



Book Review

The Vixen. By FRANCINE PROSE. New York: Harper Perennial. 2022 Pp. 319. \$16.99 (Paperback). ISBN 13: 978-0-06-301215-8.

The Vixen is the title of a novel first published by Francine Prose in 2021. It is also the name of a book-within-the-book, one still in manuscript form, awaiting editing by its publishing house. Think Russian nesting eggs. In fact, think Russian spies and the Cold War, the 1950s' fight against communism, here being waged in fiction. The main weapons of this war are pseudonyms, code names, and nefarious—and multifarious—book titles. Prose reveals renaming to be a powerful weapon for the lies and spies the reader encounters. After all, the story is set in the McCarthy era, where names are already dangerous; to “name names”, or not, reveals your alliances. Name manipulation can be a means of warfare or vindication, and this is a tale of onomastic revenge.

It is New York, 1953, and the narrator and protagonist Simon Putnam, right out of Harvard, is hired as a junior editor at the publishing house Landry, Landry and Bartlett. The fictional version of *The Vixen* ends up on Simon's desk, an editing job that he will commit to for his own onomastic purposes. Simon is on a kind of revenge-and-rescue operation for the good name of Ethel Rosenberg, who, along with her husband Julius, was found guilty of spying and was executed on the day the book begins. Manipulation of the manuscript, covert editing, is Simon's response to a public plea from Ethel that was read by her lawyer before her execution: “You will see to it that our names are kept bright and unsullied by lies” (8).

And Simon is the man for this job. His parents are Brooklyn Jews, horrified at the US government's actions; his mother was childhood friends with Ethel (née *Greenglass*) and has been suffering from crippling migraines since the Rosenbergs' arrest; and Simon specialized at Harvard in Viking sagas, texts he describes as “tales of deception, insult, and vengeance” (23). Simon's background is put to avenging use when he joins the publishing firm, through a connection his Uncle Maddie has tapped, and is handed the second iteration of the title, called *The Vixen, the Patriot, and the Fanatic*, a sexy pot-boiler by new author Anya Partridge, one in which Ethel Rosenberg (now *Esther Rosenstein*) seduces every man around. (“Prosecute *this*,” Esther says, as she rips open the bodice that is her prison garb [91].) Anya makes it clear in this version that Ethel/Esther is unequivocally guilty as charged for crimes against her country. This low-brow, tawdry book has a dual function: to make money for the financially strapped publisher and to help tamp down the outrage of those Americans who doubted the Rosenbergs' guilt. Simon, however, has other plans. He will punish Anya's book for “slandering the dead” (82) by avenging Ethel's name; he will rewrite the manuscript into his own, third version of *The Vixen*.

ans-names.pitt.edu

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

Vol. 71, No. 1, Winter 2023

DOI 10.5195/names.2023.2455



Articles in this journal are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



This journal is published by [Pitt Open Library Publishing](https://pittopenlibrarypublishing.com/).

Both Prose's and Anya's *Vixens* are teeming with duplicity. Even a simple brand name could turn covert and traitorous. Take Jell-O: Is it a good old American product or part of an espionage signal? Is it a criticism of Ethel/Esther's mothering skills (all that sugar)? Is it a sign of her being a bad Jew (it might not be kosher)?

Simon knows about name manipulation. He tells us that his surname is a lie, a prank, an immigration official's homage to the Mayflower pilgrims who decided to rechristen Simon's grandfather *Putnam*. (We never learn the original name.) Who else was onomastically made pilgrim by this official? "Brotsky became Bradshaw, Di Palo became Page, Maslin became Mather. Welcome to America!" (21). And *Simon* is an imperfect Anglicized homage to his grandfather *Shimon*. Simon also seems a magnet for insult by nickname. Anya calls him *Mr. Editor College Graduate* (140). Julia, the editor he is replacing, calls him *Mr. Ivy League Hot Shit*. "Please call me Simon", he asks her, to which she responds, "Please don't tell me what to do" (31). (Dear Reader, Simon will marry her.)

Simon is lying and spying himself. He is hiding more than his old-country family surname and that manuscript in a locked desk draw. He lies (by omission) about his origins (Coney Island), religion (Jewish), and family connection to Ethel Greenglass. The WASPish name *Putnam* offers him these opportunities to pass, and he fails to clarify the misperceptions, especially in 1953: "Julia's parents had misgivings about her marrying a Jew, even one named Putman" (302). His boss, Warren Landry, usually calls his new editor *Simon*, but once Simon reveals his editing ploy, Warren calls him *Mr. Putman* in anger: "He pronounced my name as if he knew that Putnam wasn't my legitimate surname." (104). Founder Preston Bartlett also questions Simon's validity: "Mr. Putnam, if that is your real name" (197). His Uncle Maddie has embraced the trappings of a Putnam, since he practices the Gilded Age way of addressing workers by their professions. The driver is *Driver*, the waiter *Waiter*, the cook *Cook*. Simon, not really a *Putman*, cannot bring himself to do that.

Simon's boss Warren Landry plays the name game for serious stakes. Although the publishing firm is Landry, Landry and Bartlett, there is only one *Landry*, that being Warren. "Our founders had decided that three surnames sounded more impressive than two. But Warren also liked saying, 'I am the one and only Landry!' [. . .] asserting his right to name two-thirds of a business after himself" (35). Duplicity shows up repeatedly, as Warren tries to get employees to use his first name. According to Simon, this plea was a good cover story, to "prove that the company was an enlightened democracy and not a dictatorship ruled by ambition, intimidation, and fear" (38). No one will do so to his face, but he is *Warren* behind his back.

Warren is an onomastician. His forte is in naming CIA special operations (he is both types of agent, literary and CIA): *Operation Othello*, for "the literary touch!" (102); *Operation St. Anthony's Fire* to monger fear. Of course, there were the duds: "Operation Ahab. What reader of *Moby-Dick* would go on that mission?" (206). There were also names that were too transparent: *Operation Svengali* for a mind-control project. "What's the point of a secret name if everyone knows what it means?" (207). But Warren has fun with the job.

One of Warren's names hits very close to home for Simon, a posthumous name for a project that turned tragic. Warren retroactively names this operation *The Burning*, one that ended with 87 fighters in Albania, resisting the Soviets, being burned alive. We have heard this title before. Simon's college advisor coincidentally had urged Simon to read something called *The Burning*, and that is the title Simon gives to his undergraduate thesis. In addition, Warren tells Simon that Anya's *Vixen* manuscript was originally named *The Burning*.

Names will be sacrificed, sullied, and redeemed by the end of *The Vixen*. Simon's mother predicts that soon there will be no more *Rosenbergs* or *Ethels* in the phone book. Already, *Our Ethel (Rosenberg)* becomes mixed up with *Lucy's Ethel (Mertz)* in conversation as the family watches the 1950s sitcom between news reports of the execution (6). Simon wonders and worries about Ethel and Julius's sons: "[W]hat would happen when the Rosenberg boys went to junior high, presumably under assumed names [. . .]?" (181). (In fact, they are adopted by, and take the surname of, the Meeropols.)

Names multiply for multifarious (and nefarious) purposes. One *Vixen* becomes two, then three: (1) Prose's book, which contains (2) Anya's manuscript (although at one point Anya misspells the title as *Vickson*), which begets (3) the version with Anya's title that Simon sends to the publisher, his own revenge rewrite.

In a way, there is a fourth *Vixen*. Simon learns so much from this project that he later on writes his own Viking saga under an assumed name, the "androgynous pseudonym: E. S. Rose" (306). "In fact, I liked writing as E. S. Rose more than I would have liked it as Simon Putnam. It made it easier—made it possible—to *not be myself*, to let the story pour through me. Those moments of grace, of transcendence, were more satisfying than whatever celebrity Simon Putnam might have enjoyed" (306-307).

Simon deliberately gets "the wrong" version of *The Vixen* published, his edited version, and vindicates Ethel's name, at least to those few who read the book before it is pulped. He also is offered the chance to rename himself when Warren screams at him, "Fuck you, Simon whatever-your-name-is" (298). What is Simon's name? *Putnam* was a *put-name*, put on by the immigration official. Is there a clue in the fact that Vikings reserved revenge only for kith and kin? Did Simon avenge a relative with this clearing of Ethel's name? Could the family name have been *Greenglass* or *Rosenberg*.

Susan Behrens

Marymount Manhattan College, USA