

Book Review

The Name Therapist: How Growing Up with My Odd Name Taught Me Everything You Need to Know about Yours. By DUANA TAHA. Toronto: Random House Canada. 2016. Pp. 360. \$32.00. ISBN 978-0-345-81530-9.

The next birthday gift for Duana Taha, the author of *The Name Therapist*, should be membership in the American Name Society (ANS). While not a scholarly endeavor, this book is written by a name-obsessed (and self-titled) name therapist, “giving straight talk baby-and-grown-up-name advice to just about everyone,” as stated in a public relations insert in my copy. Taha’s enthusiasm will be recognizable to any *Names* reader, although her anecdotal tales, subjective claims, and lack of scholarly sources will frustrate some.

The first line draws us in: “I love names” (1). Taha is still getting over the head-scratching *Duana* (pronounced Dew-ANN-ah) that she was given by her Irish mother and Egyptian father. We feel her name pain: all those mispronunciations, mishearings, and misspellings; problems ordering at Starbucks; and dearth of *Duana* pens, key chains, and hairbrushes at novelty stores. Interestingly, though, Taha veers between bemoaning her onomastic burden and urging her clientele (who mainly comprise expectant mothers) to skip *Michael* and *Jennifer* and go for *Clive* or *Daphne*: “[T]he world doesn’t need another Elizabeth” (12). (I didn’t know we had maxed out.) This book is admittedly a view of names filtered through personal experience, especially that of a white, middle-class, North American female, coming of age in the 1980s (Taha having grown up in Canada).

I must admit that it took me a while to warm up to this book. Many times, I had to resist the impulse to write in the margin: “data?” or “cite?” Taha declares: “I refuse to allow [names] to be seen as ‘soft science’ any more” (6), but the word *onomastics* does not appear until page 225, *linguistics* not until page 276. The academic approach, however, is not in the spirit of this book. It is about real people who see names as “traditional” or “wacky” through gut feelings and personal associations. *Esthers* are competent; *Tylers* are popular. Taha’s first *Tracy* wore a cape, “and since then, all the Tracys I’ve known have had a flair for the dramatic” (141).

Because of this anecdotal approach, Taha’s message is contradictory. She says that children, especially today, do not distinguish traditional from exotic names, and yet “even as we grow more and more culturally diverse in North America, the swath of names that are ‘acceptable’ in the general population is very narrow [...] [W]hat constitutes a ‘normal’ name doesn’t expand” (87). She advocates for more “Vikram and Dagny and Rakim and Sugeewa” (116) in the world, but when there is no *Vikram* souvenir license plate or *Sugeewa* key chain — the very objects that bestow “social endorsement” (309) — aren’t these youngsters being told they do not belong?

When Taha cites sources, they are either blogs, baby name books, input from her clients, interviews she conducted with people she grew up with, or encounters on data-gathering trips. Taha has chosen to make a career offering a service that is much in demand in spite of her not having an academic background. Says Taha: “[M]y name knowledge went from a nerdy pastime to a vocation it seemed I’d been in training for all my life” (11). She does acknowledge that she has “limited credentials,” although the main limit she cites is not yet being a parent (12). Her clients most likely do not read the scholarly literature anyway. They are anxious parents, sweating over lists of names for their future offspring, more worried about what an ill-chosen name would say about them as parents than about their son or daughter.

But this is a book about names! I enjoyed the rant about “the behemoth that was the name ‘Jennifer’” during Taha’s teen years, but can we really blame *Love Story* alone for that one, as Taha does (35)? Here arises that contradiction again: Taha seems to be saying that the sameness (burden) of being a *Jennifer* and the entitlement (benefit) it bestows, the “collective sense of place in the world,” can co-exist, but not in the same chapter apparently (143). Amid Taha’s eclecticism, I enjoyed the appendix material: “The Unlikeliest Names in Songs” and “The Ongoing Issue of Gaelic Spellings” (although I was, prior to her book, unaware of this heated issue). I especially enjoyed a section on pet names — “‘Ezra’ on a dog won’t raise eyebrows the way ‘Lord Chaunceleroy’ might on a human” (137) — and her impromptu quiz: “In the family of ‘Rowan, Eli, and Flora,’ guess who is the child and who is the pet” (137).

There were laugh-out-loud moments: Taha travels to Park Slope, Brooklyn, and encounters “Franklin and Emmeline and Dorothy and Joel and Evelyn,” a situation she perfectly describes as “[e]very name you think you heard at your grandparents’ retirement community” (268). And some sad moments: parents who were blindsided after Harper Lee published her second book and tarnished the name *Atticus* for them forever. Yes, children’s names — currently being used by real people — were changed because of that book.

Many enticing passages left me longing for more: the connection between names and socioeconomic status; names and race; the process of taking one’s saint name; those who go by their middle names; proper ways to get a nickname; changing names in adulthood; African and Ashkenazi Jewish naming traditions; decisions to Anglicize (or not) foreign-sounding names; and names and gender, especially in the transgender population. These categories would have suited me better as chapter headings than the book’s actual organization, which I still have not figured out since one chapter seemed very similar in theme to the next.

Crucially, the book could have offered a more urgent message about linguistic profiling: *Shelica* doesn’t get a callback after a job interview, but *Shelley* does. Taha only alludes to countries with name laws and notes, for example, that you cannot just name a child anything in Germany. I was alarmed by teachers’ reactions to certain names on their class rosters. Says one that Taha interviews: “Lucas is a weirdo. I’m sorry. Every time,” and “Daniels are going to [...] ‘Wind up on the six o’clock news [...] [w]ith body parts’” (165). Educators out there: reflect on the ramification of such preconceived notions in terms of student success.

Does it say something about me that I wanted more scholarship and could not simply enjoy this book for what it is? “Starbucks names” have been written about (and even led to the coinage of *coffeonym*). What about aptronyms and eponyms? So much in semantics could have been imparted. But that is not where this book is coming from, and while it is not necessarily written for an academic, it might well pique the interest of onomastic beginners who will want to know more. And I’ll give \$10 to anyone within arm’s reach of this book who does not immediately flip to their own name in the Index of Given Names. (*Susan* is on pages 169, 230, 269–271, and 290.)

Taha reminds all ANS members why we do the work we do: we too love names. We pursue a more research-based approach, but that doesn’t mean we are immune to another’s enthusiasm. Taha’s advice, ultimately, would work better for this reader if it were more meta-discursive, i.e. more reflective about names, and less prescriptive, especially since her rules do not really go beyond intuition and personal experience. Yet Taha says: “I’m aiming to help others figure out that names are as important as I know they are” (78). That’s not a bad mission (or message) after all. Or journey to embark upon. And, in the end, Taha is more than okay with *Duana*; she values it.

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