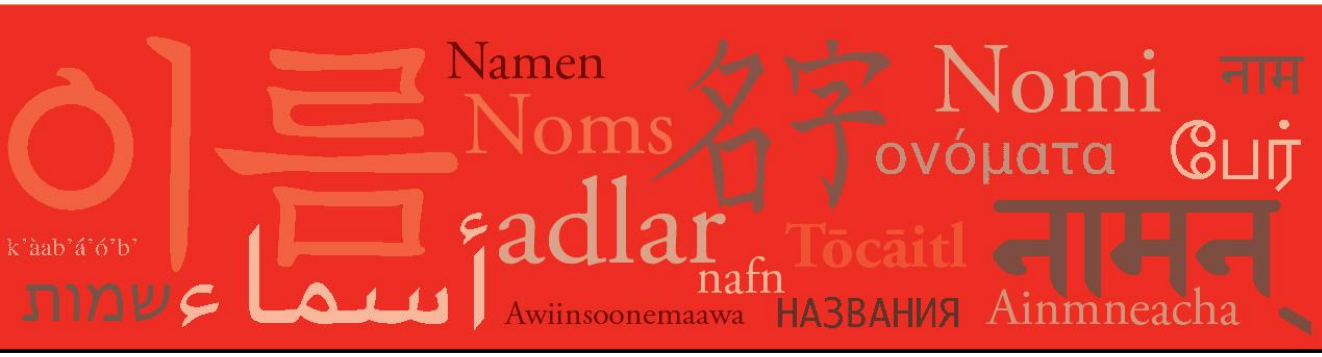
Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Naming to Survive in the Face of Powerlessness: Four Case Studies from Fiction for Young Readers

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ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 73 No. 4, Winter 2025 DOI 10.5195/names.2025.2759

Abstract

Young Adult (YA) fiction presents readers with teen protagonists struggling to overcome real-world, adult-like troubles. These dark themes are on the rise as the genre has embraced plotlines related to issues of diversity, inclusion, and social justice. Such a trend has been both criticized and applauded in the media. This article examines the positive ways that the genre, through treatment of naming schemes, offers young readers models of self-advocacy, social activism, and hopes for a more just world. Four contemporary novels are considered. Searching for, insisting on their true names, the teens in these books survive dire circumstances and grow. The books' authors not only depict teens fighting for their true selves, but they also supply young readers with abundant resources to tackle such issues as health crises, both mental and physical, the trauma of school shootings, and suffering often inflicted on disenfranchised populations. This article provides insights into the role of naming in YA fiction by examining the journeys of these teen protagonists trying to navigate a world of oppression and disempowerment.

Keywords: literary onomastics, diversity, powerlessness, self-advocacy, social activism, social inequality, young adult fiction

Introduction

Young adult (YA) fiction has been rising in popularity. This genre, which is generally defined as books for readers 13 and older, saw print sales increasing by more than 48% in the five years between 2018 and 2023 (Toop 2023). Also on the rise are YA novels that deal with issues of diversity, inclusion, and the often-associated problems of social inequality and powerlessness (Fitzgerald 2024). Some of these books have been criticized for tackling themes considered too dark; are young readers ready for stories about death, homelessness, depression, suicide, human trafficking? (Wenstrom 2021). A counter response is that fictional teens triumphing over adversity can potentially lead young readers to a greater awareness of social injustice in the world and, furthermore, supply models of hope, self-advocacy, even social activism (Gustafson 2022; Fitzsimmons and Wilson 2020; Smith 2011). While the genre might have once been "perceived as shallow [. . .], YA fiction often offers narratives that are complex—weaving in discussions on race, privilege, gender and sexuality" (Toop 2023).

Another way to consider teens in this genre as they wrestle with adult-size issues is to look at how various authors treat naming. Onomastic research contributes to a wider understanding of YA fiction and the messages it sends to readers. *NAMES* even dedicated a special 2022 issue to names in children's fiction. Nick (in press) offers an entire text on the theme of diverse naming in YA literature. Examining naming schemes in this genre illuminates further avenues to combatting real world problems of social inequality and helps readers see ways out of powerlessness, especially by harnessing the strength obtained from true names (Behrens in press; Anderson 2022). This article will continue that exploration and present a discussion of four contemporary YA novels that deal with so-called dark themes and examine their plots and protagonists through onomastics. First, we briefly consider scholarly explorations into YA fiction that shine a light on issues of social injustice and powerlessness.

Social (In)justice Issues in YA Fiction

Fitzsimmons and Wilson (2020) argue that scholarship into YA fiction, when too narrowly focused on the so-called blockbuster books (e.g., *Twilight*, *Hunger Games*), precludes a more inclusive picture of underrepresented and undervalued voices in the genre. Too many books, they argue, are overlooked that actually inform readers about real world troubles and suggest avenues of action for readers to make a difference. Fitzsimmons and Wilson encourage both scholars and book buyers to cast a wider net. YA readers will readily find a diverse array of protagonists dealing with very serious, adult-like problems. Not all YA books give us "vampire romances or teenagers fighting to the death" in fantasy settings (Toop 2023 n.p.).

Today we also find more diversity in YA fiction among the authors themselves and consequently the voices of the protagonists. With their "desire for authenticity", writes Toop (2023 n.p.), these authors provide books tackling issues of diversity and "opportunity for change" (n.p.). And despite the fears of plots being too dark, such real-world issues might even be more accessible for young readers who connect with, and develop

DOI 10.5195/names.2025.2759 Vol. 73 No. 4, Winter 2025 ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

empathy for, a fictional character who is undergoing something traumatic (Toop 2023; Anderson 2022). Readers live through the struggles of the protagonists, who themselves "examine the inner workings of an oppressive system" and device action plans (Fitzsimmons and Wilson 2020, xiii). "One of the primary ways the teenage character experiences this development within YA literature is by disrupting the systems that define their lives" (xi).

Mootz (2020) asks questions about who gets to speak out and, in turn, who is silenced in YA fiction. We should value a text that "recognizes that justice and change is [sic] not immediate, but that speaking out and acting on [. . .] knowledge and experience is [sic] necessary. It is the characters' responsibility, and the readers' implied responsibility, to continue the struggle" (75). Jesse and Jones (2020) believe these models of social activism are indeed teachable moments, and they see such books as having a place in the classroom, as part of teaching critical literacy, which "empowers students to recognize that because we do not live in an equitable society, some voices (and genders) matter more than others—but also that change is possible" (119). Not all characters get to change the system, but many can find opportunities to change their own worlds in positive ways.

Onomastic Research

Nick (in press) considers YA fiction today through the perspective of diversity in names. Fictional characters can model the taking of control of social forces through embracing the power of naming. A young reader can follow protagonists as they find ways to join forces, form support groups, disrupt systems of oppression, and discover not only community but also themselves.

Linguistic devices aid along the journey. DeVinne (2023) cites a series of names all starting with the letter **M** in Julia Alvarez's *In the Time of Butterflies* as a signal of those characters' commitment to one another and to the cause they are fighting for together. Behrens (2023) notes that the author of the 1960 working class British drama *The L-Shaped Room*, Lynne Reid Banks, makes effective use of her own first name's initial to bestow confidence and strength on a young, pregnant woman living alone in her (also non-traditional)
L-shaped living space. Repeated phonemes in fictional names can "establish a network of internominal relationships and lexical associations", states Robinson (2013) in his analysis of phonetic metaphors in the novels of Ursula K. Le Guin (194).

Knowing one's name can afford power to the name bearer; powerlessness otherwise. The overpowering first initial **R** of a first wife–dead and yet much psychologically present–in Daphne du Maurier's novel *Rebecca* leaves the young new wife unnamed, unsafe, and powerless (Robbins 2016). The teen in Sylvia Plath's
The Bell Jar tries on pseudonyms during a disastrous summer internship in New York City. It is not until she finally hears someone call her own, real name and only then can she return home to safety (Behrens 2013).

So too in real life: the psychological draw of repeated phonemes has been studied in patterns among popular baby names. Berger, Bradlow, Braunstein, and Zhang (2012) find that repetitions of consonants and vowels in one popular baby name will soon show up in other top 10 entries (e.g., an uptick in babies named *Karen* begets more *Katie* names; the popularity of *Jaydon* begets more *Aidens*).

Names as Resources in YA Fiction

This article examines onomastic patterns in a cohort of four recent YA novels that depict teen protagonists struggling with powerlessness in the face of real world problems: (1) *All the Greys on Greene Street*, by Laura Tucker (2019); (2) *When You Call My Name*, by Tucker Shaw (2022); (3) *The Lucky Ones*, by Liz Lawson (2022); and (4) *Cardboard City*, by Katarina Jovanovic (2023).

The crises confronting teens in these books are real, not fiction. A brief look at some statistics will show the relevance of the issues discussed here. Tucker shows a family struggling with mental health issues and the associated stigma. The World Health Organization estimates that 5% of adults around the world are suffering from depression (World Health Organization 2023). Shaw's book deals with HIV/AIDS. In the US, the number of people living with HIV or AIDS has decreased since the start of the epidemic, but it is still a dangerous disease, and the CDC (2024) reported almost 32,000 new infections in 2022 in the US alone. Currently, almost 40 million people worldwide are living with HIV (UNAIDS 2024). Lawson sets her story in the aftermath of a school shooting. The news organization CNN, which keeps track of school shootings in the US, reports that in just the first six weeks into 2025, there were already four school shootings (reported by Matthews, O'Kruk, and Choi 2025). The year 2024 saw 83 such tragedies (Matthews et al. 2025). Finally, Jovanovic depicts Romani teens living in deplorable conditions in Serbia. The mistreatment and suffering of minoritized groups around the world are reported by organizations such as UNHRC, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR 2025) and Minority Rights (Bašić 2021).

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Such tough reality in the news might not always reach the awareness of teens, but when protagonists in their same age bracket are living that reality, young readers might tune in more closely (Toop 2023; Anderson 2022) And how can the authors of these books also paint a picture of hope? The treatment of naming in each book sets up the protagonist, and the reader, to better cope with, and possibly overcome, powerlessness and social inequities. The books considered here, published between 2019 and 2023, are not blockbusters, but they are nonetheless worth exploring. How do young protagonists live through their crises and try to make a difference in their (big or small) worlds? The books supply diverse scenarios of survival experienced with the aid of naming. Names seem to constitute an essential tool, specifically when false labels are replaced with those of true names, for the self as well as for others in the teens' lives. Protagonists recognize naming as a source of power, helping to send the message that change is possible.

Why these particular books? Any discussion of a genre needs to settle on a subset of representative works to explore the issues at hand. This cohort comprises YA novels that cover a range of issues confronting their teen protagonists, problems humans continue to face today, in the 2020s. While all the books were published on or after 2019, the settings differ. Two are set in the late 20th century in New York City, and two are set in the early 21st century, one in Los Angeles and one in Serbia. Future research should continue to explore books with other themes and settings. The four in this article contribute to the larger picture of naming schemes in YA novels, especially as an avenue of raised social awareness and even potential societal change. As we view these books, we find protagonists using names to find their own voices, find ways to change–themselves and their relationship to external systems–and educate readers about crucial social issues.

All the Greys on Greene Street

Tucker's *All the Greys on Greene Street* is set in 1981 in New York City's SoHo section, an area back then largely populated by low-income artists. Successfully searching for real names that are in hiding saves 12-year-old Olympia (also called *Ollie*) from the same fate as her mother, whose life has stalled due to a paralyzing depression that keeps her in bed for weeks, endangering them both. The stigma of mental illness prevents Ollie from acting, asking for help. Soon, though, we find that naming expands Ollie's community and connections to others. The teen ultimately finds a friend in her father's Other Woman. Before the story begins, her father has run off with a French woman, who is snidely referred to as *Vouley Voo* by both Ollie and her mother. Once this other woman is humanized by showing kindness to the girl, Ollie can say, and the reader can learn, her real name, which is *Clothilde*. *Olympia* is also the name of a painting by French artist Édouard Manet. It depicts a prostitute lounging on her couch. A friend's parent points out to Ollie that no one ever really sees the other woman in the painting: a Black servant holding flowers just delivered to Olympia. Not only is young Ollie taught to see the figure, but she learns the name of the model who posed for the servant, at least her given name: *Laure*. Accepting her father's new love, and using Clothilde's real name, now also allow Ollie to visit her father in France. Here, Ollie sees Manet's *Olympia* and her servant; but more importantly, she gains the strength and support to seek the resources her mother needs to return to health.

Olympia is a reference to Greek mythology, although her family is not Greek. Her father's business partner is *Apollo*, again referencing Greek mythology, although this man is not Greek either; he is Polish. This Greek connection between the two characters, potentially an odd coincidental aside, actually conveys the close bond the two have. (It also echoes a subplot about an ancient statue with no provenance, another unnamed entity.) As we later learn–and as hinted at through the pair of Greek names–Apollo is also more than a family friend; he is in love with Ollie's mother, and he was given naming rights when Ollie was born.

Ollie is already very sensitive to the labels that we call colors. She and Apollo often play a game of finding the most accurate name for a hue. Such exactitude in a color's name is not simply a game, though. It represents safety and power to these characters. "The names on the labels [of paint] are clues that there's magic inside: Orpiment. Azurite. Rose madder. Ochre. Ancora. Cinnabar. Malachite. Antimony" (36). Olympia knows more color terms than most middle schoolers do. She and Apollo also know the history of colors, and which ones were at one point in history toxic and could lead to sickness and death. Correct labels, we are reminded–at least for potential poisonous substances–can save lives. Strangely, though, in her own art Ollie fails for a long time to acknowledge the power of color. She is nicknamed *Miz Monochrome* for her resistance to incorporating color into her own artwork, instead sticking to black and white. When Ollie shares a weekend with a friend's family on Fire Island, she sees for the first time different versions of colors, in a new light (literally and figuratively). She finds the color back home in SoHo to be a contrasting "charmless grey" (248). In a different light, "[the greys] couldn't have been more different from the greys on Greene Street" (216); the lesser grey, perhaps a product of the mother's unresolved crisis. Eventually, Ollie learns to see and use colors in a better, truer light, "all the colors in a color" (113).

DOI 10.5195/names.2025.2759 Vol. 73 No. 4, Winter 2025 ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Labels hold such power in this story that they can indeed be a matter of life and death. A building in New York City at that time displaying the sign "AIR", for Artist in Residence, on the front door signaled to the city that the property was occupied after hours. The AIR sign on Ollie's building, however, is makeshift, drawn by hand; her family never seemed to have received official approval for AIR status. When Ollie tears the sign (name) off the front door in an angry moment, she takes their artist label away. She also almost costs her mother her life: a fire breaks out while Ollie is away, and the firefighters do not know (without the AIR sign) that the building, in this desolate area, is actually occupied. In the end, when Ollie's mother has finally received help, and mother and daughter have achieved stability, a government-issued AIR sign graces the entrance of their new home; her mother is officially bestowed the name of artist.

The book opens with a passage about the two meanings of the word Mayday: the first day of the fifth month of the year, as well as a call for help. We learn that the latter is from the French *M'aidez* for "Help Me!" (287). In addition, this plea traditionally must be spoken three times to ensure that it is understood. Asking for help is something that young Olympia cannot do for most of the book, holding onto the secret about her mother's depression and lack of parental oversight. The adult cannot take care of herself, let alone her child. Yet Olympia is trying to handle it all by herself. The book comes full circle when, at the end, all the real names are revealed; Ollie can then call *M'aidez* that third, crucial time and save her mother and herself. Saying the right name instead of being anonymous or saddled with a false label allows Ollie to utter aloud the words she needed to say: that her mother is suffering from depression.

When You Call My Name

New York City, a decade after the setting of *All the Greys on Greene Street*, is reeling from a health crisis. *When You Call My Name* is set in New York in the year 1990 and deals with the HIV/AIDS epidemic. As with the AIR sign in *All the Greys on Green Street*, names ultimately save the protagonists of this book: Adam and Ben, gay teens who both turn 18 during the story. The two characters are very tuned into names. Hearing their own names, as well as having lists of names as support, helps them to keep going, to survive.

Note the significance of names when Adam meets his first love, Callum: "'The name is Keane.' 'Key?' 'Keane [. . .] Callum Keane'" (Shaw 7). Working at a local DVD store (it is 1990!), Adam has to shift through a list of customers' names with discs on hold to find the right name: "*Ramón, Barillas, Inkpen, Zakris, Keane*" [italics in original] (7). "Two hard guttural clicks with the hum in between and a fade-out finish. *Callum Keane*. He didn't know yet that he would remember that name forever" (7). The exchange is completed when Callum utters *Adam*: "Adam was startled to hear Callum Keane say his name" (8); "Callum Keane was calling his name, because he knew it now" (8).

On a more somber note, Adam educates himself on the HIV/AIDS literature when he learns that Callum is HIV positive. The list of vocabulary terms "[. . .] dizzies him, but he will learn them all" (207–208). The names of viruses, medications, and resources are no longer to be ignored. Through his widening world in this time and place, Adam also now knows many names of hospital patients. His godfathers, a gay couple, visit a roll call of HIV positive friends in the hospital: "Albert. Joe-Joe. Ron. Timo". (145). Adam joins them on one visit, since Callum has also recently been admitted, and he finds himself reading all the names on hospital doors: "*Donohue. Kaya. Mariani. Kelso. Moskowitz. Smith. Torres*" [italics in original] (165). But there is no *Keane*. Adding to the urgency of one's name having a voice–being known–is the fact that Adam is not a relative, nor did Callum give the hospital a list of names of people who could visit. In fact, "I don't have a list for a patient with that name", a nurse tells Adam (236). In the gay community of the time, hospital visitors are more likely to be friends than family and thus need special permission through self-advocacy. One's name must be overtly stated to become family. A real name thus bestows a kind of power and access. Failure to have it revealed results in powerlessness and people dying alone.

The last word Adam hears Callum utter as he is dying in the hospital is the name *Adam*. The lobby of the hospital, then, is where Adam goes for comfort after Callum's death. He sits in the hospital, where he "last heard [Callum] say his name" (300). And it is at the same hospital where Adam finally gets tested for AIDS, a move to protect his own life. Contradicting the argument that names bestow power, a nurse encourages Adam during the testing to use a pseudonym, *John Johnson* (345). And he is told that his results will be numerically coded for anonymity. Privacy or superstition, we learn here, dictates that the virus should not know your real name.

Ben, the other teen protagonist, is also attuned to names, for him those of fashion models, designers, and glossy magazines. He has memorized his own roll call: fashion icons from Madonna's hit single "Vogue": *Greta Garbo and Monroe*, etc. These names are like a mantra for Ben; reciting them keeps his spirits alive. When Adam and Ben finally properly meet at the Gay Pride Day Parade (they have spotted each other several

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 73 No. 4, Winter 2025 DOI 10.5195/names.2025.2759

times in the West Village area of the city and exchanged names, and once a brief, flirtatious kiss), Adam is drunk. He also keeps his distance from Ben with silly, belittling replacement names: *Ben Boy, Benny, Private Benjamin, Benzoyl Peroxide* [italics in original] (283); *Benedict, Benjamin Franklin, Eggs Benedict* [italics in original] (284); and *Gentle Ben* [italics in original] (285). Adam is using false names here in an attempt to strip Ben of power and importance, withholding the man's true name.

It is 1990, and posters and t-shirts from the advocacy group ACT UP proclaim that "SILENCE=DEATH" (171); the message is that speaking up (and acting up) can save lives. We see Adam and Ben learning this truth. Yet, when one of Adam's "gayfathers" (285) is diagnosed with HIV, their circle of friends resorts to the metaphor of naming with that grim twist: "Whose name did it [the virus] call this time?" (318). Here again is that superstition about keeping the virus from seeking you by your name, a reversal of the strengths in names and naming. Ultimately, though, names help the two teens find their way to safety. One fitful night, Adam remembers his grandmother's advice for how to recover from a nightmare: "You've been out in dreamland but you haven't found your way back yet. Don't be afraid. You can call yourself back. Use your name" [italics in original] (286). Up to the last chapter of the book, chapter titles alternate between Adam and Ben. The two teens become close in the end, paired in newly gained strength, and this achievement is signaled by the final chapter's heading: Adam and Ben (351).

The Lucky Ones

Lawson's *The Lucky Ones* is set in the 21st century. Chapter titles alternate between the names of two protagonists, *May* and *Zach,* just as they did in *When You Call My Name*. Here we have two teens both caught up in different ways in a recent school shooting outside Los Angeles. May's twin brother Jordan was killed at the school; Zach's mother is the lawyer defending the shooter, one of their classmates. At first, May and Zach become close; then, they discover each other's last name. May is a *McGintee*, the family who lost a son; Zach is a *Teller*, the son of the shooter's defense lawyer, the son of someone May loathes. May walks away, but Zach tries to win May's friendship back.

Given his associations with the shooter's defense team, Zach is bullied at school; one peer "[. . .] spits out my last name like it's a curse. Which it might be, now that I think about it" (128). Zach must ultimately prove to everyone, especially May, that he is not just the son of Michelle Teller but his own person; that his last name does not simply tell everything about who he is. "I'm not my mom. We might share the same DNA—the same last name—but I'm not her" (97). He needs to have his own, true name.

Naming as a crucial element of the self is also signaled through the unusual name of the indie band that May and Zach's friends have formed: *Proper Noun and the Noun*. The band name plays with a standard formula for popular musical groups, such as *Buddy Holly and the Crickets* or *Elvis Costello and the Attractions*: "specific person + anonymous other(s)". This odd template of a band name suggests that characters need to work in order to find their real, personal, and overt names to fill in those generic blanks and be someone. Both Zach and May are indeed trying to find ways to be their true selves, not merely nouns associated
with the tragedy.

Along the way, May learns that to survive, she needs to give voice to names, to say them aloud. She finally succeeds in lovingly speaking her brother's name for the first time since his death. At first, when she mentions *Jordan*, she "[. . .] want(s) to grab [the name] out of the air and shove it back into (her) mouth" (135). She learns to name by ultimately feeling safe around Zach, due to Zach's persistence; he is who helps May finally tell her story. In contrast, all along May wants people to name the shooter. When Zach refers to him as "*the guy*" [italics in original] (96), May responds, "You mean David fucking Ecchles, the psychopath who killed my brother and five of my friends and my favorite teacher?" (96). That name needs to be uncovered, spoken and heard, similar to the way a virus might infect someone through the recitation of a name.

Lucy, May's best friend, is rooting for a romance between May and Zach to start. And when it finally does, she takes credit for pushing May to open up, not succumb to survivor guilt, but to heal. At one point she demands, "You had better name your firstborn after me" (167), a name-honor being one of the highest, it seems. But first May needs to let people know who she is. May must overcome the victim status of her friend's nickname for her, *May Day*.[1] She has said the name *Jordon McGintee*; she has said the name *David Ecchles*. When she comes face to face with Zach's mother, the defense attorney, she at first wants to hide her last name. Bravely, though, she decides it is time to be Jordan's sister, *May McGintee*, even in front of this woman. She emphatically says her full name so that the woman will connect the dots and know exactly who she is.

DOI 10.5195/names.2025.2759 Vol. 73 No. 4, Winter 2025 ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

As in *When You Call My Name*, here again having your name on a list can gain you access, to visit someone in the hospital or, in May's case, to visit David, the shooter, in prison. May is summoned by David through a series of letters he has been mailing her, and he places her name on a visitor's list. May is tempted to visit to obtain potential information he has about that day, and she finally goes as the first anniversary of the shooting nears. What she really needs to know is whether her brother's last word was her own name. In *When You Call My Name*, Adam takes solace in his dying lover's last word being *Adam*. David ultimately refuses to reveal Jordan's last words to May, as a kind of punishment: withholding name information to disrupt her healing. But May does heal. Zach helps her say *Jordan*. And while her own recitation of the names of the shooting victims had been for the past year a kind of self-torture, by the end of the book, May can list the fallen as a gigantic step toward her own healing. In fact, the last words of the book are composed of a recitation of the names of the shooting victims, ending with May offering up *Jordan McGintee* (333).

Cardboard City

Teens struggle with adult-size problems all over the world. *Cardboard City* depicts the subhuman treatment suffered by one minoritized group of people, the Romani, in present day Serbia. Teen Nikola and his sister Saida live under unjust conditions, and part of their dehumanizing social treatment is associated with the local population unable to name themselves as a people. Their home is on the outskirts of Belgrade, in a so-called city that is in fact made out of cardboard huts; and the titular name of the ramshackle set of lean-to huts is indeed *Cardboard City*. Calling it a city, giving it a name, affords the residents some dignity. The denizens, however, are disparagingly called *Gypsies* by those outside their area. This name to them is false. Thirteen-year-old Nikola Seich prefers, and is proud of, the preferred name of *Romani*. Yet, here in a world where true names can be lost, the Cardboard City residents continue to be belittled with the inaccurate and meant to be disparaging label *Gypsies*. We see the detrimental ramification of real names lost when we learn the story of a local boy named *Spoon*; the name is a taunt that has followed him since he burned himself with soup and thereafter feared spoons. Now, "nobody, not even his mother, remembered his real name" (Jovanovic 18). It seems that he is powerless to ever again be anything other than *Spoon,* a reflection of his fear. He will never embrace his true name and be fully realized, a message that claiming one's own name is not easily achieved; it is not guaranteed.

But as we see with all the protagonists represented in this article, Spoon and Nikola's community fights for naming accuracy. And the advantage of naming parallels constitutes one type of weapon for Nikola, revealing a path to a better life. At his young age, he is already a talented trumpet player. In fact, there seems to be a surprising number of trumpet players existing in one locale, some ancestors of Nikola and some unrelated. There is even fittingly a *Golden Trumpet Hotel*. Trumpet playing as a talent, lineage, and name-connection allows Nikola to ultimately be recognized for his own talents and escape his poverty. When Nikola is reunited late in the story with his sister Saida, who had run away, it is due to the unlikelihood of two trumpet-playing teens named *Nikola* residing in the same city. This *Nikola* must be both the brother who Saida is looking for and the young talented musician who is seeking his sister. The name-trail leads Nikola to family (reunited with his sister), fame (meeting a legendary trumpet player), and himself (recognized by the musician as a true trumpet player). Says the professional to this young teen, "The world will hear about Nikola Seich", promising that his true name can empower him (98). And with more visibility, more voice, this Romani can fight for equal treatment for his people.

Discussion

What do the teen protagonists in these novels learn by attending to the importance of names in their lives? First, they learn that true names can help form community. In *All the Greys on Greene Street*, Ollie and Apollo's Greek connection leads to a growing sense of family, and Ollie and *Vouley Voo/Clothilde* become allies through a real name being accepted. And we find in *Cardboard City* Nikola's unusual name acting as a link to family. True names can also help heal trauma and other wounds. We see this in *The Lucky Ones*, in May's recitation of the names of shooting victims as part of her recovery, as she gives voice to the silenced victims and to herself. The teens also learn that when one's name is on a list, one is official and can have access to people and resources, as in *When You Call My Name* and *The Lucky Ones*. We can be recognized for (and as) ourselves, be it as an artist (the AIR sign in *All the Greys on Green Street*), as a family member, or simply but crucially as a human, shown in each of the four books.

While these teens find opportunities for change through names, their actions also send a message to young readers. The books all include ancillary material comprising educational and social advocacy resources for readers to act upon. Tucker explains to young readers at the end of *All the Greys on Greene Street* what depression is and reassures them that it is not a character flaw or their own faults if a relative is suffering from it. She supplies helpline numbers and email contacts. In *When You Call My Name*, Adam and Ben learn

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 73 No. 4, Winter 2025 DOI 10.5195/names.2025.2759

about Gay Men's Health Crisis and other organizations, as do readers. Lawson offers extensive material for young readers about school shootings in *The Lucky Ones*. Her *Author's Note* lists the names of victims from the shootings at schools in Parkland, Santa Fe, Columbine, and Sandy Hook (using names as visibility toward greater awareness). Jovanovic begins *Cardboard City* with a preface about the Romani and the fate of a real Cardboard City in Serbia. These societal ills are still all-too real and with us.

Conclusion

It is true that the books considered here tackle heavy subjects. It is important to remember, however, that they also convey messages of hope. Thomas and Samjose (2022) call for more books for young readers that find "a balance of both desire and damage episodes"; more stories that go beyond the negative repercussions of one's name being maligned or denied (27). Instead, the scholars applaud realism and messages of hope on the journey that young protagonists take to embrace their rightful names. Onomastic research needs to continue to explore the genre of YA fiction to gain greater understanding of its potential to offer that realism and hope, to empower the disenfranchised.

There are of course more books to consider beyond those examined here. The 2019 novel *Count Me In* depicts bullying and hate crime causing lasting damage on a seventh grader. Author Varsha Bajaj tells readers that hate crime is on the rise around the world, and that "it will take all of us working together to find a way forward", just as her teen protagonist Karina and cohort of friends do in the book (173). Kathleen Glasgow's 2019 *How to Make Friends with the Dark* explores how teen Tiger maneuvers grief after the death of her mother and subsequent trauma experienced in foster homes. Glasgow's *Author's Note* explains to young readers that "there's no blueprint for grief" and that she wrote the book hoping "that if you are wandering that dark road of grief, Tiger's story helps you in some small way" (416). Behrens (in press) considers other recent novels that educate young readers about such issues as world water shortages, human trafficking, teen pregnancies, racism, and suicide among the young.

Research needs to continue, for there are more questions to ask. O'Sullivan (2023) agrees with Nilsen and Nilsen (2007) that YA literature has dual-audience popularity, its messages reaching even those now beyond their teen years. How might this cross-over appeal influence the continued potential for YA fiction to have an impact on social change? Also crucial to examine are the ways the Covid-19 lockdown might have transformed YA themes and teen reading habits. The pandemic is linked to a rise in mental health issues in young people (National Institute of Mental Health 2023). How are authors of YA books moved to help young readers process that crisis? Are readers now more (or less) ready to tackle dark themes, eager to learn about actions they can take? The benefits of examining naming schemes, real-world troubles depicted in the literature, and the intersection of the two have not been exhaustively mined; there is more to learn.

Notes

[1] Note in contrast the positive way Ollie in *All the Greys on Greene Street* uses the word Mayday to summon help. May, instead, must shed the victimization implied by the word, and she must overcome the connotations of the verb that is a homophone to her name: she ultimately does go beyond the possibility and permission connoted by "may" and moves toward "can" and "will" (119).

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the anonymous reviews and the journal editor for their insights.

Funding Statement

The author has no financial interest or will benefit from the direct applications of this research.

AI Statement

No AI Tools or Technology were used to conduct the research or write this article.

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ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web) Vol. 73 No. 4, Winter 2025 DOI 10.5195/names.2025.2759

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DOI 10.5195/names.2025.2759 Vol. 73 No. 4, Winter 2025 ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)