Names & Titles

Grandpa: “Yesterday your mother accidentally called me Roscoe.” Daughter: “That’s not so bad. She really likes the dog.” Grandpa: “Yeah, so I’m told.” Daughter: “Now, if she ever calls you Muffin you should really be flattered. She adores the cat!” *(Brian Crane, in Pickles comic strip)*

If you've ever wished that your parents had given you a better handle, take comfort from the following actual names: Ure A. Pigg of Portland, Oregon, Ima Hogg of Houston, Texas, Serious Misconduct of Welwyn, England, General Error of Pueblo, Colorado, Safety First of Tulsa, Oklahoma, Pearl Harbor and Honor Roll of Birmingham, Alabama, E. Pluribus Eubanks of San Francisco, California, and Harry “Bum” Messenger of Idaho Falls, Idaho. *(Valmarie Carson, in Tidbits)*

The second man to walk on the lunar surface was Buzz Aldrin. His mother’s maiden name is Moon. *(Russ Edwards & Jack Kreismer, in The Bathroom Trivia Digest, p. 92)*

Officer: “What’s your name, Mister?” Motorist: “My name is Aloysius Alsalia O-Luineachaine, sir.” Officer (pocketing ticket pad): “Now don’t let me catch you speeding again.” *(Lawrence P. McGuire, in The Saturday Evening Post)*

For the 12th year in a row, Emily topped the list of most popular baby-girl names last year, according to the Social Security Administration. Jacob led among names for boys for the ninth year in a row. The other top names for boys were Michael, Ethan, and Joshua, while the other top girls’ names were Isabella, Emma, and Ava. *(Chicago Sun-Times, as it appeared in The Week magazine, May 23, 2008)*

People come up to me and ask if I made up my last name. Believe me, I would never have made it up. *(Kevin Bacon, actor)*

At last report there were 838 places named Bethlehem in the United States. Not just towns, but also streams, crossroads, landmarks. *(L. M. Boyd)*

Real ****brand**** names in foreign countries: Swine chocolates -- in China; Kolic mineral water -- in Japan; Catch-It kitty litter -- in Canada; CowBrand shampoo -- in Japan; and Horsehide glue -- in China. (O. V. Michaelsen, in Words at Play)

When I left for college, my parents said I could come home any weekend. One Friday a friend and I decided to make the trip. We arrived late, and as I fiddled with the front-door key, I heard my mother yell, “Spike, tell them we have a gun!” When we were inside, I asked my mother why she called Dad “Spike.” “Honey,” she replied, “do you really think a burglar would be scared off by someone named Lester?” *(Casey Murphy, in Reader’s Digest)*

Best-selling canned soup in the People’s Republic of China is labeled “White Fungus.” *(L. M. Boyd, in Boyd’s Book of Odd Facts, p. 2)*

The name “Chicago” came from the Indian phrase “shika’ko” meaning “skunk place.” *(L. M. Boyd)*

**A couple in Belgium have given their 11 children names using different variations of the same four letters: a, e. l, and x. Gwenny Blanckaert and Marino Vaneeno landed on the novel strategy after naming their first child Alex and second one Axel. “We realized that they were the same letters, so we decided to continue like this,” said Gwenny. The next nine became Xela, Lexa, Xael, Xeal, Exla, Leax, Xale, Elax, and Alxe. No name has been selected for their 12th child, due in April, but they have 13 remaining combinations to choose from. *(The Week magazine, November 5, 2021)***

Those who chase down odd monikers report a U.S. couple named Mr. and Mrs. Stubbs christened their son “Cigar.” *(L. M. Boyd)*

A growing number of colleges are finding that changing to a more prestigious-sounding name can help boost enrollment. Among the recently renamed, Trenton State College became the College of New Jersey, Western Maryland College became McDaniel College, and Beaver College is now Arcadia University. *(The New York Times, as it appeared in The Week magazine, August 26, 2005)*

You don’t get many reports out of China’s 125,000-square-mile Taklimakan desert. The name explains why. Taklimakan translates as: “Once you get in, you can never come out.” *(L. M. Boyd)*

Too many doctors in the house: If you go around calling yourself “doctor,” said Charles C.W. Cooke, you should have a medical degree. Unfortunately, the country is now lousy with people who insist on being called “Dr.” because they once wrote an arcane thesis. Vice President Joe Biden’s wife relentlessly calls herself “Dr. Biden,” even though her doctorate is in “‘educational leadership,’ whatever the hell that is.” Why use this title? It confers a certain better-than-thou status, proving that Dr. Biden is “smart.” Other faux doctors who exploit the title include the impressive sounding Princeton philosopher Dr. Cornel West and the author Dr. Maya Angelou, who has 30 honorary doctorates from various colleges. A Ph.D. literally means you’re a “doctor of philosophy,” and in practice, it simply means you’ve spent a lot of time in academia, and are now qualified to teach in a university. In a professional context, a doctor of English literature is justified in using the title – but of what relevance is it in everyday life? When people cling to “trophy credentials” to prove they’re smarter than everyone else, it suggests that maybe they’re not. *(The Week magazine, May 10, 2013)*

## We don’t know when our name came into being or how some distant ancestor acquired it. We don’t understand our name at all; we don’t know its history, and yet we bear it with exalted fidelity. We merge with it, we like it, we are ridiculously proud of it, as if we had thought it up ourselves in a moment of brilliant inspiration. *(Milan Kundera, in Immortality)*

## Overheard: “I know the new First Couple is from Arkansas, but I still can’t believe their names are Hill and Billy. *(Contemporary Comedy)*

## With the Pittsburgh Steelers’ victory in Super Bowl XLIII, teams named after some category of human being have won 30 of these pro football championship games. Teams named after horses have won four Super Bowls; mythical figures (Giants), three; other land-based animals (Bears, Rams), two; aquatic mammals (Dolphins), two; and birds, one. *(The New York Times, as it appeared in The Week magazine, February 13, 2009)*

## Ford Motor Company in 1955 hired the poet Marianne Moore to suggest names for its new car. She offered “Dearborn Civique” and “Utopian Turtle-Top,” among others. Too artsy, decided a Ford committee. The car was named the “Edsel.” *(L. M. Boyd)*

## The name “George” came from the Greek for “farmer.” *(L. M. Boyd)*

Not everybody familiar with the name “B. F. Goodrich” knows the initials stand for “Benjamin Franklin.” *(L. M. Boyd)*

**A man named Ulysses S. Grant won a primary race in Delaware and believes his name helped him win. It didn’t work out so well for his opponent – Fred bin Laden. *(Jay Leno, in Rocky Mountain News, 2006)***

**Half the islands in the Philippines are not even named. *(L. M. Boyd)***

Only 850 babies in the U.S. were named Katrina last year, after a hurricane bearing that name killed thousands and wreaked widespread devastation. The name dropped 100 places in popularity and now ranks at 382, just below “Brenna.” *(Associated Press, as it appeared in The Week magazine, May 25, 2007)*

**About 35 percent of married women in their 20s and 30s are keeping their own last names – a big increase over previous generations, according to a study by Facebook. Among married women in their 60s, only 9 percent kept their own last names. *(Salon.com, as it appeared in The Week magazine, July 26, 2013)***

**On September 4, 1781, Los Angeles was founded by Spanish settlers. Its original name: “El Pueblo de Nuestra Senora La Reina de Los Angeles de Porciuncula.” *(L. M. Boyd)***

**Billy is on the telephone and hollers to his Mom: “Mommy! What was your maiden name? They won’t take my pizza order unless I know it!” *(Bil Keane, in The Family Circus comic strip)***

**Wife: “Stop questioning what I say! Just do it!” Husband: “I knew when I first met her she was ‘Miss Right’. I didn’t realize her first name was ‘Always’!” *(Art & Chip Sansom, in The Born Loser comic strip)***

Pharmaceutical firms spend sizable sums to find trade names for new drugs. Said names surface and sink in seasonal fads. Big now, say the ad folks, is medical nomenclature containing lots of “Z’s” and “X’s.” *(L. M. Boyd)*

**The news service Reuters recently reported that an Australian couple, Pat and Sheena Wheaton, named their newborn son Superman. That may seem odd, but it was actually their second choice for a name; they wanted to call him 4Real, but the government registry rejected the name because it contained a numeral. *(Samantha Weaver, in Tidbits)***

**No record can be found of any people who didn’t have names. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**Five famous businesses and products that first operated without names: Merrill Lynch -- unnamed first two years;   
Associated Press -- unnamed first four years;   
Baker Chocolates -- unnamed first eight years;   
Nathan’s Hot Dogs -- unnamed first five years;   
Cracker Jack -- unnamed first four years. *(World Features Syndicate)***

**At the time of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the top U.S. Navy command was called CINCUS, which was pronounced “sink us.” This was changed for PR purposes. (Charlotte Lowe with Emma Wilson and Rachel Federman, in Useless History Fact-O-Pedia, p. 196)**

**Why the perfume makers in the Soviet Union have not yet successfully competed in the worldwide markets may be suggested by the fact that one of their recently exported scents was named “Black Casket.” *(L. M. Boyd, in Boyd’s Book of Odd Facts, p. 2)***

**Have any popes kept their real names? Not since 1522 when the Dutch Cardinal Adrian Dedel became Pope Adrian VI. He was the last non-Italian pope until John Paul II, might mention. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**Most popular name among 46-year-old women in the United States today is said to be Linda. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**A single parent, I introduced my four-year-old son to a man I was dating. “Aaron, this is Rex.” Aaron paused and looked up. “Is your first name: Tyrannosaurus?” he asked. *(Terri Clark, in Reader’s Digest)***

**Anyone who calls a rose by any other name is probably pruning. *(Quoted in Grit)***

**Another thing that makes the ruling dynasty of Japan unique is it has no name. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**“Pancho” is the nickname for Francisco. Incidentally, there’s a large body of people who object mightily if you refer to San Francisco as “Frisco.” How they’d feel about “Pancho” I do not know. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**If the ancient Romans thought a woman could foretell the future, they called her “Sibyl.” *(L. M. Boyd)***

**Tell Michael Smith there are about 100,000 boys nationwide with the same name. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**People with initials that spell out GOD or ACE are likely to live longer than people whose initials spell out words like APE, PIG, or RAT. *(Noel Botham, in The Best Book of Useless Information Ever, p. 198)***

**Most identified stars have numbers, not names. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**The study of genealogy is pretty near impossible in Tahiti. A Tahitian might get a different name at each stage of life. *(L. M. Boyd)***

Nomen est omen, the Romans used to say – a name is a destiny. It’s a contestable notion, of course; even the idea of destiny leaves me uncertain. But just consider what you are saddled with when you’re named after a ruthless warrior thought to have been responsible for 17 million deaths. The Central Asian warlord Tamerlane, or Timur the Lame, was the cruel master of a 14th-century empire that stretched from India in the east to the Caucasus and Syria in the west. His armies, primed for pillage, left Delhi, Damascus, and Baghdad in ruins, adding to the glory of his own capital, the Silk Road city of Samarkand. His acts of atrocity were so over the top – pyramids of human heads in conquered Persian cities, prisoners walled in alive so their screams would cow others into submission – that they remain the stuff of macabre legend. “Tamerlane used terror as a central aspect of his military strategy,” said his biographer Justin Marozzi, “and it worked.” We may never know what, if anything, all that meant to his namesake Tamerlan Tsarnaev, whose body today lies unclaimed in a Boston morgue. Plenty of men are named Alexander without entertaining thoughts of world domination. I know a Hungarian named Attila and a German named Adolf (he goes by Adi); neither has ever shown the slightest tendency toward megalomania. No doubt, the emerging picture of the older Tsarnaev brother includes ample evidence of cruelty, even before he engineered senseless violence at the Boston Marathon. But he grasped for terror without his forebear’s tactical brilliance, and it didn’t work. His sorry act leaves no legacy beyond the pain of the victims. *(James Graff, in The Week magazine, May 3, 2013)*

The Washington Redskins are by no means the only team with a Native American nickname. In a database of 42,624 high school, college, and pro teams, 2,129 have Native American names, including “Savages,” “Squaws,” and 75 teams called “Redskins.” *(FiveThirtyEight.com, as it appeared in The Week magazine, September 19, 2014)*

**Can Islamic terrorists be ‘white’?: Are the Tsarnaev brothers white? asked Peter Beinart. That question became a partisan flashpoint during the hunt for the Boston bombers, when one liberal columnist expressed a wish that they turn out to be white, right-wing extremists, rather than Islamic terrorists. When police identified the bombers as Tamerlan and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, ethnic Chechen immigrants, some conservative bloggers were gleeful, writing that – ha! – the terrorists were “not white Americans.” Actually, the Tsarnaevs are white Americans. One brother is a citizen and the other was a legal resident; they have white skin, come from the Caucasus region, and are literally “Caucasian.” But in our country’s dominant culture, “white” doesn’t refer simply to skin color. It means “one of us.” Since 9/11, the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims have been viewed as intrinsically “not white,” no matter what they look like. Younger brother Dzhokhar in particular does not fit into the terrorist stereotype. He was a popular wrestler and lifeguard, a devotee of hip-hop, and a typical, pot-smoking American college student – until he embraced Islamic extremism. At that point, his racial category also changed. *(The Week magazine, May 10, 2013)***

Animal-rights activists are calling for the town of Fishkill, New York, to change its name. The “kill” in Fishkill derives from the Dutch word for creek, but People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals says that fact is lost on the general public. “When they think of Fishkill, they think of abusing fish, and that’s not the right message,” said Karin Robertson of PETA. By that standard, says Fishkill town historian Willa Skinner, PETA should challenge Otterkill, Beaverkill, and Catskill. *(The Week magazine, July 29, 2005)*

**“Tuna” may seem like a funny name for a girl, but that was the name of the heroine in Finland’s version of Cinderella. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**Sony’s tiny cassette player-with-headphones invention didn’t do that well when first released as the Soundabout in the U.S., and as the Stowaway in England. But sales took off after both countries adopted the same nonsensical name that the Japanese had successfully used for it: Walkman. (David Hoffman, in Little-Known Facts about Well-Known Stuff, p. 58)**

**HE NEEDED A LAST TIME: Born a slave, Booker T. Washington was always known simply as Booker. When emancipation came and he went to school for the first time, he heard the other students respond to the roll with two names. Suddenly he realized that he needed a last name and picked Washington because it was the grandest name he could think of. Later he learned that his mother had given him Taliaferro as his last name, so he used it as a middle name. (John & Claire Whitcomb, in Oh Say Can You See , p. 160)**

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