

WORKSHOP 3

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

We've been talking quite a bit about languages, and our own languages, as well as the languages of literature. But now let's think about names and naming – because these, after all, are very important in literature. Novels, and short stories, and often poems as well, have characters, protagonists, and narrators, who (usually) have names. Sometimes, names and naming are important to a storyline as well. (There is even an academic field devoted to its study: onomastics).

Let's start by thinking about our own names. What do you think of your own name? Do you know the story of how you came to be called that? Where does your name come from? Who chose it? What does it mean? Has it always been the same? Do you have other names that people call you by?

Whatever our cultural background, the question of how names are chosen, and what they mean, is important. We may have particular feelings about our names. And it matters that people get our names right. This is 'The Birth Name', written by the British-Somali poet Warsan Shire:

The name Warsan means good news in the Somali language. I hated it. I despised my name. I wanted to be called something soft, something that ended with an 'ah' sound. My name is difficult to whisper into the side of my face. My name is easy to use with a hard voice. I appreciate that now. The hesitation on the other side of the phone. The way they would replace my name with 'baby'. Give your daughters difficult names. Give your daughters names that command the full use of the tongue. My name makes you want to tell me the truth. My name doesn't allow me to trust anyone that cannot pronounce it right. My mother calls me 'Warsanay.' If a man ever tried to call me that, it means he understands that I am someone's daughter. It means I'll let him call me down from a long building. Praise my grandmother, Warsan Baraka. My father's mother. The woman I was named after.

Warsan Shire, 'The Birth Name', in 'Fuck Yeah, Poetry!', 2011.

<http://fypoetry.tumblr.com/post/34281180644/the-birth-name>

- What kinds of meanings does the speaker attach to her name? Have they changed over time?
- What do you think she means when she says: 'Give your daughters difficult names'?
- What does Shire suggest here about why names matter?

In his essay 'You Can't Say That! Stories Have To Be About White People!', Darren Chetty writes:

A few years ago, I taught a Year 2 class in east London. I had built up a good bank of multicultural picture books and shared these with the class whenever seemed appropriate. When it came time for the class to write their own stories, I suggested that they use the name of someone in their family for their protagonist. I wanted them to draw on their own backgrounds, but was worried about 'making an issue of race'. When it came to sharing their stories, I noticed only one boy had acted upon my suggestion, naming his main character after his uncle. He had recently arrived from Nigeria and was eager to read his story to the class. However, when he read out the protagonist's name

another boy, who was born in Britain and identified as Congolese, interrupted him. ‘You can’t say that!’ he said. ‘Stories have to be about white people.’

Darren Chetty, ‘You Can’t Say That! Stories Have To Be About White People!’, in Nikesh Shukla (ed.) *The Good Immigrant* (London: Unbound, 2016). An earlier version is available on *Media Diversified*: <https://mediadiversified.org/2013/12/07/you-cant-do-that-stories -have-to-be-about-white-people/>

- What do you think about the story Chetty tells? Why does the boy in his class object to the naming of his friend’s protagonist?
- How does this compare to your own experience? Do the stories you read have protagonists with names similar to those of people in your family? Could they do?

You might want to think about different *kinds* of stories here. How about writing a story like this that is:

- about teenagers growing up in a British city?
- A mystery story?
- A spy novel?
- A historical novel?
- A science fiction novel?
- A superhero story?

WRITING EXERCISE

Now let’s take up the challenges posed by these writers (Darren Chetty, and Warsan Shire) in our own writing.

EITHER

Write a poem or a short piece of prose which reflects on your own name. You might want to write about how you came to be named, the meanings of your name, or your experience of having this name. Have your feelings about your own name changed over time, for example?

OR

Write, or begin to write, a story in which the protagonist has the same name as a member of your family. Think about how they will be similar to this family member, and how they will be different – is naming all they will have in common? What kind of a story is it going to be?

* * *

FURTHER RESOURCES

This is a performance poem – at a ‘poetry slam’ – by Rachel Rostad, called ‘Names’ (although a warning: its subject matter, around adoption and belonging, is painful):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gfexOa8-h44>

I also enjoyed these poems, written for a Guardian writing workshop, which provide plenty of material for thinking about the creative possibility and power in writing about names and naming:

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/jul/12/poetry-workshop-names-colette-bryce>

Finally, here is an extract titled 'My Name', from *The House on Mango Street*, by Sandra Cisneros:

In English my name means hope. In Spanish it means too many letters. It means sadness, it means waiting. It is like the number nine. A muddy color. It is the Mexican records my father plays on Sunday mornings when he is shaving, songs like sobbing.

It was my great-grandmother's name and now it is mine. She was a horse woman too, born like me in the Chinese year of the horse – which is supposed to be bad luck if you're born female – but I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong.

My great-grandmother. I would've liked to have known her, a wild, horse of a woman, so wild she wouldn't marry. Until my great-grandfather threw a sack over her head and carried her off. Just like that, as if she were a fancy chandelier. That's the way he did it.

And the story goes she never forgave him. She looked out the window her whole life, the way so many women sit their sadness on an elbow. I wonder if she made the best with what she got or was she sorry because she couldn't be all the things she wanted to be. Esperanza. I have inherited her name, but I don't want to inherit her place by the window.

At school they say my name funny as if the syllables were made out of tin and hurt the roof of your mouth. But in Spanish my name is made out of a softer something, like silver, not quite as thick as sister's name Magdalena – which is uglier than mine. Magdalena who at least can come home and become Nenny. But I am always Esperanza. Would like to baptize myself under a new name, a name more like the real me, the one nobody sees. Esperanza as Lisandra or Maritza or Zeze the X. Yes. Something like Zeze the X will do.

Sandra Cisneros, *The House on Mango Street* (New York: Vintage, 1991). Extract available online:
<https://d3jc3ahdjad7x7.cloudfront.net/w4Uh4xckKtHMoyQxoR82OuvpAuDRwloWk3Wsafm2BmG3M0XH.pdf>