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Book Review

Hello, My Name Is Awesome: How to Create Brand Names that Stick. By ALEXANDRA WATKINS. San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers. 2014. Pp. 112. US$16.95. ISBN 13 978-1626561861.

Like any child, newborn companies and products need names. But trade names differ from personal names in one important way: the names need to be legally available. The practice of developing company and product names has evolved into a small industry of naming firms, expert consultants, and crowd-sourced contests that promise a perfect business name. And for those who want to try it themselves, this slim volume is a breezy, easy-to-follow guide to creating company and product names "that stick," that is, names that are memorable and meaningful. Alexandra Watkins is a former advertising copywriter who runs a naming company called Eat My Words, and her years of experience are obvious; she supports her points with real-world examples of bad and good names, the latter category including many names created by her firm.

The book can divided into two sections. The first three chapters introduce the reader to Watkins' criteria for bad and good names, using the acronyms SCRATCH (Spelling challenged, Copycat, Restrictive, Annoying, Tame, Curse of knowledge, and Hard to pronounce) for bad qualities and SMILE (Suggestive, Meaningful, Imagery, Legs, and Emotional) for good qualities. Although the acronyms are somewhat forced ("Curse of knowledge" really means "relying too much on in-group jargon" – there's no "curse" involved), the advice here is generally sound. Watkins feels that a name should be easy to spell and pronounce, reflect something about the company or product, connect emotionally with the potential customers, and stand out in a field of competitors. And, unlike many other naming guides, Watkins emphasizes the importance of choosing a name that's legally available, and she offers the reader valuable information on clearing trademarks and obtaining domain names.

Chapters 4–6 provide an in-depth look at how a professional namer develops name candidates. It is not, as Watkins stresses, a matter of sitting down in a large group and writing random words on a whiteboard. Rather, the first step is developing a creative brief that clearly states the goals of the naming assignment, along with details about the target audience, competitors, desired brand personality, and preferred name style, such as real words, coined words, etc. Next, the namer embarks on a brainstorming session that involves exhaustively exploring metaphors, concepts, and images related to the creative brief. Finally, the list of names must be screened against trademark and domain name databases to ensure that the final name is legally available for use. The book ends with a chapter that lays out rules for how to build consensus when there are multiple decision-makers involved in choosing a name and offers a rather cursory look at the pros and cons of changing an already-established brand name.

While the chapters on creating names are solidly constructed, giving plenty of detailed, step-by-step instructions on name generation, the sections containing specific good and bad name criteria lack context and an understanding how of business strategy informs naming. Much of Watkins' "7 Deadly Sins" (the source of the SCRATCH acronym) advice is based more on the author's personal taste, along with a large dose of snarky

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commentary, than on facts. This example, from the advice against restrictive names in Chapter 2, is both factually and contextually wrong:

> It's confusing and shortsighted to name your product and company the same thing. Although you may have only one product now, think about the future. What if Apple had named their first computer the Apple? What would they name the dozens of other products that have launched since then? (27)

Actually, Apple did just that. Its first product was the *Apple I* (1976), followed by the *Apple II* (1977), *Apple III* (1980), and *Apple IIc* (1986). Apple products were sold under many different brand names, including *Macintosh*, *Quadra*, *Performa*, *PowerBook*, and *Centris*, until the *iMac G3* was released in 1999, establishing Apple's "i-" nomenclature system. Apple's decision to use the same name for the company and the product was a practical one: why spend money and time educating consumers about two brands, when it's more efficient to focus on one brand that covers all products? The single-brand strategy worked well for Apple in its early stages; it was not "confusing and shortsighted." When its product line became too large to handle with numbers and letters, the company simply switched to a new strategy and developed unique names for the products.

Such a narrow view of naming undercuts Watkins' larger points. The first of the SCRATCH criteria is "Spelling challenged – not spelled like it sounds." Names that feature unusual spellings may be hard to spell correctly and will be hard to process by voice recognition apps such as Apple's Siri or Amazon's Alexa assistants. But what Watkins misses are the advantages of an innovative spelling – how it stands out from competitors, how it creates intrigue, and how it supports a brand image. To cite one example of many, Watkins uses the name *Flickr*, an image- and video-hosting website (since acquired by Yahoo) several times as an example of a "head scratcher(s) that consumers struggle with" (1). In its heyday in the mid-2000s, Flickr was hugely successful and the name itself was widely hailed as creative and fresh; the dropped "e" became something of a trend in naming, spawning *Tumblr*, *Grindr*, and *Scribd*, to name just a few. *Flickr* suggests images, as in movies flickering on a screen, as well as "flicking" quickly through photos. The name *Flickr* was not difficult to pronounce nor hard for people to remember. Watkins' other examples of "spelling challenged" names, such as *Xobni* and *Speesees*, support her point, but the inclusion of a such prominent counter-example like *Flickr* erodes the reader's trust in the author's pronouncements.

Further errors compound the problem. Watkins states confidently, "As with book titles, song titles (as well as album titles and band names) can't be trademarked and are up for grabs when it comes to brand names" (66). This is incorrect with regard to band names. The US Patent and Trademark Office has a section of its website for musicians and artists devoted to information on trademarks (https://www.uspto.gov/learning-and-resources/ip-policy/musicians-and-artists-profile); you can absolutely trademark a band name. Similarly, a small section called "Punctuation is a crutch" (37) conflates diacritic marks and capitalization with punctuation; no examples of punctuation in names are given, and there are many that could have been discussed, such as the exclamation point in the name *Yahoo!* or the misplaced apostrophe in *Lands' End*. And in the section warning against copycat names, Watkins writes, "I think we can all agree that the employee collaboration tools named Yammer, Jabber, and Chatter were inspired by the name Twitter" (24). In fact, Jabber was created years before Twitter and may have itself inspired the name *Twitter*.

Names don't exist in a vacuum, and what's missing from this book is the acknowledgment that most names don't start out as "awesome." Any list of the most valuable brand names will include many that commit one or more of Watkins' 7 Deadly Sins: *Google*? Spelling challenged. *Disney*? Relies on insider knowledge. *AT&T*? Uses punctuation as a crutch. *Nike*? Hard to pronounce. The point is that these names owe their success, their "stickiness," to years of careful marketing and millions (sometimes billions) of dollars in advertising. Name evaluation, aside from metrics like market valuation, is highly subjective; what is "awesome" to one person may be "annoying" to the next, to use Watkins' terminology. But as long as they recognize the book's shortcomings, the average business owner who needs a name for a company or product will find *Hello, My Name Is Awesome* a valuable resource for creating meaningful, appropriate, and available names.

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Spring Garden. By TOMOKA SHIBASAKI. Translated from Japanese by Polly Barton. London, UK: Pushkin Press. 2014. Pbk. 2017. Pp. 154. ISBN 978-1-78227-270-0.

Spring Garden is the title of a novel by Tomoka Shibasaki. It is also the title of a book inside Shibasaki's book. Duality emerges many times in this slim book. Names take on dual roles in this tale of people living with other people's names, in other people's homes. Characters point out whenever two people share a birth year. And, fittingly, we encounter many gifts being given; gifts can be regifted.

In fact, I at first believed that the major theme of this book was regifting. Over the course of the novel, many gifts are given to thank people for favors and, in turn, for giving a thank-you gift. Our protagonist, Taro, never actually keeps a gift, passing everything along to his neighbors and co-workers, always with a reason for not welcoming the item into his own life. The book is set in Tokyo, and gift-giving is part of the Japanese culture, but Shibasaki has created in Taro a protagonist who seems (and prefers) to exist in a limbo state, one of transition. Nothing settles with him.

The act of giving and re-giving gifts moves us into the realm of trading identities, with the names of the presenter and recipient changing hands. Taro is intensely interested in identity: who shares a name with whom, which people in his life were born in the same year or in the same hometown. (We learn, for example, that two characters share a birth year with Neil Young. It seems important.)

People's homes also seem to have names and identities that are traded over the course of the novel. Taro lives in a housing development, an L-shaped apartment building called View Palace Saeki III, with an unusual naming scheme. The family name makes sense: a Mrs. Saeki owns these "flats." Taro (like the reader), however, never finds out if there are a View Palace Saeki I and II. Entering while naming is in progress, we are robbed of starting at the beginning.

Besides being the third of something, these flats hold another onomastic mystery:

> Instead of having room numbers, the flats were identified by animals of the Chinese zodiac. So, starting with Taro's flat in the short section, the flats on the ground floor had the names Pig, Dog, Rooster, Monkey, and on the first floor, Sheep, Horse, Snake, Dragon. It was common these days for people not to put their names on the nameplates on their doors, or on their letterboxes either, so the flat names were all there was to go on. (11)

A neighbor puzzles about the zodiac scheme of the flats. "They start with Dragon, right? That's the fifth one in the zodiac. That means the first four are missing. I think there must have been a View Palace Saeki I and II" to account for the use of those missing signs (62). Yet only four zodiac signs are unaccounted for (Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit), not enough to make up two additional housing complexes.

Given Taro's aversion to permanence, he does not try to learn his neighbors' names. Instead, a woman residing in the Snake flat is called Mrs. Snake. Another neighbor is Dragon Woman. Taro does not interact with the world around him. He claims his favorite pastime is napping. Yet he is not a recluse. He has a full-time job and was once married. But his failure to find out the mysteries of the names around him says something about Taro's character. Mrs. Snake is always just that; Dragon Woman herself must offer up her real name to Taro; she must name herself to claim her identity.

Name changes seem to disorient Taro. A male colleague from work gets married and takes his wife's surname (explaining to Taro that his wife is an only child). Not only that, he now uses this new name at work, which is apparently even more unusual. At one point, this colleague laments that the choice he made ultimately means that he must be buried in his wife's family's grave. The change of name has thus changed his home for the rest of eternity. It all makes Taro very uncomfortable.

View Palace Saeki III is slated for demolition (more flux). As tenants move out, they are not replaced, so the flats become more and more desolate. Mrs. Saeki's house is next door to the flats she owns, but even she no longer lives there. Whether a residence is occupied or not matters to Taro; it is a distinction he often considers (again, a focus on limbo). Is it really Mrs. Sakei's house if she is now in a nursing home? Over time, the flats house only three tenants: Taro, Mrs. Snake, and Dragon Woman, who has in fact, we learn, been born under a different zodiac sign, not the dragon but the rooster. She tells Taro (and us) that her name is Nishi, and that is what she becomes for the rest of the book. However, she refuses to reveal to him her pen name for a long time. (She is an illustrator.) When Nishi informs Taro of Mrs. Snake's actual name, he never uses it, and the reader remains in the dark.

Nishi has been obsessed since her teens with a book of photos called *Spring Garden*. The images are of a private house that actually exists right next to these flats. The photos were taken by (and of) the occupants of twenty years ago, a husband and wife named Taro Gyushima and Kaiko Umamura. Kaiko is an actress, and we later find out that she is identified in the book by her stage name, not her real name of Asuka Sawada. And of course the husband shares a name with our protagonist. Two Taros. Nishi researches the couple and finds news of Kaiko over the twenty intervening years, as she tries to make the book and the real house come together for herself, "but the more [Nishi] read, the further Asuka Sawada grew apart from Kaiko Umamura" (58). Realities converge when Nishi visits the house in the book and befriends the current occupants: "It seemed as though the decades that had passed there before and the afternoon now slipping by were coming together as one" (97).

The house, too, has evolved in twenty years. The nameplate now reads "Morio." Taro's sense of the distinction between a simply unoccupied house and a vacant one is confirmed by the appearance and disappearance of a home's nameplate, when folks bother to use one at all. A word about nameplates. They are absent from View Palace Saeki III, but they are valuable to Taro; they are how he confirms his hunch about whether a flat has been vacated (nameplate gone) or re-rented (new name). When younger, he would notice television celebrities' names on nameplates in his neighborhood and marvel at the duality: are these famous neighbors the TV characters they play or themselves in those houses? It was difficult for him to reconcile the two, their dual identities, dual names.

Burying and unearthing are other themes that arise from the flux all around Taro, the trading of the visible and the invisible. An unexploded bomb is discovered in the area. Taro muses that the discovered bomb is around the same age as his father. One photo in the book *Spring Garden* in particular preoccupies Taro, the occupant Taro of twenty years ago posing with a shovel in the house's garden. It is ambiguous: we don't know if this Taro is burying or unearthing something. Protagonist Taro's thoughts about burial coalesce at the end of the story. He climbs the wall into the garden, finds the same spot as in the twenty-year-old photo, digs a hole, and places in it the remaining ashes of his father, along with a wasp's nest (more housing) that he had discovered intact but empty in his flat. Taro has been in limbo, napping, until he climbs that wall and both finalizes his father's resting place and clears up the ambiguity of the photo in the book of the other Taro mid-dig: now it is the action of burying (as opposed to unearthing).

But then Taro returns to limbo. He enters the house and falls asleep in the upstairs bedroom. In the morning, he is awoken by a police investigation downstairs. He hears that a woman's body has been discovered in the garden. Something perhaps was unburied, unearthed after all. "Okay, and cut!" he then hears (152). A film shoot is taking place. An actress, whose name he remembers (but doesn't share with us), motions for him to scram. The duality of fiction and reality appears once more.

Toward the end of the book, a potential solution to the four missing zodiac signs of View Palace Saeki III seems close. Mrs. Saeki's son, Tora, visits the flats to give Taro his eviction date. Tora means tiger, one of the four missing zodiac signs. 'This is going out on a bit of a limb,' Taro says, 'but do your brother and sister's names happen to use the characters for "cow" or "rabbit"?' (131). Alas, Tora is an only child. The naming scheme will have to remain a mystery.

Taro is so much in limbo that in the last twenty pages of the book, he relinquishes the role of protagonist. The narration switches from third to first person, offering us now the point of view of Taro's sister (whose name we do not learn). The sister had also encountered the *Spring Garden* photography book when younger. (*Spring Garden* must have been a best seller!) A friend had a crush on the Taro in the photographs and an intense dislike for the wife, attacking even her name: '[H]er name was weird. When I suggested that Kaiko Umamura was a stage name, probably the name of her character in the theatre troupe, my friend said she couldn't possibly get along with someone who would choose a name like that. In her mind, Kaiko Umamura could do nothing right' (136–137).

Taro's Tokyo is also in flux, in duality. It is constantly building itself up and tearing itself down. The limbo that Taro dwells on is all around him. Time is almost up for his flat. The *Spring Garden* house is in flux but also exists in many current forms (book and reality). Nishi has multiple names over the course of this story. The title *Spring Garden* plays a dual role. The house in the picture book *Spring Garden* exists in two realities, twenty years apart. No wonder Taro finds his grounding by burying a piece of his own history. During Shibasaki's book, while underground (or at least masked) objects surface, Taro reverses the process.

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