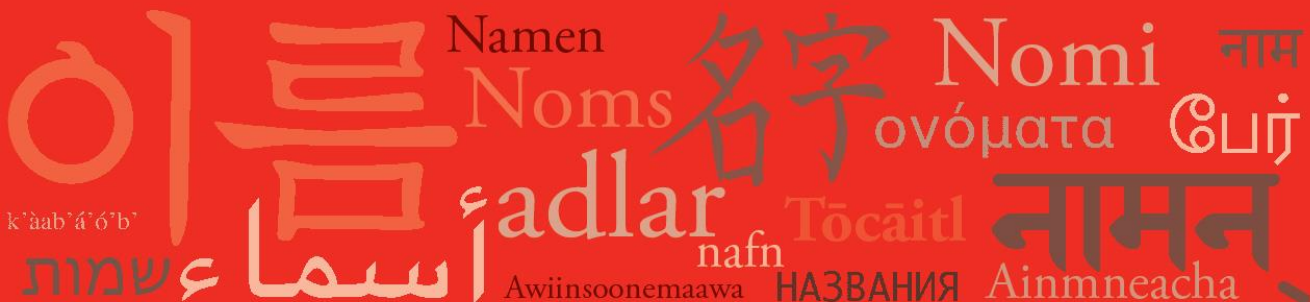


# Names | A Journal of Onomastics



## Book Review

**The Misfits.** By JAMES HOWE. New York: Simon and Schuster. 2021 (28<sup>th</sup> edition). Pp. 304. \$8.99. (Paperback). ISBN 13: 978-0-689-83956-6.

In 2001, the children's book *The Misfits* made its debut on the US American book market. Now in its 28<sup>th</sup> edition, the work immediately received resounding international acclaim, earning the book and its author, James Howe, numerous awards. Alongside its irresistible quirky humor, one of the primary reasons for this book's enduring success is its compelling social justice theme. As Howe himself explains, one of the main incentives for him to have written the book is to speak out against name-calling and encourage others to do the same. Howe makes this call to action by telling the story of four friends. There is *Adison Carle* or *Addie*, who stands out amongst her classmates thanks to her startling height and imposing intelligence; the pint-sized wiseguy *Schuyler Tookis*, also known as *Skeezie* or *Elvis*; the fearlessly creative *Joe Bunch*, who frequently comes to school to find his locker smeared with ugly taunts like "fairy" and "faggot"; and the book's main character, the big-hearted, slightly overweight *Bobby Goodspeed*, whom the bullies prefer to call *Pork Chop*, *Roly-Poly*, *Dough Boy*, and *Fluff*. As the reader soon discovers, what binds together this endearing crew of four is not only their love for another, but also their shared experience of being the constant butt of vicious name-calling in their school, Paintbrush Falls Middle School (PFMS).

The reader enters the story, just as PFMS is entering the final phase of its school elections. Lead by Addie, their self-proclaimed leader, the group of outsiders "decide" to enter the political arena with a party of their own, *The No-Name Party*. As their name suggests, this non-conformist third party has two novel campaign objectives. First to call attention to the prevalence done by harmful name-calling; and second to put an end to the dreadful behavior once and for all. In the crescendo of the story, we watch in a combination of hope and horror as the entirety of PFMS files into the assembly hall to hear the final promotional speeches by each party representative. After the presidential candidates for the Democrats and the Republicans finish their pitches, the leader of the No-Name Party is invited to take the floor by the Election supervisor, Ms. Wyman. Much to

[ans-names.pitt.edu](http://ans-names.pitt.edu)

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

Vol. 71 No. 3, Summer 2023

DOI 10.5195/names.2023.2565



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/).

the delight of the students and the irritation of Ms. Wyman, Addie turns the mic over to our narrator, Bobby Goodspeed, when it comes time for the No-Name Party to pitch its platform. Once at the podium, Bobby reveals to the entire school and the readers just how he came to be called *Fluff*.

It all started a few years earlier when Bobby's mother lost her battle against cancer. In his grief, he began a daily ritual of eating his mother's favorite treat—peanut-butter sandwiches slathered with marshmallow fluff. That coping mechanism soon resulted in significant weight gain and a seemingly endless supply of derisive nicknames. In the following passage, Bobby explains the effect this name-calling has had on him and so many others in the PFMS universe:

Names [. . .] do hurt. They hurt because we believe them. We think they are telling us something true about ourselves, something other people can see even if we don't. Lardo fluff fatso faggot fairy dweeb mutant freak ree-tard loser greaser know-it-all beanpole geek dork . . . Is that me? we think. Is that who I am? If you haven't been called any of those names, think about the ones you have been called. Is that who you are? The No-Name Party wants to put an end to name-calling in school. [. . .] We want to represent everybody in the school and will work hard to make all voices heard [. . .]. (250-251)

Somewhat predictably, at the end of Bobby's speech the assembly hall erupts in thunderous applause; and Bobby is congratulated with a flurry of high-fives and hugs from his classmates, and slaps on the back and much hair tousling from the adults. If *The Misfits* were an ordinary tale, the story would have ended happily ever after with the No-Name Party winning by a landslide and no one ever calling anyone else a hurtful name ever again. Thankfully, *The Misfits* is no ordinary story and Howe is no order writer. Rather than boring readers with a cliché ending, Howe creates a refreshingly realistic narrative that opens the space for real lessons to be learnt.

The day after Bobby's rousing speech, readers learn that it is not the No Name Party which wins the election but the Republicans, led by one of the insanely popular kids from the in-group crowd. And, derisive names continue to be hurled in PFMS's hallways, albeit less often than before. As Bobby reflects in the final pages of the book, "[i]t isn't always about winning the election . . . or the race . . . or the game. Sometimes it is about winning something much bigger". (260). According to the story's narrator/author, the No-Name Party members' courage to speak up and speak out was not without consequences. Some students and teachers who were inspired by *The Misfits'* example decide to make a personal promise to take a stand against name-calling. That collective pledge eventually transformed into a school coalition and the start of a new initiative, "No-Name Calling Week". Although readers learn that that grassroots initiative does not result in an immediate and radical change, they see that with time and commitment, real changes is possible.

In a truly heart-warming example of life imitating art, after the release of Howe's homage on the outcasts, small coalitions of students, teachers, and parents began their own "No-Name Calling Week" in their school communities. Those actions soon snow-balled and by 2004, three years after the book's first release, No-Name Calling Week had become firmly institutionalized in many schools across the United States and beyond. For tens of thousands of school teachers, pupils, and their parents, January remains an action month against derogatory name-calling and other forms of discrimination in their communities. The year 2024 officially marks the twentieth anniversary of No-Name Calling Week in the United States. In support of this important grassroots movement, in January of 2021, California Senator Barbara Lee, the highest ranking African American woman in the Democratic Leadership, introduced a Congressional resolution (H. Con. Res 4) to support "the goals and ideals of No Name-Calling Week" by assisting schools in their "ongoing dialogue about ways to eliminate name-calling bullying, and harassment in their communities".<sup>1</sup> As one of the resolution's co-sponsors, Rhode Island Congressman, David Cicilline, explained: "No one should ever be made to feel unsafe or unwelcome [. . .] unfortunately, that's what happens to many young people across our country" (Lee 2021, para. 4).

Unlike the inane children's rhyme about sticks and stones, the fact is name-calling can and does cause very real injury. As numerous scientific investigations have confirmed, children who are the target of malicious name-calling frequently evidence lower rates of self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as higher rates of anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, aggression, and self-harming behaviors (e.g., substance-abuse, eating disorders; suicidal thoughts, attempts, and completion) (Acquah, et al. 2016; Armitage 2021; Crozier & Skiliopidon 2002; Crozier & Dimmock 1999; Davis, Tucker, Dunbar, Pedersen, & D'Amico 2020; Goldstein 2004; Lin & Liu 2023; Mynard, Joseph & Alexander 2000; Tucker et al. 2016; Salmon, James, & Smith 1998). Importantly, such negative outcomes have not only been identified for not only the targets of malicious name-calling, but also the name-callers themselves (National Center for Injury Prevention and Control 2014).

According to many scientific investigations, both large-scale and small, in environments where derogatory name-calling is allowed to persist, other forms of abuse, be they verbal, emotional, sexual, mental, and/or physical, may thrive as well (Valido, et al 2022; Basile et al 2019; Mynard, Joseph, & Alexander 2000; National Center for Education Statistics. 2021; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). Under such dysfunctional conditions, it is not at all unusual to find one and the same person becoming both a victim and a

perpetrator of malicious name-calling, hurting others as they have been hurt themselves in an endless chain of harming and being harmed (Basile et al 2019).

Importantly, *The Misfits* deals with this complexity and largely resists the temptation of presenting one-dimensional characters who are either the giver or the receiver of negative nicknames. Throughout the book, there are numerous examples in which one of *The Misfits* calls someone else a hurtful name. For example, the ever-creative Joe devises the particularly vicious monikers *Miss Future Anorexic Cheerleader Prom Queen My Life Will be Over at Seventeen* to refer to one of the most popular girls in school (51). Even Bobby, who delivers the speech urging his classmates to think about how much damage name-calling can do, frequently calls others names, although usually out of earshot. Rather than call his boss by his real name, *Mr. Kellerman*, Bobby insists on referring to him as *Mr. Killer Man*, until he discovers that the two of them actually have a lot in common: the two of them grew up in Paintbrush; both have the same first name, *Robert*; each regularly experienced hurtful name-calling; and most importantly of all, both recently lost their mothers. That shared grief becomes a critical turning point in Bobby's development. It is then that he recognizes that everyone has a story to tell. In many ways, the friendship that develops between young *Bobby* and the elderly *Robert* is one of the most moving in *The Misfits*. Their shared ability and willingness to see beyond their superficial differences allow them to appreciate the humanity in one another. According to Howe, it is that ability to recognize and respect one another, with all our many differences, which enables us to stick up for ourselves and others: to "do what's right because you know in your heart it's the right thing to do". That, say Howe, is the ultimate lesson he hopes his stories can teach. The fact that Howe's work uses names as a tool for imparting this lesson makes it a highly recommendable read for all name lovers.

This is not to say, however, that Howe's work is without problems. There are several aspects of the narrative which may risk reinforcing faulty assumptions about names and naming. Putting aside the fact that the few Black characters in the story are forced to articulate their perspective through Howe's rather clumsy version of African American English, the author decides to name the one prominent (predictably athletic) Black male character *DuShawn Carter* and the one Black female (always angry, never kind) character *Tondayala Cherise DuPré*. While it is true that some morphophonological combinations are more common in certain ethnoracial groups than others, it is also true that not every member of a particular ethnoracial grouping will have a personal name that fits those patterns. The fact that Howe resorts to these (non)onomastic tropes is a missed opportunity to teach readers about the diversity that exists within and between groups. Where Howe's name choices sometimes made for uncomfortable reading, there were other moments that were positively cringe-worthy, like when Joe and Bobby explain that they prefer to call their classmate *Tondayala Cherise* rather than *Tommi*, the name she has asked everyone to call her because THEY like her formal name better. The privilege they display by blatantly ignoring their classmates' wishes remains completely unchallenged in the book.

A similarly disturbing moment occurs when *DuShawn* declares that the adopted parents of their Asian-American classmate, *Heather*, clearly "got no sense" (90) because they didn't "name her Ming-Li or Kim or something [ . . . ] [to] give her a sense of pride, man!" (90). Addie (thankfully) challenges this contention. However, *DuShawn* responds by making an even greater display of his racism. He haughtily declares: "The girl's Chinese. Callin' her Heather and stick' her in the middle of a family of micks, man, just makes her look the fool". (90). Although taken to task for using the slur "mick", his other prejudices are left unchallenged. To make matters worse, later on, when a concerned Addie asks *DuShawn* if he has ever been called racist names, he is portrayed as taking offense at the very question. "You're thinkin'" he retorts "because I'm black I've been called names" (145). He then states that although he knows that there are bigoted people in the world, he personally has never had to deal with it.

When one stops to consider the fact that James Howe was nearly ten years old when Emmet Till's horribly mutilated body was found after having been tortured to death by a gang of Mississippi Klansmen; that he was in his 20s when the US Supreme Court finally ruled that state prohibitions against interracial marriage were unconstitutional; that he, a native New Yorker, published *The Misfits* after it was revealed that five African-American teenagers: Corey Wise, Antron McCray, Raymond Santana, Kevin Richardson, and Yusef Salaam—a.k.a. "The Central Park Five"—had been wrongfully convicted and imprisoned for assaulting and raping a female jogger in Central Park; and that his story about the group of four outcast students was being sold in bookstores as the world watched in horror televised images of Rodney King being mercilessly beaten by a gang of police officers . . . when you think about all that, it is difficult to understand why and how Howe decided to have the only Black male character in his story about intolerance indignantly declare that he had never been the victim of racist name-calling. At best, this narrative choice was a profound and deeply disturbing missed opportunity to discuss just how extreme name-calling can become. At worst, it is an example of sociopolitical myopia that focusses on the suffering of a select few while largely ignoring the lethal injustices facing the masses. Thus, while Howe devotes an entire page of his book to displaying the 58 hurtful epithets that have been hurled at his four white protagonists *Bobby*, *Joe*, *Skeezie*, and *Addie*, the harmful slurs reserved for his secondary non-white characters *Tondayala Cherise DuPré* and *Heather* are left unnamed and unspoken, relegated to the deepest corners of the narrative closet. The fact that Howe chose to side-step this

aspect of name-calling is not only a missed opportunity for creating a richer, more inclusive narrative. It is also a lost chance for encouraging readers to come to terms with the prejudices which lay underneath name-calling.

Granted, it is never possible for any one book to take into consideration ALL aspects of a social issue. Authors are therefore forced to narrow down their thematic focus to address one central concern. Where *The Misfits* strikes out where the issues of ethnicity and race are concerned, it hits a dazzling homerun in its treatment of gender, sex, and sexuality. In fact, it would not be an overstatement to say that Howe’s sensitive and respectful handling of these issues was no less than revolutionary. It is one of the first successful US American works of fiction that was written for underage readers and presented positive, well-adjusted, and openly queer characters. As Howe revealed in an interview for the literary website “bookpage.com”, his decision to include positive gay protagonists was intentional and inspired by his own biography. After spending decades of his life hiding his own sexuality in shame and fear, he was amazed to find how much happiness he discovered once he came out and embraced his true self. At the same time, he experienced a sense of grief and anger in the time he had spent in self-rejection. After that experience, he “wanted to write a book in which there’s a kid who’s growing up and gay and feels fine about who he is” (Cary 2011., para. 17).

At the time, the decision to publish a queer-friendly children’s book within the United States was not only innovative, it was courageous. In the same year that *The Misfits* was released, the United States was undergoing a shocking rise of anti-gay discrimination, and underage victims were by no means spared. According to the 2001 report “Hatred in the Hallways” which was conducted by Human Rights Watch in combination with the US Department of Justice, queer youth across the nation were regularly the target of blistering verbal harassment. As one respondent revealed “The worst thing about my first school was that they were screaming things to me in the hallways. Sometimes they would say these names in class” (Bochenek & Brown 2001). Another study interviewee described the taunting scene that greeted him each day he entered his school: “These guys, they’ll stand in front of the lockers. They’ll be, like, ‘Look at that faggot’. You hear it every day” (Bochenek & Brown 2001). Seen against that backdrop, thirty-years ago, creating for middle school and adolescent readers a book that offers positive non-heterosexual main characters was truly revolutionary. Thankfully today, there is an ever-growing number of children’s and young adult books that place a stunning rainbow of once marginalized minority groups at their narrative center.

Despite that positive development or perhaps in reaction to it, recent years have also seen a disconcerting backlash against literature that teaches young readers about the very real harms that can be caused by disrespecting the diversity of peoples’ identities. In many classrooms and libraries across the United States, the mounting intolerance of tolerance has resulted in a disconcerting surge in literary censorship. According to nationwide data collected by the American Library Association (ALA), 2022 saw the highest number of attempted book bans in the last two decades. In total, the ALA determined that for the school year 2021–2022, there were 2,571 unique titles that were targeted by censors. The states with the highest number of challenged titles are presented in the table below (ALA 2022):

**Table 1.** The Ten US States with the Highest Number of Challenged Book Titles (NrCBT)

	State	NCBT		State	NrCBT
1	Texas	2349	6	Virginia	182
2	Florida	991	7	Missouri	173
3	Michigan	359	8	North Carolina	167
4	Pennsylvania	302	9	Wisconsin	137
5	South Carolina	218	10	North Dakota	113

According to PEN America, a non-profit organization that has worked to defend freedom of expression in literature since 1922, the vast majority of books banned in the United States over the past few years have been by and/or about a person of color or a member of the LGBTQIA+ community (Tomlin 2023). For example, from July 1, 2021, to June 30, 2022, 81% of books banned in the USA had primary or secondary characters who were either persons of color (40%); or LGBTQIA+ (41%) (Friedman & Johnson 2022). The perpetual erasure of literature that reflects the experiences of minorities runs the risk of communicating that their thoughts, feelings, needs, gifts, and lives are less credible, less valuable, less interesting, less inspiring.

Sadly, there is every indication that this pattern of censorship will not change any time soon. Although there are another six months til the 2022–2023 school year ends, PEN America (2023) reports that 1,477 individual titles have already faced censorship attempts. Among the top ten contested titles are relative newcomers to the book market like Maia Kanabe’s *Gender Queer* as well as internationally celebrated literary classics such as Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (PEN America 2023).<sup>1</sup> On examination of the titles that have been singled out for censorship, a startling 79% percent are classified as young adult (49%), middle grade (11%), or picture book (19%) (Friedman & Farid Johnson 2022).

For many, these numbers will come as no surprise. From standing room only auditoriums to anonymous internet fora, far too many adults across the political spectrum have allowed spirited yet respectful, evidence-based discussions over appropriate literature for underage readers to divulge into unseemly

name-calling competitions in which one side attempts to outdo the other in viciousness. In the face of such toxicity, *The Misfits*, for all its shortcomings, has an incredibly important message to share for readers of every age. In the words of Bobby Goodspeed, in the midst of all this verbal animosity, let us all take some time out to “think about the names we call each other [ . . . ] and stop talking to each other like some of us are less than others of us” (251). And, then, maybe, just maybe we can begin to work together to make sure that everyone’s voice is heard and everyone’s right to pursue their own definition of happiness is respected.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> The full text of the Congressional Resolution can be found here:

<https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-congress/house-concurrent-resolution/4/text>

<sup>2</sup> According to the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, between 2013 and 2023, the following publications are the five most challenged titles in the United States: 1.) the *Captain Underpants* series by Dav Pilkey; 2.) *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison; 3.) *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-time Indian* by Sherman Alexie; 4.) *Fifty Shades of Grey* by E.L. James; and 5.) *The Hunger Games* by Suzanne Collins (ALA 2023).

## References

- Acquah, Emmanuel, Pamela-Zoe Topalli, Michael L. Wilson, Nina Junntila, and Päivi M. Niemi. 2016”. Adolescent Loneliness and Social Anxiety as Predictors of Bullying Victimization.” *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth* 21, no. 3: 320–331.
- American Library Association (ALA). 2022 “Censorship by the Numbers”. <https://www.ala.org/advocacy/bbooks/by-the-numbers>
- American Library Association (ALA). 2023. “Challenges to Freedom to Read, 2013-2022.” Office of Intellectual Freedom. April 19, 2023. Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://public.flourish.studio/story/1882667/>
- Armitage, Richard. 2021. “Bullying in Children: Impact on Child Health”. *BMJ Pediatrics Open* 5: e000939. doi: 10.1136/bmjpo-2020-000939
- Basile, Kathleen, Heather Clayton, Sarah DeGue, John Gilford, Kevin Vagi, Nicolas Suarez, Marissa Zwald, and Richard Lowry. 2019. “Interpersonal Violence Victimization Among High School Students: Youth Risk Behavior Survey.” *MMWR Supplements* 69, no. 1: 28–37.
- Bochenek, Michael, and A. Widney Brown. 2001. *Hatred In the Hallways: Violence and Discrimination Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students in U. S. Schools*. NCJ Number 188824. U.S. Department of Justice. Human Rights Watch. Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://www.hrw.org/legacy/reports/2001/uslgbt/toc.htm>
- Cary, Alice. 2011. “James Howe: Searching for Addie’s Voice.” Interview by Alice Cary. Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://www.bookpage.com/interviews/8718-james-howe-childrens/>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). 2020. Youth Risk Behavior Survey Data Summary and Trend Report 2009-2019.
- Ciabattari, Jane. 2023, May 26. “Why is the US Banning Children’s Books.” Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20230525-how-book-banning-escalated-in-the-us>
- Crozier, W. Ray., and Evanthia Skiliopidon. 2002. “Adult Recollections of Name-Calling at School.” *An International Journal of Educational Psychology*. 22, no. 1: 113–124.
- Crozier, W. and Patricia Dimmock. 1999. “Name-calling and Nicknames: A Sample of Primary School Children.” *British Journal of Educational Psychology*. Part 4. 69: 505–516.
- Davis, Jordan, Joan Tucker, Michael Dunbar, Eric Pedersen, and Elizabeth D’Amico. 2020. “Effects of Homophobic Name-calling and Verbal Sexual Harassment on Substance Use Among Young Adults.” *Aggressive Behavior* 47, no. 1: 5–16.
- Farid Johnson, Nadine. 2023, March 28. “PEN America: U.S. Is Experiencing the Biggest Attack on First Amendment Rights in Generations.” <https://pen.org/pen-america-testimony-first-amendment/>
- Friedman, Jonathan, and Nadine Farid Johnson. 2022, September 19. “Banned in the USA: The Growing Movement to Censor Books in Schools.” Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://pen.org/report/banned-usa-growing-movement-to-censor-books-in-schools/>
- Goldstein, Richard. 2004. “Children’s Inhumanity to Children.” *The Journal of Pediatrics* 144, no. 1: 3–4.

- Lee, Barbara. 2021. "Congresswoman Barbara Lee Reintroduces A Resolution Recognizing No Name-calling Week." Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://lee.house.gov/news/press-releases/congresswoman-barbara-lee-reintroduces-a-resolution-recognizing-no-name-calling-week>
- Lin, Kai, and Lin Liu. 2023. "Friendly Teasing or Traumatic Bullying? Examining the Conditioning Effect of Social Distance on the Negative Psychological Outcomes of Homophobic Name-Calling." *Journal of School Violence* 22, no. 3: 429–441.
- Mynard, Helen, Stephen Joseph, and Jane Alexander. 2000. "Peer-Victimisation and Posttraumatic Stress in Adolescents." *Personality and Individual Differences* 29, no. 5: 815–821.
- National Center for Injury Prevention and Control. Division of Violence Prevention. 2014. "The Relationship between Bullying and Suicide: What We Know and What It Means for Schools." Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/yv/bullying-suicide-translation-final-a.pdf>
- National Center for Education Statistics. 2021. "Bullying at School and Electronic Bullying".
- PEN America. 2023, April 20. "The 11 Most Banned Books of the Start of the 2022-2023 School Year." Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://pen.org/banned-books-list-fall-2022/>
- Salmon, G., A. James, and D. Smith. 1998. "Bullying in Schools: Self-reported Anxiety, Depression, and Self-esteem in Secondary School Children." *British Medical Journal* 317, no. 7163: 924–925.
- Tolin, Lisa. 2023, February 14. "The Most Banned Picture Books of the 2021-2022 School Year." Accessed June 30, 2023. <https://pen.org/banned-picture-books-2022/>
- Tucker, Joan, Brett Ewing, Dorothy Espelage, Harold Green, Kayla de la Haye, and Michael Pollard. 2016. "Longitudinal Associations of Homophobic Name-Calling Victimization with Psychological Distress and Alcohol Use During Adolescence." *Journal of Adolescent Health* 59, no. 1: 110–119.
- Valido, Alberto, Gabriel Merrin, Dorothy Espelage, Luz Robinson, Kyle Nickodem, Katherine Ingram, America El Sheikh, Cagil Torgal, and Jarvi Fairclough. 2022. "Social-Ecological Predictors of Homophobic Name-Calling Perpetration and Victimization Among Early Adolescents." *Journal of Early Adolescence* 42, no. 9: 110–1151.

### I.M. Nick

*Germanic Society of Forensic Linguistics, GERMANY*