



Book Review

Mayflies. By ANDREW O'HAGAN. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart. 2020. Pp. 277. \$14.95 (Paperback). ISBN 13: 978-0-7710-6811-9.

“Back Never” says a sign in a shop the main characters enter in Andrew O’Hagan’s novel *Mayflies*. How does one interpret such a message? Making sense of time is the theme of this novel, fittingly named for the ephemeral insects that live only a day or two. The friends in *Mayflies* go further by attempting to *control* time. And their main tool is an onomastic one. These twenty-something men from Scotland are awash in a steady stream of names of their own choosing. Nicknames, those other ephemeral creatures that evoke a time and place, are used copiously; and the friends communicate largely through dialogue lifted from favorite films and popular culture, another way to anchor us in time. Ultimately, we find that Tully, the most onomastically creative of the group, must teach the rest that sometimes control means acceptance by choosing a name and staying by it to the end.

The central character is Tully Dawson, and we experience him through the eyes of the narrator, his friend James Collins. The book is organized in two parts, each comprising a crucial moment in the lives of Tully, James, and their friends. In part one, titled “1986”, we meet them in their hometown of Glasgow, where they are planning a trip to a music festival in Manchester, England. In Manchester, while living the best day of their lives, they play with names and communicate through pop culture references. Part two is thirty-one years later, 2017, and these men have grown, scattered, married, or died. And one of them, Tully, is dying of cancer. As adults, the names they encounter, the references, are more somber.

Why is Tully called *Tully*? James asks Tully’s mother that very question. “I’ve always meant to ask [...]”, he says (25). Her reply shows a Dawson family belief in the power of names. While pregnant, she picked up a book with a hero named *Tullius*, called *Tully*. With that same name, she reasoned at the time, her son would also “be a brilliant dancer and take me to all the big casinos”, the hero’s successes in life (26). The name would

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guide her child's destiny. It seems, though, that neither a glamorous dance career nor gambling success has followed for Tully.

But he is more adept than his mother at choosing names that reflect the essential nature of a person, one with Tully's own stamp of approval. His nickname for James is *Noodles*; Tully pays tribute to his favorite Robert DeNiro character, in the film *Once Upon a Time in America* (a title with another time reference). *Noodles* is indeed pliant, as he tries to emulate his friend. James has his own onomastic moment when, being given good news, James addresses the teacher who has encouraged him to go to university as *Susan*; they both soon realize that this form of address is wrong. "Mrs O'Connor to you" (10), the teacher replies after a pause. Student and teacher are two roles whose timelines are in sync for that particular relationship only; for Mrs O'Connor, they are at different stages in their lives for a romantic connection. James, however, does end the meeting by impressing Mrs O'Connor with his knowledge of names; he informs her that the poet Edith Sitwell had two brothers named *Osbert* and *Sacheverell*. "There's a couple of good Scottish names for you" (11), he lays at her feet, like a dozen roses.

The Glasgow-to-Manchester party comprises other friends who have their own naming schemes. We meet Tyrone aka *Tibbs* and Bobby (McCloy) aka *Dr Clogs*, naming himself to signal feeling older than his years. Lincoln is *Limbo*: "[L]imbo, the place, comes before heaven, or instead, if you can't get in" (124). *Limbo* is a young man still trying to situate himself in the flow of time. Completing the entourage is David Hogg, who calls himself Hogg. Perhaps to make up for this missed nicknaming opportunity, the group bestows a series of names on Hogg's new car, including the *Poser Mobile* and the *Shaggin' Wagon*, certainly a youthful set of terms.

Names are a system of currency for these friends. Besides naming those in their own circle, they reference names from popular culture and test one another in a kind of one-upmanship naming game. Many of Tully's allusions are to works by the Angry Young Men school of writers, those who captured the voices of the working-classes of Northern England in the 1950s. James says that his friends "felt glamorous watching films, listening to records, or reading books written by people who unfolded their lives, who told of the time they loved and the time they died and the time they danced at El Morocco" (95).

When Tully initiates his name games, he is at the controls; this game is how he assesses people's worth. We already know Tully's pick for best character name in a Robert DeNiro film (*Noodles*). Tully and his friends always ask someone new to name who influences them. Names sum us up; they matter. And getting a name wrong can count against you: Hogg chastises Dr Clogs when he mixes up Willie Wonka with Charlie, both of the Chocolate Factory. Then Hogg rubs it in: "I don't think you'd know the difference [...] between William Burroughs and William of Orange" (67). James uses an onomastic pickup line in Manchester; he asks a woman to identify with the drink of her choice, which he will then supply: "Which one are you, Taboo or Mirage?" (81). The woman's answer, which is "I know who I am—Mirage", seems like an oxymoron (81). As it turns out, she is indeed illusional, ultimately one of those "Back Never" people in James's life.

Tully knows that it is not worth wrestling with the passage of time if you are in possession of your own true name, something that constitutes your legacy. In Manchester, he scans the names of the dead on a war memorial, seeking out his own. Tully does indeed find a *Dawson*. Later, he cannot stop thinking of all those names and their "enduring memory" (65). Remember my name and I will not have failed in life, he reasons. And perhaps his mother was more accurate than given credit for; Tully has maneuvered his way through his days like a professional dancer, one in this gambling den we call life.

A temporal cousin to the sign "Back Never" is a revered The Smiths' song that Tully references: "How Soon is Now?" Sooner than we think. Life is indeed short, even for humans. In fact, we could reclassify humans as the species *Back Never*. A thin line exists between names of bands that the boys encounter at the music festival and groups of people important to them later in life. They listen when young to bands named the *Speechwriters* and the *Shop Assistants*, perhaps playful mockery of real-life work and drudgery. In the second half of the book, though, Tully and James must work with care assistants at a nursing home where Tully's mother now lives, and companions, the helpers at the assisted suicide facility in Switzerland named *Dignitas*. This is serious life work.

Part two of the book is played out on Tully's terms. He will travel to the medical facility and make the decision that is right for, and controlled by, Tully. He is always "Tully Dawson, at home and abroad" (71). To his last day on earth, Tully embodies the quality that James has named *Tullyness* (110), an eponymous knowledge that one's own name brings dignity. The *Dignitas* representative, leading the main character to his room, calls him Mr Dawson. "I'm just Tully" is the (indeed) dignified reply (274).

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