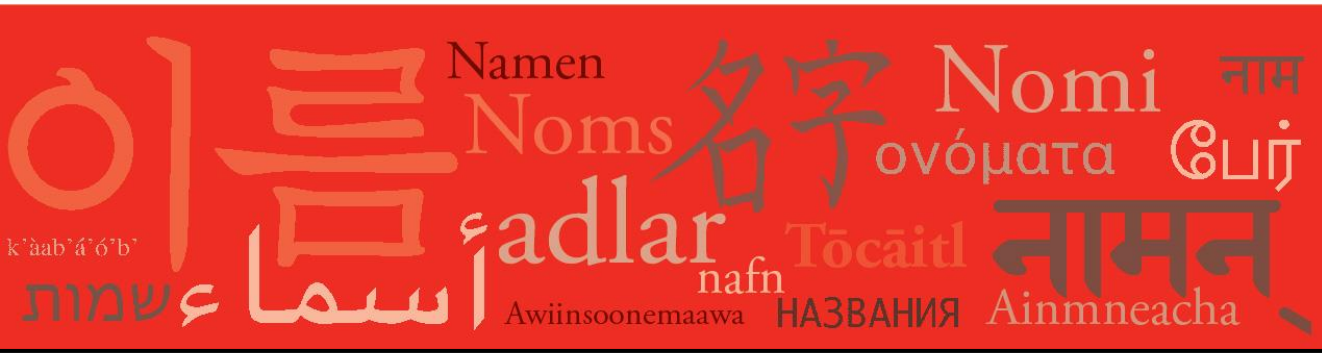
Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Book Review

Gliff. By Ali Smith. New York: Pantheon Books. 2024. Pp. 288 (Hardback). $28.00. ISBN 978-0-593-70156-0.

Gliff by Ali Smith is a novel about a dystopian near-future. It also contains at its heart, functioning as a roadmap to freedom, linguistic strategies for maintaining possession of your own identity in a world quick to erase you. True to Smith's style of word exploration, this map to liberation requires a sensitivity to language in order to be fully utilized. And that is exactly what the heroes in the story possess: to fight back and keep their freedom, the book's teen protagonists, an older sibling named Bri and younger Rose, weaponize the very language used to render them as "unverifiables" (89). They uncover insightful etymologies and semantic cognates to help them see through double-speak, to best reveal truths. They also challenge the conventional parsing of English grammar, dividing up phrases in new ways. And they never stop acknowledging the power of names. One's battle for liberation is a linguistic one, a fight for the right to name oneself, and thus *be* oneself.

The book's epigraphs signal the linguistic lessons to follow: "Look at any word long enough and you will see it open up into a series of faults, into a terrain of particles each containing its own void" (n.p.) and "[. . .] names, so many names, already eaten by the flames" (n.p.). Right from the start, the book signals the need to harness the power of language and hold tightly to our naming rights, for they are vulnerable. Readers walk through a language minefield of distorted words and phrases to finally reach greener pastures with real grass (not the standard plastic type), a suspension of the ubiquitous governmental surveillance, and a horse that Rose names *Gliff*. This unusual name, which Rose has to clarify to all is not *Glyph* or *Cliff* or *If*, is a Scottish word meaning "transient glance" (Dictionaries of the Scots Language 2025). But no one in the story knows what the word really means until Bri finds pages of its definition in a dictionary, capped off with the uber-meaning "*a substitute word for any word*" [throughout the article, italics in the original quotes (183), indeed the best route to freedom yet.

In this world, people live and die by labels bestowed on them by the authorities. If they are "unverifiables" (89), then off they go to an Adult Retraining Centre (ARC) or Child Retraining Centre (CRC) (i.e., "arks" and "circuses") (126). Such word play is deceptively anodyne; in reality, we learn that arks and

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circuses are sites of exploited workers trained to recycle dangerous computer parts, regardless of the cost to their own health. Bri and Rose are not fooled by such innocent-sounding labels. They also work hard to attack how the authorities segment society, here physically represented by a machine that creates demarcations with red lines around entities (buildings, people) to be torn down and made invisible: the *SUPERA BOUNDER* (or so the name on the behemoth of a machine states) (54). It is indeed a bounder, and it creates boundaries. It divides—parses—society like a diagrammed sentence. The siblings do not have machinery to fight back, but they have words, and they respond with linguistic resistance. Rose makes a point, for example, of pronouncing "conglomerate" as "conglomerate", thus "taking some of a conlomerate's power away from it by mis-saying it" (36). Devices are "vices" (108), another Rose-ism. The siblings also weaponize near-cognates. "*We can't solve it. But we can salve it*" (52), Bri likes to declare. When they encounter an abandoned school, with a Language Lab and a library full of dictionaries, they gain access to an arsenal of definitions and etymologies: a wealth of linguistic armory.

Names, however, are their most powerful weapons. And that power is much discussed between themselves. Bri wonders (and worries) about humans giving names to other creatures, in that such an act implies ownership and thus deprives a living thing of agency. About the horse named Gliff, Bri at first questions the point of Rose having named him at all, let alone with an unusual name: "[There are] other people who'll have called him other names before in his lifetime and thought they could decide what to do with his life, ride him, treat him well or badly, send him to a slaughterhouse [. . .]" (163).

Bri further wants to know if people and animals need names in different ways. "Why was it different calling a person something from calling a horse a name? It *was* different [. . .]. Or [is] giving a horse as a name just some word, a meaningless word like gliff, from then on supposed to mean that individual horse whether the horse knew it or not?" (157–158). Bri skeptically asks the horse itself, "You don't need a name, do you?" (164). Their childhood dog, for example, never had "really anything to do with the name we'd called him. So there was the word that made the [dog's] name, and there was the dog that it conjured in the mind, and there, way beyond it, totally free of it himself, was the real dog, wagging or not wagging his tail. It was me who was tethered to the word" (i.e., the imposed name) (164–5).

Bri admires the creatures who might well be free from such imposed labels. This should be a model for people to follow. Both siblings refuse to be pinned down by names, especially surnames. When Bri evades yet another question about their family name with the answer *Bush*, the inquirer suspiciously connects the dots: that means the younger sibling is named Rose Bush (85). Bri also sometimes goes by *Briar*, sometimes *Brice* (158), and once, five years in the future telling of this tale, *Mr Allendale* (258). Bri's gender is never explicitly stated, so the reader cannot be sure which name is closer to a truth. During "re-education", after being captured by authorities, Bri is barked at, "Which are you, then, you little weirdo?" (212) and ordered, "Tell us a name, stupid, or we'll make up a name for you that'll get you bullied for the rest of your very short life" (213). On the spot, Bri comes up with the name *Allendale*, a place name encountered earlier in the story. The bureaucrats duly write down "Dale. Alan" and order the teen, "Sit down, Alan" (213).

Later, a lower-level worker spots this renamed Mr. Allendale and declares that "you are the image of your sister", and brings word of a Rose free—but on the run (117). This acquaintance also restores to Bri an identity of onomastic and gender fluidity: "And which of those many names [Rose] told us are you?" Bri replies: "Which would you like me to be?" (159). The exchange continues: "Nice of you to offer me a choice, [. . .] and are you a boy or a girl?" To which Bri replies, "Yes, I am" (160). This news of Rose becomes Bri's motivation to escape. Bri had inspired Rose, who has inspired this worker: "Your sister told us that because of you anyone could be anything and everything. And I mean" (247). Our names, our selves: we *mean*, we have meaning. And we, not others, control the meaning.

Empowered, Bri defiantly walks right past the security guard in the government building back to freedom (albeit as someone on the run, an unverifiable once more) and is greeted as is usual with "Right-o, Mr Allendale" (258). "That's not my name, I say. I'm not Mr anything" (259). And yet again, "Right-o, Mr Allendale" (259). Challenging labels is not a priority to most re-educated people in this world. But for the narrator, "[. . .] my briar self is back, prickly and twined and opening in me like a bush covered in wild opening blossom" (248).

Early in the tale, the siblings meet a boy called *Colon*. Bri and Rose immediately get to linguistic work (and play) on his name: "Is your name really Colon? [. . .] Have you got a little brother called Semi? [. . .] [A]re you named after an ancestor's intestines? [. . .] Is your second name Ization?" (86). When Colon resists the alternate name *Colin*, Rose encourages him: "You can be someone else!" (91). Bri knows that she "really like[s] having more than one name" herself (157). Still, Colon vacillates onomastically, thus signaling his inability to resist the system and shake off the name originally imposed on him.

Rose's onomastic play, on the other hand, allows her to introduce herself variously to strangers as *Taylor Swift, Taylor Smith* (85), and *Marianne Faithless* (138). Rose continues to be attuned to words and the truths in them. She was once corrected in thinking that a "behemoth" was a type of moth (41). Still, there is Rose-wisdom here, in that both behemoths and moths are vulnerable to the light—and possibly to truths. Another Rose-ism: The siblings had once seen a series of paintings of terrified horses. Bri informs Rose of the artist's name, Stubbs. Apparently, Stubbs took to frightening his model horses (in real life) to get that

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horrified reaction for his paintings. Rose isn't having it: "I'll stub Stubbs out", she vows (115). Rose thus reminds the reader that names hold the key to our vulnerabilities as well.

Rose at first mishears (mis-parses) the designation of horses in the field as "avatar horses", a word which then gets transformed to "abba-tor" and finally "abbattoir" (70). They have indeed been categorized as abattoir horses (i.e., destined to be meat). The horror slowly dawns on Rose, who is learning this new word. She names one horse *Gliff* and rescues him. The name *Gliff* seems to address, and salve, the dilemma of imposing a name on a creature without its consent. After Rose names the horse-no-longer-food *Gliff*, Bri looks up the word in a dictionary and congratulates her: "[. . .] one of [*gliff*'s] meanings is, here see?—*a substitute word for any word*" (183). "You've named him a word that doesn't just mean so many things, it can also mean all of them *and* none of them at once. [. . .] Because of what you called him, he can be everything and anything. And at the same time his name can mean nothing at all. It's like you've both named him *and* let him be completely meaning-free!" (183).

The siblings aspire to such a simultaneous state of meaning and meaning-freedom themselves. "Why were my sister and I so careful and keen to evade when we told people our names? Evade what? Why did we so often naturally know to tell them names that weren't our names at all, and why did doing this leave us reeling with happiness [. . .]?" (157).

The book is subdivided into three sections titled "horse", "power", and "lines". Here we find two potential grammatical parsings: "horse power" and "power lines". As with the Supera Bounder, a human vs. machine dichotomy is again evoked by these phrases. We learn that the etymology of the name of another unverifiable, *Daisy*, is "day's eye" (189), and she supplies yet another floral name to the team, alongside *Briar* and *Rose*. We also learn the association of the name *Daisy* to machines, to conlomerates [*sic*]: the song "Bicycle Built for Two", with the refrain "Daisy, Daisy", was the first song sung by an IBM machine, an ominous reference to the machine/surveillance state at work in the book: a machine can own your name. (This reference also nods to the evil computer HAL in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*.)

Chapter headings in the last third of the book offer further linguistic gymnastics, transforming *Brave New World* by redividing the phrase, as it journeys to "rave new o ld [*sic*]" (221), "Bravo new world" (264), and finally "Brave new world" (266). A new word will "*salve*" (52) us; salvation for one horse is in the word-name *Gliff*. The siblings need to be "gliffy" themselves (95).

Bri declares that the very poor are "*people without anything to their names*" (149), which could be taken to mean that their names have no meaning. To the siblings, though, names can be everything: "I am all my me's, [Rose] said. I am complete" (98). Multi-named Rose remains free. Bri is at one point captured; now, to be free, Bri becomes a gliff, a nothing and an everything, by scrubbing the computer systems of any trace of *Bri*. Or is it that Bri will become a glyph, a symbol (not word) that also stands for anything? True to the linguistic nature of this author, Smith's next book will be titled *Glyph* (Scott, 2025).

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