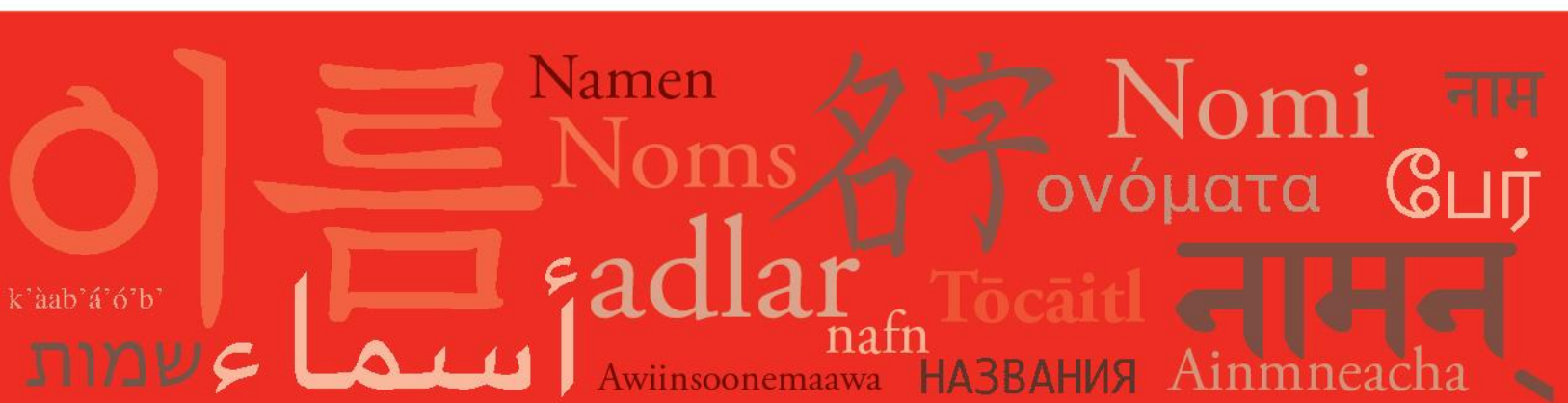


Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Book Review

The Art of Naming. By MICHAEL OHL. Translated by Elisabeth Lauffer. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. 2018. Pp. xiii + 312. \$22.49. ISBN: 978-0-262-53703-2.

It does not happen often, but every once in a while, a book comes your way that leaves you feeling sad when the last page is turned, as if you have just said goodbye to a very good friend. That was the feeling I had when I finished the book under review. Importantly, a not insignificant part of the success of this English reference is due to the translator, Elisabeth Lauffer, and her skill in crafting a highly readable text—no easy feat considering the syntactic labyrinth that is so often characteristic of German scientific prose. What’s more, Lauffer was able to do this while preserving the wonderful humor and masterful storytelling of the author, Michael Ohl. A biologist at the Natural History Museum of Berlin and an associate professor at Berlin’s Humboldt University, Ohl brings intellectual passions ignited by all those wickedly wonderful “winged things that sting” (viii). Although much of the book is understandably devoted to the names of what many of us less affectionately call “creepy crawlies,” this work also covers an impressive range of other zoonyms. Overall, the book has three intersecting thematic foci: namers, names, and the named.

The very first chapter, “Hitler and the Fledermaus [bat]” (1–30), falls into this first area. This chapter tells the incredible story of a little-known set of events that took place during the height of National Socialism. In the spring of 1942, the Berliner Morgenpost carried an article detailing a recent decision of the German Society of Mammologists: the bat and shrew were no longer to be called *Fledermaus* and *Spitzmaus* or “fluttering mouse” and “pointed mouse,” as neither of these organisms was in fact a mouse. Almost immediately, this seemingly innocuous declaration met with stark opposition and from the highest of all places, none other than Adolf Hitler himself. In response to the Führer’s disapproval, the society

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ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 69, Issue 1, Winter 2021

DOI 10.5195/names.2021.2253



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immediately withdrew its proposed name change. Even today, over a half a century later, both names are still commonly used by German-speakers for the bat and the shrew. Rather naively, Ohl asserts that the society's proposed name changes "did not fail because of Hitler's intervention" but because they attempted "to take the basic idea of a standardized naming system out of the scientific context and transfer it into the realm of vernacular" (35).

Of course, the notion that anyone would have simply ignored one of Hitler's orders is ludicrous.¹ After receiving a threatening letter from the Führer's office demanding that the proposed name change be promptly withdrawn lest more meaningful activities be found for the society members on the Eastern front, the society immediately retracted its suggestion (Hutterer 2001).² Clearly, Hitler's objections did play a pivotal role in the failure of this proposal. However, Ohl's assertion concerning the difficulty of replacing longstanding everyday animal names with Latinate scientific nomenclature is well taken. Normally, the lay and expert systems of zoonymy coexist side by side, separate and distinct. One of the main differences between these two systems is that zoonyms used by the general public are often based on an animal's outward appearance. By contrast, researchers devoted to the science of naming species have learnt that looks can be very deceiving.

To help make this point, in Chapter Two (37–72), Ohl tells the story of the affable *Ailurus fulgens*. This strange four-legged furry creature once roamed the dense forests of China, where despite its imposing size, the elusive giant dined exclusively on plants. A careful examination of the herbivore's anatomy revealed a thumb-like appendage which the monochrome beast used to uproot and consume prodigious amounts of the local vegetation. Based on this appearance, zoologists agreed that the animal belonged to the family of raccoons, martens, and skunks. It was not until many decades later, however, that DNA tests revealed that the taxonomical home of the elusive giant was actually to be found with bears native to the Arctic Circle and North America. The name of the endangered species was eventually changed to *Ailuropoda melanoleucus* or the giant panda bear.

As Ohl explains in Chapter Four (97–128), part of the difficulty in naming this and other species is the enormous degree of natural variation that exists within a single species as well as the surprising degree of commonality that exists among species. It is precisely these two competing forces which make it so difficult for children to determine what the difference is between a horsey and a doggie, the tiger in the zoo and Aunt Tilda's beloved orange tabby, Jelly Bean. Whether to a trained zoologist or an inquisitive first-grader, inter- and intra-species variability makes animal naming a true challenge. To help ease the process for scientists, there are a number of international organizations that have been developed that establish guidelines for the development of scientific zoonymy.

In Chapter Three (73–96), Ohl details many of the guiding principles and regulations for scientific naming and names. Onomasticians with an interest in the intersection between cognitive semantics and formal grammar may find this chapter particularly interesting. Luckily for the reader, Ohl's discussion of "Words, Proper Names, and Individuals" is far from being a dry philosophical treatise but is brought to life with fascinating tales of dinosaur hunters who scoured the desert in search of forensic evidence left behind by the legions of reptilian predators that once ruled the earth. As Ohl aptly describes part of the challenge of naming the world's creatures is that a good portion of them have never actually been seen. And even in cases when exemplars do exist, errors in observation can lead to unintentional misnomers. The digger wasp species *Podium sexdentatum*, for example, has seven teeth not six. The shy mole *Scalopus aquaticus* does not live in the water as its formal name implies but underground, and New Guinea's bird of paradise *Paradisaea apoda* is not at all footless. Given the frequency of such errors, taxonomists have confined themselves to correcting only those names which "are in conflict with the nomenclature rules" (97). This high degree of tolerance has produced a surprising degree of creativity in the names which namers select.

Historically, the race to discover new species has been fueled not only by a fascination with the world's flora and fauna but also by a love of one's own persona. It is no accident that a significant proportion of scientific nomenclature has been devised to flatter either someone else's ego or one's own. From political leaders and scientific trendsetters to musical heroes and entrepreneurs, the list of humans immortalized in scientific zoonymy is impressively long, e.g., Barack Obama → *Caloplaca obamae*; Nelson Mandela → *Stasimopus mandelai*; David Attenborough → *Attenborosaurus conybeari*; Bob Marley → *Gnathia marleyi*; Beyoncé Knowles → *Scaptia beyonceae*; David Bowie → *Heteropoda davidbowie*; Bill Gates → *Eristalis gatesi*; Hugh Hefner → *Sylvilagus palustris hefneri* (Puiu 2016; MSN.com 2018).³ In an effort to fill up their shrinking coffers, some institutions have capitalized upon this tradition and offered to name species after a patron for a nominal fee.⁴ In other cases, as Ohl relates, namers' motivations would appear to be more driven by mirth than money. The world of scientific taxonomy is filled with inside jokes

that testify to the deliciously quirky sense of humor shared by nerds around the world. Many excellent examples can be found in Chapter Five (129–150), which Ohl aptly entitles “The Curio Collection of Animal Names.” My personal favorite in this collection is the series of names given to the elusive fungus beetle of the genus *gelae*. Over the years, this phonological treasure has given rise to a plethora of silly names. There is the *Gelae baen* and the *Gelae donut*, the *Gelae rol* and the *Gelae fish*, and of course, last but not least, the *Gelae belae* (143). Readers who relish such onomastic humor will particularly enjoy Chapter Nine (243–272), where Ohl explores the fanciful world of cryptozoology and the names which have been created for the horde of mythical beasts that have been said for centuries to slither and creep through the shadows, just beyond the camera’s reach.

As wonderfully entertaining as these onomastic anecdotes are, the book also contains many somber stories behind some of the world’s leading scientific names and namers. In Chapter Nine (243–272), for example, alongside his description of some of the scientific nomenclature that have been devised by cryptozoologists for mythological creatures such as Sasquatch and the Loch Ness Monster, Ohl tells the remarkable yet sorrowful tale of taxonomist extraordinaire Alexandre Arsène Girault (1884–1941). As Ohl explains, Girault’s compulsion to discover and describe new species seems to have been driven by an uncontrollable and compulsive drive “to record, organize, sort” (245). Even in a field where eccentricity is commonplace, Girault’s taxonomic obsessions appear to have been fuelled by an urge that “follows rules other than actual free will” and ultimately led to this genius’s psychopathological demise (244). Initially, the future of the intelligent young Maryland native appeared bright: “[l]ike so many entomologists, he started as a fifteen-year-old interested in bugs” (245). That passion became the basis for what would become his profession and later his pathological obsession. Unfortunately, Ohl’s description fails to provide many of the details for this professional and personal demise. For this information, one is forced to consult other references.

According to Capinera (2008), after completing his BS at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute in 1903, Girault secured a position as an applied entomologist at the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA). It was there that he was assigned to conduct research on the Colorado potato beetle (Capinera 2008). Three years later, he was sent by the USDA to Australia to help researchers there determine what was killing the sugar cane in Northern Queensland. This trip marked the beginning of Girault’s truly remarkable career. Today, he is credited with publishing nearly 500 titles, many of which are hundreds of pages long (Capinera 2008; Ohl 2018). Added to this scientific legacy are the 2,483 handwritten pages of unpublished manuscripts (Ohl 246). The lion’s share of this scholarship is devoted to describing some 3,000 different genera and species of Chalcid wasps (Capinera 2008). Despite these unquestioned professional accomplishments, the widowed father of five struggled to make ends meet, until finally reaching his

breaking point. As his son, Frank later recalled, one day, his father “started acting strangely. He stood in the yard and hollered at the neighbors” (Gates, Grissell, and Schauff 2004). Less than a week later, Girault was admitted to Australia’s infamous Goodna Hospital for the Insane, where the great entomologist would later die.⁵ Were it not for works like the one under review, the contributions of this prodigious scientific namer and so many others like him might have been completely forgotten by all but a handful of distant relatives and appreciative scientists.

Recognizing the importance of preserving the history of the names as well as their namers, Ohl devotes Chapter Eight (211–242) to those “who count the species” and “name the names.” Here, readers learn, for example, more details about the individual fates of those German zoologists who incurred Hitler’s wrath by proposing a new, more correct name for the bat. As one might suspect, for those scientists who subsequently either failed to mollify or dared to increase the Führer’s anger, the punishments were swift and often fatal. Precisely this was the fate that awaited Professor Dr. Walther Arndt, then curator of Berlin’s Museum for Natural History. Sometime after the Fledermaus fiasco, Arndt confided to a colleague that he believed it would not be long before the Reich was vanquished by the Allies. The colleague promptly reported the private conversation to the authorities. This betrayal had catastrophic consequences for the professor. Almost immediately, Arndt was paid an unexpected visit by the Gestapo and placed under arrest. Less than six months later, the world-famous specialist in sponges and worms was beheaded. According to Ohl, Arndt’s sister “was then sent a bill for 300 Reichsmark for the execution” (214). The story of this scientist’s refusal to allow the truth to be silenced by a rogue government is one of many such inspiring anecdotes to be found in this book, and therein lies the dual value of this remarkable publication. At the end of the day, Ohl’s work is not only an outstanding reference on scientific names and naming. It is also a fascinating study of the triumphs and follies, responsibilities and legacies of the international scientific community, both past and present.

Notes

¹ In point of fact, it was not unusual for Hitler to interfere in the naming customs and policies of the German Reich. The Office of the Chancellery was frequently petitioned by members of the general public and government authorities to ascertain the Führer's naming preferences, as mistakes could be fatal. For more on naming during the Third Reich, see Bering (1993); Nick (2019); and Rennick (1970).

² For the original text of the letter written by Reichsminister Martin Bormann at Hitler's direction, see Heiber and Heiber (2005).

³ In some cases, there is a connection between the species and their famous namesakes. For example, the species *Syvilagus palustris hefneri* is a small rabbit with a bushy white tail. The small Colombian tree frog, *Dendropsophus stingi*, was named after the famous singer, Gordon Sumner who is better known by his stage name, *Sting*. This taxonomic honor was bestowed upon the former lead singer of the Police in recognition of his continuing efforts to save the world's rainforests. For more on species named after famous persons, see Jinkinson (2012); MSN.com (2018); and Puiu (2016).

⁴ One of the organizations Ohl highlights is the German-based conservationist company "Biopat." As described on its website, Biopat is a non-profit organization that raises funds for classifying and naming the world's species through "donations." More specifically, patrons who pay at least 2,600 euros, can have a plant or animal named after them or someone of their choice (<https://biopat.de/ueber-biopat.html>).

⁵ Still in operation today, the psychiatric clinic in Goodna has a long and troubled history. Catastrophic lack of sanitation, meagre food rations, and sadistic treatment by the staff resulted in shockingly high patient mortality rates for many decades. Although no records could be found detailing the exact causes of Girault's death, during the time that he was committed, the Woogarro Asylum, as it was previously called, was grossly overcrowded. The majority of the patients kept there were Australian immigrants like Girault. For more on the history of this facility, see Finnane (2008).

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