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The Uncanny Unnamable in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child* and *Ben, in the World*

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In *The Fifth Child* and *Ben, in the World*, Nobel Laureate Doris Lessing creates a character whose naming attempts to socialize the unsocializable. In the first novel, Harriet and David Lovatt raise four edenic children, until the birth of Ben, their atavistic son. Exiled, Ben reappears as the sequel's title character, a monstrous throwback searching the globe for home. Among a multitude of biblical and traditional given names, a surname that requires the family to "love it," and a world of modern and ancient place names, Lessing's onomastic choices underscore her themes of identity and belonging.

KEYWORDS Doris Lessing, *The Fifth Child*, *Ben, in the World*

Doris Lessing earns her reputation for social fiction by posing a pivotal question: what are the limits of human belonging? In *The Fifth Child* (1988) and its sequel, *Ben, in the World* (2000), she confronts this question in the unsettling character of Ben Lovatt. The two novels provide Ben with a name and a life story; they propel him from home into the wider world; they compel readers to ask who he is and where he fits. In two economical works, a total of 311 pages, Lessing thus encapsulates the thematic core of her sixty-year writing career. Her canny use of personal and place names in Ben's uncanny tale underscores her message and, at a fundamental level, reminds her audience that naming is an entirely human prerogative.

Not just in these paired texts but across her series-rich corpus, readers delight in connections that weave into a whole what Lessing calls "just one book" (Rege, 1999: 122). Shrewd onomastic linkages, as Claire Sprague early recognizes, define a subtle, pervasive unifying strategy (1987: 5–6). In Ben's history, interwoven names reinforce meaning not only in helping to define characters but also in suggesting, by inverse proportion, the thematic importance of person and place. The first novel, with its familial focus, names three dozen figures in the Lovatt circle but references only a single city, London. The sequel, tracing Ben's exodus from society, names just fifteen

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characters but follows him through five countries, to ports and villages ever farther from his family roots and successively more dehumanizing. Throughout, the aptness of Lessing's name choices calls attention to Ben's problematic essence, the unresolvable questions of origin, identity, and destiny that he poses.

The Fifth Child

Families shape the core of human society, and *The Fifth Child* opens with two names that will become the parental unit: "Harriet and David met each other at an office party neither had particularly wanted to go to, and both knew at once that this was what they had been waiting for."[1] Given pride of place and origin is Harriet. To claim her for England and hint at her power, Lessing bestows on the wife- and mother-to-be a kingly name, from the French *Henriette*, feminine diminutive of *Henri*. The French originates in the Germanic *Heinrich*, from *haim* "home" and *rīc* "power" or "ruler," and as matriarch Harriet will rule the home they create (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 108, 110).[2] David, meanwhile, bears the name of a great king of Israel and, closer to home, two kings of Scotland and the patron saint of Wales. Patrick Hanks and Flavia Hodges offer a possible origin for his name in the affectionate address to a child, "darling," and beloved David certainly will be, adored by wife and children (2001: 61).

The new couple find a perfect home in an idyllic garden suburb of London, and four children rapidly arrive. All are named within the Christian tradition, beginning with Luke, after the evangelist with the post-classical Greek name, and Helen, after the legendary Trojan beauty and the sainted third-century mother of Constantine, the woman credited with rediscovering the cross of Jesus's crucifixion.[3] Next is Jane, the feminine, Anglicized form of the Old French *Je(h)anne* for John, another Gospel-writer and "beloved disciple." A second son follows, Paul, the name taken by Saul of Tarsus, destined for martyrdom. From the Latin *Paulus*, originally a nickname for "small," this name marks the child whose emotional development will be arrested following the birth of his younger brother (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 156, 110, 123, 192).

These four are the proper offspring of Harriet and David, who believe themselves capable of creating the ideal society in miniature. One after the next, their exemplary children are conceived and born into the heart of the family, in sentences that pay as much attention to birth order as to name. "The first baby, Luke, was born in the big bed" late in 1966 (*FC*, 17). "The second child, Helen, was born, like Luke, in the family bed" (*FC*, 20). "Jane was born in 1970, when Helen was two" (*FC*, 21). "The fourth baby, Paul, was born in 1973" (*FC*, 22). Four children in seven years, within the space of six pages, warm the Lovatt hearth. They generate, the novel's limited omniscient narrator suggests, what Harriet and David dare to expect: "Happiness. A happy family. The Lovatts were a happy family. It was what they had chosen and what they deserved" (*FC*, 21). The family has grown in adult membership, too, and by now includes Harriet's mother, Dorothy, from the Greek *dōron* "gift" and *theos* "god," a self-sacrificing woman whose live-in help provides a much needed gift in kind (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 69).[4] Meanwhile, the reader, anticipating that fifth child, wonders at what irony or self-gratification the repetitions of "happy" might hint.

Even in a happy family, of course, four children require prodigious upkeep, and Lessing's social subtext makes clear that David's family contributes more than Harriet's. He is a Lovatt, from the Old English *lufu* "love," and regularly prompted checks from his prodigal father James, with the royal Stewart name, sustain the clan (Reaney, 1997: 285). Remarried to Jessica, carrying a name that Shakespeare coined for Shylock's daughter in *The Merchant of Venice*, James, with his alliterative wife, supplements the income by which David, an architect, shelters his family (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 127). David maintains closer ties, though, with his mother Molly, whose name is a pet form of Mary, the archetypal Christian mother, and her husband Frederick, an Oxford don with a name, from the Germanic *fred/frid* "peace" and *rīc* "power" or "ruler," that suggests a tranquil form of rule (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 175, 92).[5] With her marriage, Molly assumes his Irish surname, Burke, so that among them the extended Lovatt family carry names representing every country in the United Kingdom.

Harriet's family name, Walker, first arises during a discussion of household finances. An occupational surname, it derives from Old English *wealcere* "fuller," from the practice of fulling cloth by beating or walking on it in troughs of water (Reaney, 1997: 473). It and the related name *Tucker*, from the Old English *tūcian* "torment," were regional, with Walkers in the north and west of England and Tuckers in the southwest; *Fuller*, the French form, originated in the southeast but became ubiquitous (Reaney, 1997: 179). The Walkers, then, are the pedestrian, work-bound side of the family, members of a universal labor force that promotes a modern capitalistic economy. Blended, the Lovatts and Walkers embody the English middle class in a supposedly typical if overly optimistic family, determined that their traditional values can protect them from the murders and mayhem that intrude on their edenic haven only during the nightly news.

Soon, however, this home will be invaded from within, in the disturbing plotline of what Margaret Moan Rowe casts as a novel of "domestic terrorism" (1994: 103).[6] Harriet's fifth pregnancy frightens her. She warns David that "this new foetus was poisoning her" (*FC*, 32), "trying to tear its way out of her stomach" (*FC*, 38). Pummeled from within by heels and fists, she fears "this creature with whom she was locked in a struggle to survive" (*FC*, 42). At eight months he arrives, eleven pounds in weight, with a sloped forehead and thatch of blond hair. "He's a funny little chap," David puzzles aloud (*FC*, 48); "[h]e's like a troll, or a goblin or something," worries Harriet (*FC*, 49). She names him summarily:

> "We are going to call him Ben," said Harriet.
> "Are we?" said David.
> "Yes, it suits him." (*FC*, 50)

Indeed, the ambiguous name does. Might she intend it as a clipped form of *Benedict*, to identify the newest Lovatt as "blessed," from the Latin *Benedictus*, from *bene* and *dicere* "to bless," name of the venerated founder of the Benedictine order (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 23; *OED*, 1989)? More aptly, it would be short for the Hebrew *Benjamin*, the youngest of the twelve sons of Jacob, whose wife Rachel died in birthing and naming him, with the patronymic combinative *ben*, *Benoni* "son of my sorrow." Jacob, to avoid an ill nomen-omen, renamed him *Benyamin* "son of

the right hand" or "son of the south," his only child born in Canaan. An alternate derivation suggests *yamin* "days" or by extension "years," that is, "son of [my] old age." In the Middle Ages, babies whose mothers died in childbirth were often called Benjamin (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 23). In Lessing's twentieth-first-century fiction, this monstrously hairy giant, grown too fast into a Goliath, will test his father David's ability to "love it." A mutant mix of genes, preternaturally strong, unnervingly mature, perturbingly asocial, Ben is, in Harriet's own words, a "Neanderthal baby." Not even she knows what to call him. "*What* is he?" she demands of David, mute before the implications (*FC*, 53). Within six months, they recognize that "he was going to destroy their family life" (*FC*, 59). Scarcely out of infancy, he leaves in his wake a dead cat, a dead dog, the bloody carcass of a raw chicken, and two-year-old Paul, his older brother, with a sprained arm (*FC*, 62, 97, 58).

Thus Ben is named, but barely. Delayed in speech, he recognizes his own name but never uses anyone else's in direct address. Slow to master pronouns, he names himself in repeated third-person references: "Ben get down now. Ben wants to go to bed" (*FC*, 95). Often this becomes "Poor Ben," evidence that he has internalized ambient opinion (*FC*, 97). Harriet, meanwhile, recognizes in his name a forcible socializing tool for a son who arouses in her as much dread as love. More than any other character, she uses his name. In her mouth, "Ben," that one syllable patronymic, carries the force of a matronymic, exerting its strength not just on him but on her. With his name, she overcomes an instinctive fear one day when she finds him crouched, ready to spring from a dark corner of the attic:

> "Ben," she said softly, though her voice shook. "Ben . . ." [*sic*] putting into the word her human claim on him, and on this wild dangerous attic where he had gone back into a far-away past that did not know human beings (*FC*, 116).

The given name, emblem of family belonging, ties him to her and to rest of the race.

Over against the collective need of husband and family, Harriet stakes all on the mother-son bond. In an event that crucially redefines her character, she is temporarily persuaded to place Ben in an institution but, racked with guilt, resolves to bring him home. Lessing plays out the results of this agonized choice in a counterpoint of named and unnamed elements across eleven pages, the longest single episode of the novel. Setting out under bleak winter rain, Harriet drives for hours to an address in the geographically indistinct "North of England" (*FC*, 78). "I'm Mrs Lovatt and I've come to see my son," she declares to the nameless young woman who answers the door of "the place" (*FC*, 78–79). "I am here to see my son Ben Lovatt," she insists to the unnamed white-coated man fetched to dissuade her; "I'm Ben Lovatt's mother" (*FC*, 80). The only authority these two invoke for Ben's care "isn't here this week," a Dr MacPherson, from the Gaelic "son of the parson," the missing spiritual, healing presence (*FC*, 79; Reaney, 1997: 293). Nameless or absent is every social authority, exposed before the determined presence of a mother who announces the reclamation of her son by repeated conjunction of her name with his.

Through a ward of anonymous "monsters," every bed cradling "an infant or small child in whom the human template had been wrenched out of pattern," Harriet follows the two attendants, until they reach Ben, clean him, re-inject him with sedatives, and bundle him into his straitjacket for the ride home (*FC*, 81). She carries the swaddled Ben in to the waiting family: "Luke. Helen. Jane. Little Paul. And

David, his face set and angry" (*FC*, 86). Her mental roll call tallies, by name, their unanimous resentment; she has chosen this fifth child over them. As Debrah Raschke notes in her sympathetic reading of Harriet's character, the buoyant, even smug, young wife of the novel's opening pages has matured into a mother willing to take a lonely stand with the child who needs her most (2009: 16).

If Ben is the inexplicable genetic anomaly, the unique birth, then Lessing's extra-familial characters and the places they inhabit are representative types. They carry only surnames, like Dr Brett, Harriet's obstetrician, and Mrs Graves, the headmistress at Ben's school, or are invoked by occupation, like the policewoman who brings him home one day. Hopelessly inadequate, these medical, educational, and social agents, whom the narrator calls "the Authorities" as if they constituted a proper noun, speak from obscure, unnamed sites of power (*FC*, 97).[7] Except for London, the center of commerce and crime where Harriet and David pointedly refuse to raise their family, the nation's toponymy is evoked only by indirection. The Lovatts' small town remains unspecified, in a way that both cloaks it and makes it emblematic, much like the shadowy "valley high among the moors" that hides the cheerless establishment where Ben is sent (*FC*, 78). A Ben could appear anywhere, they proclaim, in any family, any town, any institution. No matter where, no one would know what to do with him; everyone would question what he was and where he belonged.

By the end of *The Fifth Child*, it is apparent that Ben does not belong with the Lovatts. In what Ellen Pifer calls "Lessing's subversion of the pastoral," the imagined family paradise has imploded (*FC*, 123). Still in school, Ben finds an unlikely affiliation with local teens, initiated after "a youth called John," hired for yardwork, inspires a fierce attachment (*FC*, 91). When John departs for a job in the city, Ben tags after a loose gang that offers him contested membership under nicknames like "Dopey, Dwarfey, Alien Two, Hobbit, and Gremlin" (*FC*, 94). The older Lovatt children away at boarding schools, only Paul left unhappily behind, Ben is more at home on the streets. His new mates test the limits of social authority and the Lovatt budget, which they charge for petrol and provisions on their motorbike excursions. With the false familiarity and pseudo-anonymity of petty delinquents, they carry not a family name among them: Derek, from *Theodoric*, subtly akin to Ben's working-class grandmother Dorothy; Billy, diminutive of *William* rebaptized from Germanic to Old French and then from English to Gaelic; Elvis, after the American Presley whose international popularity and 1977 death inspired waves of namesakes; Vic, with a touch of Lessing's trademark irony, from the Latin *victor*; and John, their precursor, the perennially most common male Christian given name (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 64, 25–26, 250, 79, 245, 130). Among these ill-defined inhabitants of postmodern urban fens, the anomalous Ben is both lost and found.

Launching Ben into the world, a prescient Lessing closes *The Fifth Child* with a sentence that names Berlin, Madrid, Los Angeles, and Buenos Aires.[8] Harriet muses that her son could simply "disappear into any number of the world's great cities," where she might catch sight of him one day on the television news, lost in the crowd of some metropolis (*FC* 132). The despoiled Lovatt garden will meet urban gothic in the person of Ben. In a second book that will be marked, unlike the first, by distinct place names, the hyper-outsider will become the picaresque anti-hero of his own short future.[9]

Ben, in the World

A distinct reversal in authorial tone is evident when Lessing returns to Ben's tale twelve years after *The Fifth Child*. Throughout the first part of his story, he is the savage invader; by the second, he is the victim of a savage society. Inverting the usual association of youth with innocence, predator child becomes adult prey. Lessing herself describes the works in radically different terms. In 1988 she says of *The Fifth Child*, "I hated writing it. It was sweating blood [. . .]. It was an upsetting thing to write — obviously, it goes very deep into me somewhere" (Rothstein, 1988). In 1992 she repeats, "It certainly came out of a very murky layer in my unconscious" (Upchurch, 1994: 222). By 2000, however, when she discusses the newly published *Ben, in the World*, her sense of alienation has given way to sympathy for a character who "cannot cope with the modern world," an evolutionary outcast too often "victimized and exploited," too seldom "looked after by people with kind hearts" (Doris Lessing: A Retrospective, 2000). "I find Ben an infinitely pitiable figure," she declares, adding that she found writing the second novel "very sad" but less painful than the first ("Doris Lessing").

Response to the texts has differed as widely as Lessing's outlook, *The Fifth Child* far eclipsing *Ben, in the World* in both popularity and critical acclaim.[10] Yet regardless of scholarly opinion, the second novel is no less perceptive than the first in its use of names. Again, felicitous name choices help round character types, while two additional onomastic strategies call attention to Ben's incurable isolation. First, formal documents that confirm name and identity become totemic items, and, second, a thick trail of place names maps the novel's central action, a forlorn quest for belonging that begins in exploitation and ends in liberation.

Lost to his family by mutual exile at the end of *The Fifth Child*, Ben finds his way to London after a lapse of four years' narrative time. As the sequel opens, an exasperated clerk turns Ben out of a public benefits office because he can produce nothing to confirm his name, birthplace, or date of birth. True, his mother has written a card that begins "Your name is Ben Lovatt. Your mother's name is Harriet Lovatt. Your father's name is David Lovatt. You have four brothers and sisters, Luke, Helen, Jane, and Paul."[11] However, enraged by siblings who deny him a place at table, he has scribbled out their names, beginning with the hated Paul, and then every remaining line. Even unspoiled, however, the homespun informality of his mother's name-laced card would hardly suffice. Unmoored to any official identity record, Ben is the domestic undocumented alien.

Eighteen and penniless, he has worked two years on property owned by the ragged Grindly family. With a name derived from the more patently agrarian "Greenley," they are worn down by the daily grind, eking a living as their farm is swallowed up by the city (Reaney, 1997: 205).[12] Now alone in London, Ben knows brief comfort in the care of Mrs Biggs, a big-hearted old woman who feeds him from her pension before dying of cardiac failure; her first name, Ellen, a variant of *Helen*, aligns her with his elder sister (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 78). He finds sexual companionship in Rita, associated with the Old French *Marguerite*, cognate of the Greek μάργαρος "pearl," a prostitute whose name and compassion recall Harriet, his mother (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 162, 206, 57; *OED*, 1989). Reet, with the throaty nickname spelled phonetically in dialogue, ultimately sacrifices Ben to the needs of her protector,

Johnston. The stem of his surname, "John," since the thirteenth century one of the most popular masculine given names in English, universalizes him, while its second syllable, from the Old English *tuun* or *tún* "enclosed place or piece of ground," the etymological root of *town*, localizes him (Galbi, 2002; *OED*, 1989).[13] Here again, Lessing onomastically identifies her characters as types: the struggling worker of the land, the kind but destitute neighbor, the tart with a heart, the common john — or pimp — as common man. Consigned to like margins, Ben roams the London underworld in their circuit.

The world he knows is a fearful place, indecipherable and largely unnamed. In the first novel, he (likewise the reader) learns the names of those in his family but never the name of his town. In the sequel, when Mrs Biggs prods him to go ask his mother for his birth certificate, he must travel by instinct since he cannot read names on a map. Returning empty-handed, he falls prey to Johnston, who uses the promise of a forged passport, that identity card with an international option, to lure him into criminal trade. The forgery restores, almost produces, his name and citizenship. "He was Ben Lovatt, and he belonged to Great Britain," the narrator pronounces. "Now he felt as if arms had been put around him" (*BW*, 45). The hope of belonging, though, is as spurious as the document's provenance and its claims, his age doubled to account for his adult appearance and his occupation reported, glamorously, as "film actor" (*BW*, 44).

From London, Johnston sends Ben to Nice as unwitting go-between in a drug exchange. There he catches the attention of an American filmmaker, Alex Beyle, whose name suggests his inflated self-image by allusion to Alexander the Great and Marie Henri Beyle, arch satirist of human behavior. The surname he shares with Stendhal is a slant homophone for *Biehl* and *Beil*, occupational names from the German *bil* "hatchet" or "axe" ("biehl surname"). Alex sees in the hairy, half-socialized Ben the glimmer of a plotline amid rainforest natives wielding primitive tools and confounded by the modern world. When Alex drags him from Europe to South America, Ben searches the crowds by night, cowers by day from eye-splitting sunlight, and everywhere fights his primitive urges. At the mercy of his handlers, he has one wish: "I want to go home, he [repeats], silently, in his head. Home, home" (*BW*, 92).

Congenitally homeless, though, he has nowhere to go. From the margins of a family on the margins of a capital, he drifts along an aimless journey, where even named locations come to typify rather than specify: Nice, city of predators; Frankfurt, hub of finance; Rio de Janeiro, pit of poverty. Among foreign cultures, he loses the advantage of language and, with increasing incomprehension, becomes less agent than victim in his own life. In a balance Lessing clearly tips, his exploiters, presuming to represent social good, advance their personal gain, while his protectors can muster scant power to defend him.

If Lessing's *Canopus* series seeks a utopian future, *Ben, in the World* portrays science, not favorably, in search of the past. In Rio, biologists from an anonymous "department in the laboratory" conspire to examine Ben (*BW*, 121). His atavistic phenotype fascinates, first, the self-important Luiz Machado. Luiz, from the Germanic *hlud* "fame" and *wīg* "warrior," cloaks both his desire for fame and the ruthlessness with which he, even more than the grasping Beyle, pursues it, made explicit by his surname, the Portuguese "hatchet" (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 154; *Behind the Name: Surnames*). He introduces a colleague, Professor Stephen Gaumlach

"from some famous institute in the States," with a name twice mistaken, as "Gumlack" and "Goonlach" (*BW*, 135). His given name, from the Greek στέφανος "garland" or "crown," aligns him with Machado's drive for recognition, while the unsavory, guttural surname permutations of this "world authority" implicate the international scientific community (*BW*, 137; Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 227).[14]

Against these traitors to intellect and progress stand Teresa Alves and Alfredo, whose histories draw them from their villages to the slums of Rio, where the need to defend Ben brings them together. Teresa bears the name of the Spanish mystic whose heart was pierced by divine love and a surname derived from the given name *Álvaro*, from the staunch Germanic *Alfher*, from *ælf* "elf" or "supernatural being" and *hari* "warrior" (*Behind the Name: Surnames*; *Behind the Name: First Names*). Alfredo, lacking a surname in the text, is tied by given name to royalty, to the scholarly ninth-century Alfred the Great, from the Old English *Ælfred*, that is, *ælf* and *ræd* "counsel" (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 7). By the initial *ælf*, even with the unmatched fricatives that follow, Lessing establishes two key linkages. First, she allies Teresa Alves and Alfredo with the uncanny heritage of the gnomic, chthonic Ben. Simultaneously, because they share that syllable with each other, she telegraphs onomastically the information she gives in a proleptic aside, the happy future that will unite them as husband and wife (*BW*, 134).

Names are one of the few social markers that Teresa possesses, and she is keenly attuned to the imbalances in relationship that inflect their use. When Machado introduces Gaumlach and the professor presumes the familiarity of her first name, she cuts in, "My name is Teresa Alves," so that he immediately shifts to the formal "Miss Alves." For Ben, too, she insists on the deference implicit in a full name: "Ben Lovatt. His name is Ben Lovatt" (*BW*, 136). Her defense when the scientists plan their grotesque experiments rests on his official identity: "Ben must decide for himself. [. . .] Ben has his own passport [. . .]. He is a person of Britain" (*BW*, 137). Her argument will fail, of course, and she and Alfredo, with a friend named Antonio, after the patron saint of lost things, will have to find Ben and release him from "The Cages" of the biologists' research laboratory, much like his mother had rescued him as a child (*BW*, 142).

While Teresa lacks all advantage against two men of science, she knows that, among equals, names can seal the most powerful of bonds. On the night they free Ben, she spells out her dreams in terms of an iconic name document. "One day I want a real passport," she says to Alfredo. Instantly responsive, he folds paper into the shape of a small book and takes up a pen:

> "Name?" demanded Alfredo, like an official.
> "Teresa Alves" [. . .].
> "What's the name of your village?"
> "The same as yours. Dust village, dust province, dust country. But it was Aljeco." (*BW*, 150–151)

So the interview continues, on one level the impersonal chain of personal and place names that fix a citizen's official identity, on another the delicate exchange of history that unites two lives. Finally, a chivalrous Alfredo:

> hand[s] the little package of folded paper to Teresa with a bow. "Your passport, Dona Teresa" (*BW*, 151).

Immediately after the effort that delivered Ben, naked and terrified, from The Cages, this light-hearted interlude appears an ill-timed variation of "boy gets girl" played out in questions and answers. As reverse after-image of every dehumanizing maltreatment that Ben has suffered, however, from the exchange that turns him away in the novel's opening scene to the degradations of animal research, it vividly underscores Lessing's theme, the universal human claim to identity, intimacy, and hope.

Exhausted and bereft, Ben, by the closing pages of his story, has just one hope left, founded on a chance remark by Alfredo, that he has seen people like him. As Lessing notes, it is at this point that "we realize just how desperately lonely this poor creature is, because he goes mad with joy" (Conversation, 2000). "Will you take me to them?" he begs, and, too late, neither Alfredo nor Teresa can admit that the sighting has been frozen in prehistory (*BW*, 127). Instead, in a tumble of international toponymy, they whisk Ben from Rio to São Paulo, then to Paraguay and Argentina, to the tiny airport near the giant mines at Humahuaca, finally to the tobacco plantations of Jujuy and from there, on foot, up into the Andes.[15] This mission, however, like the one that rescued him from the lab, promises a freedom that Ben will never know. In the land of nameless pre-Columbian tribes, towering peaks hide painted relics of "Ben's people," among whom, in a final human act, he chooses to die (*BW*, 175). With them as witnesses, after a night spent singing to the stars, near an unmapped sunlit cliff made sacred by ancient etchings from rituals long past, Ben will claim a home forever.

Denied a place in the human family, Ben can be named but cannot name; a throwback lost in time, he cannot find his place on the modern map. In naming him and the other players in his tale, in orienting them toponymically, Lessing reminds readers that names are crucial markers of personal and political identity. Slippery constructs, they forever elude the liminal, unassimilable Ben. His story, Lessing's extreme case, confirms the role of names in conferring dignity, anchoring each person to the known world, and rescuing even the most marginal from anonymity.

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Notes

[1] Lessing, 1988: 3. Subsequent citations are noted in the text.

[2] Ruth Robbins discusses another central role for Harriet, as focal point in the novel's third-person narration (2009: 97–98).

[3] Like her father, Helen carries a name of uncertain etymology, possibly "sunbeam" from *hēlios* "sun." The popularity of *Helen* in England dates to the Middle Ages, when it was thought that St Helen had been born in Britain, and establishes the Lovatts' daughter in the national tradition (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 110).

[4] A widowed cousin of Frederick's lends a hand for some months too, Alice, whose name, an early variant of *Adelaide* (<Old Ger *adal* "noble" + *heid* "kind" or "sort") popular in nineteenth-century England, lent a bit of nobility to her peevish help (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 7, 3).

[5] The name *Frederick* arrived in England through Norman French but fell into disuse until its reintroduction with George I, when the popularity of German names revived during the Victorian age (Hanks and Hodges, 2001: 92). Critics identify a central motif of *The Fifth Child* in the contrast between traditional Victorian ideologies, conjured in Harriet and David's sentimental family fiction, and the tensions of the diverse postmodern world; see Debrah Raschke (2009: 15), Jean Pickering (1990: 192), Margaret Moan Rowe (1994: 103).

[6] Gayle Greene defines the Lovatts' fifth child as "an invader not from outer space or from the lower classes [. . .], but from the womb" (1994: 222). Roberta Rubenstein calls him "Lessing's darkest and most transgressive child character" (2009: 72).

[7] Rowe argues that Lessing finds social agencies not callous but overwhelmed and incapable of their task (1994: 96).

[8] Although Lessing mentions the likelihood of a sequel as early as 1988, when the first novel was published, there is no indication in *The Fifth Child* that she planned to extend Ben's story (Rothstein, 1988). She suggests in 2000 that the sequel was prompted by her German publisher, based on the success of the first novel (Conversation, 2000).

[9] Susan Watkins identifies urban gothic and picaresque among the "minor genres" that Lessing takes up in her late twentieth-century fiction (2010: 153).

[10] Scholarship since 2000 consistently slights the sequel for its predecessor. Rubenstein, for example, includes only three sentences on *Ben, in the World* (2009: 72), while Watkins, who allows it two paragraphs, notes that it "is more often seen as inferior" (2010: 151).

[11] Lessing, 2000: 2. Subsequent citations are noted in the text.

[12] The author thanks the anonymous reviewer who pointed out the Dickensian flavor of *Grindly*, with its stem "grind."

[13] Here again the author thanks the anonymous reviewer who provided the interpretation. Reaney, alternatively, construes *Johnston* as "son of John," with an intrusive *t*, an interpretation that reinforces the English genealogy of the character (1997: 256).

[14] In addition to the explicit *gum*, *goon*, and *lack*, the syllables of Gaumlach's name and its mispronunciations invoke associations with *gaumen* (Ger.) "roof of the mouth," *leech* via *lach* (Ger.), and *gomolka* (Pol.), a type of cheese (*Behind the Name: Surnames*).

[15] The peripatetic Lessing declares of her own visit to the Argentine Andes, "It's very beautiful [. . .]. And the air is so clear that you can see miles of the sky at night [. . .]. I adored that" (Upchurch, 1994: 219).

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