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University of Ottawa

ANDRÉ LAPIERRE



The Power of Names: Uncovering the Mystery of What We Are Called. By MAVIS HIMES. Lanham, MD and London: Rowman & Littlefield. 2016. Pp. 225. US\$35. ISBN 13 978-1442259782.

Mavis Himes, a psychoanalyst, draws upon her Lacanian training, the experiences of her patients and friends, and her personal examination of her family's names to describe something of the history of personal naming and a variety of ways in which names can impact a person's life. Despite the sprinkling of Lacanian references and occasional references to Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, and other academics, the book is not a scholarly text. The style is generally conversational, with some meditative passages like the opening of chapter 4:

In the desert my dreams feature vast, open spaces, infinite stillness, boundless horizons. Sand sliding between my toes and light filtering through my closed eyes. The sun burns my arms as I move through the desert heat. A trail of nomads, mere specks on the earth's surface. I stop and collapse, exhausted. I force myself to get up and move on. Where am I going? For what am I searching? All I know is that I am propelled by an insatiable urge to keep moving, as if by my movement I will find what I am seeking. Stillness thunders in my ears. Then the booming command: *Keep moving, do not stop* . . . I awaken. I am in my bed. (33)

The chapter goes on to describe the Sinai and the author's trip there, where she points to the ancient nomads whose practices shaped the religions that followed them and forged the connections between names and the law through proprietary concerns. The chapter is typical of the book in that it mixes the author's personal life and feelings with some history, mythology, and etymology to give the reader a glimpse of the major topic of the chapter. The author's wide-ranging examples throughout the book offer non-specialists a host of ideas to spark further reading.

Overall, *The Power of Names* is less an argument or an historical or thematic overview of naming than it is an autobiographical exploration of the author's experience of her name and the names of others whom she has met, bolstered by anecdote, family history, and general interest research across cultures about naming. The author opens the preface by saying, "I wrote this book to interact with my own name through an exploration of

names and naming more generally,” and that is an apt description (ix). Along the journey, multiple personal naming practices are covered. A firmer editorial hand could have made the book a stronger general interest read by tightening the prose and structure and trimming the anecdotes in number and space. We do not need to read that her friend Penny tells her, “You’d better check this out before you quote me” (55). And we might question the research integrity of a book that apparently relies on friends’ explanations, such as this: “Siyi, a colleague of mine, explained to me that Chinese proper names are constructed individually from blended calligraphic characters with multiple meanings resembling verses of poetry” (57). To be fair, this last example is followed by a detailed example that supports the friend’s analysis and offers a striking insight into the beauty of Chinese names. More generally, the book’s culturally and historically wide range of examples makes it an appealing read to non-specialists with an interest in names. Specialists and other academics may find themselves exasperated, however, by the anecdotes and the general lack of rigor, including such statements such as, “The Nazis are the most recent and infamous example of those who have defended racial integrity and ethnic cleansing” (106). More recent sites of “ethnic cleansing” also hold personal narratives that speak to the power of names to protect or threaten.

As it stands, the book circles themes such as patriarchal naming, legal ramifications of naming, voluntary and involuntary name-changing, celebrating one’s name, and running from one’s name because of what it may symbolize or invoke from one’s past. The book is divided into two multi-chapter parts, “Called into Existence” and “Burden or Blessing,” the former with six brief chapters and the latter, eight. Throughout the book, chapters are divided into sections separated by asterisks to create space between narrative segments that have some thematic connection, although not necessarily one of argument or narrative. The structure helps make the book a breezy read, as well as providing the author with a means of moving back and forth between her personal story and related points. The hazard of the structure is that the book revisits topics in different contexts and can seem more repetitive than it is.

The book opens with a brief prologue about the author’s name, pointing to the personal invocation of the first name and the collective history carried by the surname. The first chapter extends the prologue’s focus, describing the author’s birth in some detail as part of a discussion about the way in which a name recognizes our humanness and traces our identity through our lives. The second chapter, “Names with Power,” toggles between a family history of names and what the author identifies in the chapter’s last sentence: “the rich interplay of culture and sacred writings that influenced the Jews in their conception of and use of names – and thereby influenced naming conventions in the West” (21). The ensuing chapters of Part I – “Go Out and Name,” “Names and Nomads,” “Choosing Names,” and “Celebrating Names” – extend the discussion of how names function and are chosen across a wide range of historical, ethnic, and sociological groupings. The theme of this part of the book is essentially that the search to understand one’s name is the search to understand one’s cultural as well as familial past.

The second part of the book addresses various ways in which one’s name and the symbolism and inheritance it carries can shape and constrain individuals. Using examples from literature, mythology, history, and people in her acquaintance, the author describes reasons for changing one’s name (to emphasize or de-emphasize an origin, create distance from part of a personal past, reject a patriarchal tie, etc.). The author’s own name and family history are shaped by the modern history and diaspora of European Jews, and it is in the passages about the challenges and opportunities of identity in Jewish life that the book (in both parts) is most compelling and the mix of personal experience and history most coherent. The author’s curiosity, enthusiasm, and empathy across cultures are also apparent.

The book concludes with an appendix titled “The Language of Names,” which, broadly speaking, discusses proper nouns in literature and in various uses of individuals’ names for common nouns. The author provides a brief introduction to the *Cratylus*, as well as to descriptivist theory and causal theory of reference, and she shows how a name poses an inherent untranslatability. This generally interesting appendix, which presents some complex issues clearly, is marred by an etymology error on page 137 that references Wikipedia (*nomen* and *calere* are the origin of “nomenclature,” not “nomination”). This is an unfortunate slip and another indication that another round of editing may have done more justice to the author.

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CANDACE CARACO



The Naming of the Shrew: A Curious History of Latin Names, by JOHN WRIGHT. London: Bloomsbury, 2014. 304 Pp. \$26.00 (HB). ISBN 9781408816981

Taxonomy, one of the lessons in the science curriculum long forgotten or deliberately abandoned by most humanities students after taking the unit quiz, is essential in scientific study (Kiser 2014). Scientists, especially biologists, spend their professional – even personal – lives studying and contributing to taxonomy, that is, the classification of the natural world. Few outside the science world would consider this venture valuable or interesting. Possibly the only other profession that might appreciate this dedication to classifying items is librarianship. And even that would be limited to those library cataloguers who consider the MAchine-Readable Cataloging (MARC) record and its endless subfield codes and delimiters valuable and interesting.

Natural historian John Wright’s chance encounter with an unusual plant that sparked his childhood curiosity and undeniably incited his lifelong fascination and passion with the complexity of the natural world culminates in *The Naming of the Shrew*. Its titular parody of a Shakespeare comedy and its subtitle, *A Curious History of Latin Names*, do not readily reveal the subject unless the reader is aware that many consider the term “Latin name” synonymous with the term “scientific name.” While the title and a cover adorned with miniature illustrations of various flora and fauna may not be tempting at first, the prologue – in which Wright provides readers with his personal history of interest in this subject and a glimpse into the complexity of the Latin names employed by scientists – is welcoming and enjoyable. The casual reader should be impressed with his enthusiasm and prompted to continue reading.

Although his self-proclaimed passion is mycology (for non-mycologists, the study of fungi), Wright’s knowledge and appreciation encompass all flora and fauna. *The Naming of the Shrew* naturally complements his titles in the “River Cottage Handbook” series, *The Hedgerow Handbook*, *The Edible Seashore Handbook*, and *The Mushroom Handbook*, all showcasing his 50-year fascination with the natural world. Very noteworthy is that Wright, a member of the British Mycological Society and a fellow of the Linnean Society (Parr 2014), has cultivated personal and professional acquaintances spanning all scientific fields, and these colleagues are often mentioned and named as consultants for *The Naming of the Shrew*.

Ten chapters provide a succinct history and explanation of taxonomy for the non-scientist. In the first chapter, Wright explains Latin’s trifold reason for use: history, stability,

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