young University, the institution at which Card worked at the time he wrote *Ender's Game*. The name Rackham was taken from Arthur Rackham, an illustrator of children's books, including fairy tales and Mother Goose rhymes. However, Card admits that as he worked with the name Rackham, the sound of it influenced the development of the character. He did not initially plan for Rackham to be the tormentor, but "I was making the unconscious association of the *Rack* in Rackham with the tortures of the inquisition" (an email message as qtd. by Nilsen and Nilsen, 2007: 98).

In his nonfiction books Chris Crowe did not have to worry about *choosing* names, only finding them. For his historical novel *Mississippi Trial, 1995* (2002), he created many names from the factual names he knew so well. For example, Hillburn, the surname of the sixteen-year-old first-person narrator and his family, commemorates Hillburn School in New York, the setting of a 1943 desegregation case argued by Thurgood Marshall. The boy's given name, Hiram, comes from the first African American elected to the US Senate, Hiram Revels — who happened to come from Mississippi, the setting of the novel. Crowe named Hiram's father, Harlan Hillburn, after John Marshall Harlan, the Supreme Court justice who dissented in the ruling in 1896 that legalized segregation. Hiram's grandfather, the tragically prejudiced man who in the novel has participated in the murder of Till, would never have given his son or grandson these names. Ironically, his name, Earl, comes from Earl Warren, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court who presided at the *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954. Crowe did reserve the right to slip his own family into the novel: Naomi, the girl Hiram likes, is named for Crowe's aunt.

Personal associations

Personal associations were also an important part of name selection for the authors included in this study, and the serendipity behind many of these name choices provides insights about the authors' personalities. Many characters are named after people from the authors' personal lives — family members, friends, or acquaintances who happened to have a useful name. Some character names come from the authors' experiences or interests. Still others have humorous associations or function as a tease or in-group joke between the author and specific readers or friends.

Yvonne Bertills (2003) wrote, "The author's own personal background and intentions form one significant criterion for name formation and selection of literary characters" (46). Authors tend to put some of their lives, preferences, and experiences into their characters' names as well the characters' personalities and actions. Even J.K. Rowling, known for complex and creative name creation, chose *Harry* because it was her favorite boy name and *Potter* because it was the surname of two of her closest childhood friends (as qtd. by Shapiro, 2000: 27).

Brandon Mull has used many names of family members and friends in his books. His sister Summer provided the name for one of the four children who are focal

characters of *The Candy Shop War* (2007a). Kendra, his little sister's best friend, and Seth, his little brother's best friend, are the two children who drink the magic milk that enables them to see and interact with the characters in the Fablehaven preserve. Tanu, the Fablehaven potion master, was named after Mull's cousin; Patton, author of the *Journal of Secrets*, who leads battles to save Fablehaven, has the name of Mull's great-grandfather. In his interview Mull explained that he once used a friend's name by accident. He named a greasy spoon eatery Leslie's Diner without any personal intent and was startled when a friend named Leslie was "put out" because she thought it was named after her.

Tunnell based the names of some of the characters in *School Spirits* (1997) on people from his own school days. The main character, Patrick Meeres, is named for two school associations: Patrick, a third-grade friend, and Meeres, Tunnell's sixth-grade teacher. Nairen, Patrick's friend and helper, was named for one of Tunnell's former classmates. The child ghost in *School Spirits* is named Barnaby Dawe; Dawe was the name of a former principal of Tunnell's school, the school on which he modeled the school in the book.

Hale has written many fantasy novels, but she writes in other genres as well. When she produced *The Actor and the Housewife*, a more realistic adult novel, she said she "named all of the characters after extended family."

In addition to friends and family, the authors' miscellaneous experiences and interests also influence character naming. J.K. Rowling has admitted that she keeps a name list; she loves strange and interesting names, and when she encounters or thinks of one she writes it down. Authors interviewed in our study explained some of the odd and unexpected places they have found very useful names.

Mull found the name John Dart on a tombstone. He thought it was "just a great name," and it became one of the characters in *The Candy Shop War* (2007). Another of his discoveries was Zzyzx, a road between Las Vegas and California. Passing the road sign, he would think to himself, "That has to be the last word possible in the English language. In any alphabetized list it would have to be dead last." When the *Fablehaven* series needed a demon prison, which he considered "the last place on earth that anyone would want to go," Zzyzx seemed to be the perfect name for it. Mull admitted that when he wants a strange name, "sometimes I just talk nonsense until something sounds good, or I start with a familiar word and change endings or beginnings. Sometimes I ask others, like my dad, for weird names."

Crowe sometimes uses his cultural associations in finding names. He named an orphan boy Dickens because Charles Dickens wrote so often about orphans. Crowe chose Arizona, the state in which he grew up, as the home state for the lead character Hiram in *Mississippi Trial, 1995*, who returns at age sixteen to his grandparents' home in Mississippi, where he spent part of his early childhood. Crowe mentioned in his interview that he did not identify Hiram's family's religion in the text, but he gave hints all the way through that Hiram's father was a Mormon (Crowe's own religion, which is fairly prevalent in Arizona). Hiram was the name of a respected African American senator, but it was also the name of Hyrum Smith, a highly respected early Mormon leader.

In *Ender's Game*, Orson Scott Card plays with analogies in the name of his central character. Ender, actually the nickname the character's sister has given him, was intended by Card as an allusion to the *endgame* stage of chess during which very few

pieces remain. However, football fans can interpret it as relating to an *end run*, which is also appropriate to the role of the character (Nilsen and Nilsen, 2007: 91). Games are a unifying theme and symbol in the novel and its sequels.

Sometimes personal humor is involved in creating characters' names. Much of this humor is easily missed if a reader is not alert, lacks some aspects of cultural literacy, or is not acquainted with the background and personality of the author.

Brandon Mull has a private joke with members of his audience who are particularly observant: he gives some of his evil characters names that are *palindromes*, words that are spelled the same way backwards and forwards: e.g. Gorgrog and Orogoro. He does not explain this in the texts; he leaves the scheme for readers to enjoy discovering — if they do. Michael Tunnell also has a private joke with some of his readers. In his extension of *Beauty and the Beast* for child audiences, which he titled *Beauty and the Beastly Children* (1993), he gives the children the names of the three musketeers — Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. Tunnell realizes that young children may not recognize the names, but hopes that some of their parents will. Since *Beauty and the Beast* is a French story, he thought it was fitting to use names from another French tale.

Mull occasionally puts in a very private joke or allusion. He refers to these as “nods to people [...] that only that person would recognize — kind of an inside joke just between us.” For example, he and one of his friends often exchange the quip “You don't have a leg to stand on.” So when Mull created a character without legs for an upcoming book, he gave this character the name of his friend. Mull commented, “I have not even told him. I am going to wait till he reads the book and see if he gets it. I'm going to be waiting for his call.”

J.K. Rowling creates layers of meaning in the names of her characters. The characters with whom she plans for children to identify are given fairly easily accessible names: the focal trio are Harry, Ron, and Hermione, and the Weasley family adds Arthur, Molly, Bill, Percy, Fred, George, and Ginny, referred to by Nilsen and Nilsen (2009) as “relatively ordinary names.” The trio's amusing friends/helpers Neville Longbottom and Luna Lovegood add a little humor in name as well as personality and social awkwardness. But when the group gets to Hogwarts, they find the name of the school to be only the beginning of fantastic and clever names. Professors and creative characters have names which allow children to laugh at the funny sounds, while more sophisticated adults chuckle at classical and mythological allusions. Rowling uses so many classical Greek and Roman names that a book chapter was entitled “Harry Potter and the Horrors of the Oresteia” (Mills, 2009). Among the easiest to identify are *Minerva* McGonagall, the *wise* professor who heads the Gryffindor House, named for the Roman goddess of wisdom; *Serius* Black, who can turn into a black dog and is named for the “dog star”; Remus Lupin, the werewolf, named for Remus, one of the wolf-suckled founders of Rome, and Lupin, the Latin word meaning *wolflike*; and Nymphadora Tonks, the very unnymphlike warrior witch (see Nilsen and Nilsen, 2009). These are only a few examples.

Conclusions

There are, of course, many ways that authors choose character names and many considerations for determining whether the names “fit” or “taste right” for the

character. In this study it was found that, underlying the specifics, these authors used a lot of sensible sources, such as appropriate period information and extensive name lists, and some serendipity, such as tombstones and road signs. While each theme that emerged could be examined in greater depth, the purpose of this article was to present an overview of how authors of fiction for children and adolescents choose character names. In general, all authors consulted in both interview and print sources affirmed the importance of choosing character names, although two of the interviewed authors mentioned that sometimes they quickly choose temporary names and allow the final names to emerge as the characters evolve.

Both interviews and published sources revealed that authors are concerned that character names are accessible to readers so that individual characters stand out as distinct and easy to remember, particularly in series that will bring them back in subsequent stories. In fantasies, authors wanted the names similar enough within each country or culture to reflect cultural characteristics but distinct enough to avoid confusion. In realistic stories, they chose names common for the setting of the book. Authors avoided names with similar sounds, particularly at the beginning of words.

Most of the authors and analysts consulted said or wrote that for them the most important criterion for name choice is that the name be well suited to the individual character, that it represent aspects including personality, values, general conduct, specific actions, motivations, relationships, etc., in addition to appearance, mannerisms, and effects on other characters. Besides fitting the characters individually, names need to be appropriate for the time period and geographic location of the book — realistic, futuristic, or imaginary.

Authors sometimes find it daunting to think of large numbers of names meeting the criteria they would impose on themselves, so they indicated going to sources including Internet lists of names from various countries and cultures, names popular during specific time periods, names with specified meanings, and even “name generators” to help them in the selection process. Some used their knowledge of history, cultures, and literature to add layers of meaning to names.

Authors tend to use names that have personal associations for them. Many have used names of family members and friends as well as names they encountered in sensible and serendipitous experiences. Some names even represent personal humor or jokes, and an author might expect a call from a friend whose name has been chosen to represent something the individual would not have anticipated.

As Shannon Hale remarked in her interview: “So many names! Many of my books have dozens of characters, and it can be a challenge to keep them all straight.” For readers, keeping names straight can be equally challenging. But as readers learn more about how authors choose character names, this knowledge can enable them to read with greater engagement, appreciation, understanding, and passion.

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