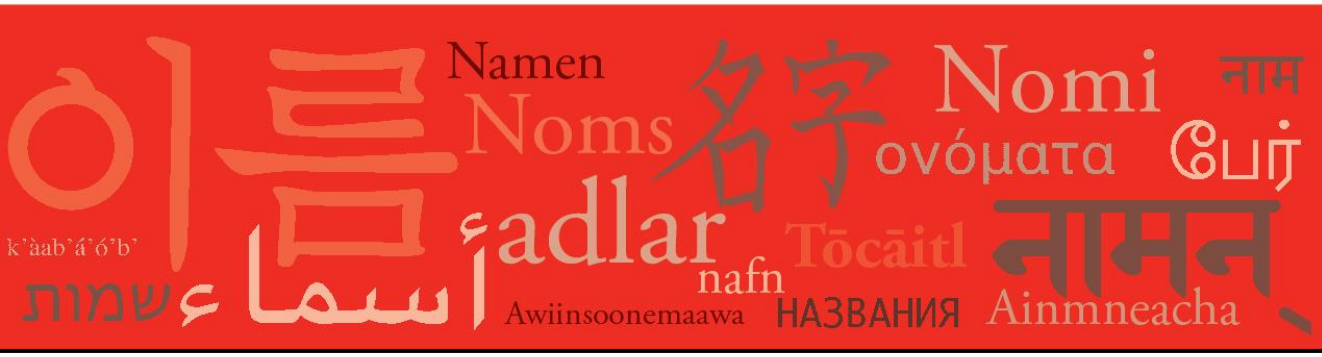
Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Book Review

The Names. By Florence Knapp. New York: Pamela Dorman Books. 2025. Pp. 336 (Hardback). $30.00 ISBN 13: 978-0-593-83390-2.

A character in the novel *The Names* asks her mother: "'Tell me the story of my name'" (265). Author Florence Knapp tells us multiple stories in this book, stories about names and the choices we make around how to embody them. Knapp's message is that names can, but do not have to, determine destiny. What we *do* with our names determines how much they ground us. "Grounded" is a key word in this book, as in being connected to something for stability but also as in being buried, hidden away. Some of Knapp's characters bury their names; others uncover hidden ones that had been left unspoken; some interpret and reinterpret the meanings of their names over a lifetime; and there are those who plead ignorance and never allow or ask for the right onomastic story to be told, letting their names lie in silence.

Knapp tells her tale in three parallel scenarios, with these sections spaced every seven years, from 1987 to 2022. This structure can almost function as a build-your-own-adventure book, in what the copy on the jacket flap calls a "prism of what-ifs". But as in life, while we have choices, readers are reminded that the potentials available to us are not limitless. We must choose wisely.

The novel's alternating scenarios present the Atkin family, a group of four living in England who are at the start grounded, linked to one another. Their connections are about to be challenged by a name choice. A prologue sets up the day the mother, Cora, is to register her infant son's name and "formalize who he will become" (1). The father, Gordon, expects *Gordon*, continuing his family's lineage of *Gordons* past. Cora has been silently resisting the onomastic tie to her domineering husband. On the way to the registry with their nine-year-old daughter Maia, Cora asks the new big sister what name she would choose. Maia offers a name that she characterizes as "all soft and cuddly and kind" but "also, brave and strong" (5). And thus the first scenario is set off: the boy is officially *Bear Atkin*. A second scenario is set in motion when Cora registers her

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own preferred name for the baby, *Julian*. And in the third scenario, Cora obeys her husband's orders and registers the name as *Gordon*, thus setting up the *Gordon* scenario. When Gordon Sr. is informed of the name choice that evening in each scenario, the book diverges into alternative worlds for the Atkin family members. When the baby is named *Bear*, Gordon attacks Cora and kills an intervening neighbor. With *Julian*, Gordon attacks and kills Cora. And with *Gordon*, Cora is alive but subjected to a life of domestic abuse.

Knapp seems to gravitate toward taxonomies, ways to categorize our world. After all, the three scenarios are a type of categorization. Also pervasive in the book is the classification of our world into the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water. Earth is represented in the grounding theme. Characters are grounded in duplicates—for example, *Maia*, the name meaning "*mother*" (4), *Julian*, another type of father, the name meaning "*sky father*" (5), and all those *Gordons*. Continuing the earth theme, we encounter an older Bear as an archeologist, Bear's career being situated mainly at ancient excavation sites. Bear goes on digs and uncovers objects from the dead to tell their hidden stories. However, he has been failing to see the living around him—until he almost loses the woman he loves.

We also find earth in gardening, an activity from which Cora takes strength. And the name *Gordon*, we are told, means a "*great hill*" (319). In the *Gordon* scenario, Cora is rescued from her abusive husband by objects that Gordon Jr. has buried in her garden (a cell phone, cash) and in the house (a spy camera). Air is represented by the name *Julian*, the sky father, also defined as "ethereal, transcendent" (21). The element fire appears as the medium in which Julian, as an artist, works by plunging metal into hot flames to strengthen it, a process called annealing. In this scenario, he indeed embodies his nickname *Jules*, aka "jewels" (319). Finally, water is ever-present in that Cora is from Ireland, and her mother is across the Irish Sea. Julian and Maia live in Ireland while their father (in the *Julian* plot thread) is in jail in England.

Taxonomies also arise with characters playing a 20 Questions-like game by categorizing their lives into what is Animal, Vegetable, and Mineral. The to-be parents Bear and his wife Lily already embody animal and vegetable, so their daughter will be *Pearl*, a mineral, even if these names are not prototypical of their respective categories. In the Ireland life, Orla, Julian's lover, signs her messages "Ox", becoming yet another animal. A different category Knapp makes use of is morphological variation. Bear Atkin and Gordon Atkin Jr. have encounters with *Lily Atkins*, her own surname being the plural of the protagonists' family name. In the *Bear* scenario, in which they are a couple, Bear refers to himself and Lily as *Atkin and Atkins*, "like our own pharmaceutical company" (144). Even the morphological interpretation of *Atkin* is multivariate, being positive as in "with your kin" or negative as in "at each other's throats". Bear and Maia worry that their names around town are mere possessions of their father's crime, being thought of only as the children of a murderer, not their own selves. And the possessive morpheme seems to be calling teenage Gordon Jr. to an alcoholic adulthood as he discovers "his" drink at age fourteen: Gordon's Gin. He says to the bottle upon processing the implied ownership on the label: "'Come to Daddy'" (129). Under the influence at a booze-soaked party, he rapes a teenage girl he has a crush on (that would be Lily). He ultimately rises and then dramatically falls in the London world of high-flying banking because of drink.

Where do these characters end up in the three scenarios? To quote the Beatles' "In My Life", "Some are dead, and some are living" (Lennon and McCartney 1965). The living all seem to harbor feelings of guilt and regret. Two versions of Cora live with the fallout of that scenario's chosen name; one does not survive. In the *Bear* scenario, she is the wife of a convicted murderer. In the *Gordon* scenario, she is a prisoner in her own home, slowly going mad until rescued by a changed Gordon Jr. And in the *Julian* scenario, she is the husband's murder victim.

Maia gets her wish in the *Bear* scenario early on, for she has named her brother, but then lives with the guilt of having caused her father's violence. In Bear's world, Maia is renamed *Bees* by her brother, for as children she would playfully say to him, "'I'm coming for your honey, Bear. The bees are after you! Bzzz!'" (48).

Bear/Julian/Gordon lives with guilt in all three scenarios. When Bear notices at age twenty-one that the murder of the neighbor was on the same day his name was registered, he feels responsible, although he still does not know the full story of his name. Julian, living with his grandmother in Ireland, stays away from romance, convinced that his genes are such that he is, deep down, a violent man. He fears he has inherited violence and should not be with a woman lest he become his own father. He eventually partners with Orla and is adamant that their future child will not be a *Cora* or a *Cormac*; *Cora* is a tainted name. (They ultimately have two daughters in Ireland, named *Aoife* and *Niamh*.) Even as a child, Gordon Jr. resists his connection to Gordon Sr.: The first day at school, he calls himself *Luke* until corrected by one and all (76). When he degrades himself to become "one of the lads" (319–320) as a teen and then in banking, he is nicknamed *Gordy* or *Gordy-boy* (235). He finds out that Lily, whom he had molested at that teenage party, fell into depression but ultimately became a human rights lawyer. He feels only blame for her trajectory: "*I did that*. What I did changed the whole course of her life" (237). As an adult, he moves from the world of high finance to communications director for an art gallery, a space "filled with shrines to other stories and alternate endings; maybe some of them his own" (312). He is learning to tell and listen to stories.

The book ends with a list of all the names used in the novel and their corresponding meanings, as defined and interpreted by Knapp. *Cora* is "the core of the story" (319); *Gordon*, the great hill, is glossed as

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"immovable, looming; a hard climb to reach the other side" (319). We find the meanings of names of the protagonists' lovers across plotlines (for the son: *Lily* and *Orla*; for Maia: *Charlotte*, *Meg*, and *Kate*; for Cora: *Felix*), neighbors (*Mehri*, *Fern*), members of Cora's Irish family (*Sílbhe*, *Cian*), and even friends named *Comfort* and *Ida*, "together, an eiderdown" (319–320).

A character at one point alludes to Mary Oliver's poem "The Summer Day": "Tell me, what is it you plan to do / with your one wild and precious life?" (1990). But can we have more than one plan, more than one life? Knapp says yes to both. Names are not destiny; they are choices. In other words, do not blame the name. The book is full of onomastically aware characters. It is Bear and Lily's young Pearl who wants the story of her name. She also asks for the story of Bear; in that scenario the young father dies from a wasp (not a bee) sting. In the prologue, before a name for the baby is chosen, nine-year-old Maia finds a naming contradiction: If a *Gordon* begets a *Gordon*, as is one scenario, why wasn't she a *Cora*? She was, reassures Cora, but in an alternate way, since *Maia* does mean "*mother*" (4), just as *Julian*, if chosen, would have been a less direct way to honor his father, given its meaning of "*sky father*". Maia when older falls in love with the diacritic in her grandmother's name *Sílbhe*, Irish for *Sylvia*, and defiantly writes her own name as *Maía* for a while, finding strength in that "flame of a candle that refuses to be blown out" (81).

The seven-year time jumps Knapp employs are reminiscent of Michael Apted's *Up* documentary series (Shyamalan 2017), another exploration of fate that begins with seven-year-old British children and follows them every seven years to see how much their young selves were already fully formed at that age or whether choices have made a difference. A character in the book notes in the *Gordon* scenario about Cora's attempts to leave abusive Gordon Sr. that "[s]even is the magic number. A talisman", a statistic representing the average number of times a survivor of domestic violence attempts to flee her abuser until she is liberated (245).

In the epilogue, Cora runs through many what-if scenarios, such as one in which she and Gordon Sr. never marry. She ends by considering a world in which she names her son after her own father, *Hugh*, which (at least to this New Yorker) sounds like "you". Perhaps Knapp is reaching out to, and reflecting, all the readers of these stories. And perhaps the message is that regardless of the path we choose, we might always encounter regret and guilt, but we will also always have hopes of liberation, ways to be ourselves.

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