Culture Mulcher

Colson Whitehead Is Taking Names

by Michael Larkin
illustration by Jairan Sadeghi

WHEN THE RATHER conspicuously unnamed lead character of Colson Whitehead's novel, *Apex Hides the Hurt*, takes on the job of renaming a town that's trying to reinvent itself, he invites us to more closely scrutinize the bold-faced brands and everyday names that are so ubiquitous we barely pay them any mind. Once you do start paying attention, as The Character Who Goes Unnamed discovers, some discomfiting revelations may follow.

The town of Winthrop is at a crossroads. Its glory days as the seat of the Winthrop family's barbed-wire empire are over. Its economy is in decline, its downtown going moribund. When a Steve Jobs-like software CEO named Lucky Aberdeen decides to relocate his eponymous software company to the town, it spells Winthrop's salvation. Yet the city council is at loggerheads over whether this rebirth should signal a rechristening as well: Should the town keep its existing name? Should it instead go with the one the lead character's consulting firm has supplied: New Prospera? Beneath the surface of this public debate, there is the question of whether to revert to the original marker bestowed by the freed slaves who founded the town: Freedom. In light of these buried roots of the town's origins, the novel's extended consideration of our modern form of "branding" takes on an even more sinister cast.

Into this mess rides our hero, the nameless "nomenclature consultant" who enters the novel in something of an existential crisis, having left his firm as a result. However, he's a virtuoso in his field, a master of papering over past histories or inventing false ones with the brush of a well chosen word or two, and the townspeople are clamoring for him to bestow his righteous approbation on them by blessing their city with a handle befitting its resurrection.

He's cool, this character, too cool. He holds everyone and everything in his life at an emotional distance, if not in outright contempt, coldly reading every one of them and applying the easy bandage of a label, some of which are to be found on store shelves and signs around the world. He adds a "Q" here or a timely "New" there, and products suddenly sell. The names spill forth, the character's brainstorms sounding like they'd be right at home at our local malls: *Redempta*, *Outfit Outlet*, *New Luno*, *Apex*. We hardly notice such names. Brand names lead to commercials, they *are* commercials, and as he says of the newly descending (mostly white, mostly affluent) townspeople, "They were used to commercials, commercials were a natural feature of existence, like dawn or rain."

Yet each name has a resonance. He says

admiringly of the prospective new town name, New Prospera, which one of his former colleagues has come up with, that it "had that romance language armature. ... The lilting *a* at the end like a rung up to wealth and affluence, take a step. A glamorous Old World cape draped over the bony shoulders of prosaic *prosperity*." But is New Prospera a better choice than the reminder of slavery denoted by long-buried Freedom? The consultant, who is African-American, isn't so sure.

In the transforming town, he comes across expatriate Silicon Valley-ites drinking Brio energy drinks and Admiral Java coffee. There on the town square is the soon-to-open Outfit Outlet, the chain store whose "parent company was a successful purveyor of low-priced low-quality goods that had decided it wanted a different piece of the action. So [after the character's naming of the franchise] the same sweatshops stitched together flashier clothes from the same fabrics, and midwifed profit." He later finds, appropriately enough, that the store has taken over the building that previously housed the library, the repository of the town's history. "Probably not the first time one of his clients had displaced a library," the character informs us. Who needs books?

If it all seems a thin excuse for a narrative, the story's deceptive simplicity is just the point. Whitehead has tapped a deep well here. If his trenchant and troubling observations about consumer culture, history, marketing and race seem obvious, might that not be of concern? *We hold these Truths to be self evident, that all Men are created to shrug in the face of these Truths.*

How often do we take a close look at the names that dot our landscape? Bed Bath & Beyond: Buying towels and sheets is a mystical journey, perhaps to the edge of the world, perhaps to the afterlife. Barnes & Noble: A book seller with the gravitas of a law firm, haute literature for the masses. Whole Foods: what you're buying is wholesome, holistic, wholly natural, unsullied by partially hydrogenated corporate oil... and you'll pay a whole price, too.

One could play this game for hours. Brand names and band names. Place names and MySpace names. Gain and Tide and Cheer and All and Bold. It's detergent, for Christ's sake!

For Christ's sake, indeed. In Judeo-Christian cultures, and most other religious traditions as well, the first to have the privilege to name is the deity—"God called the light 'day' and the darkness he called 'night'" (Genesis 1:5)—and this conjures a vestige of the divine in every act of naming. Certainly any parent who has named a child has felt it. We've long recognized the power inherent in a name, in the bestowing of substance and meaning. As such we are sometimes just as careful about when we *don't* use a name, whether it is to guard the sacred or deny the profane: the sacrilege of saying or writing the name of God in some religions; "the love that dare not speak its name"; the denials of Armenian (or indeed any) genocide. Or, in some cases, we name things in the hopes of filling a void, creating a self-fulfilling prophesy: weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.

Naming is believing. And believing equals sales.

Towards the end of *Apex*, as The Character Who Goes Unnamed reaches his breaking point, he looks around at a gathering of his colleagues and imagines what the world would be like if everyone went around with name tags bearing their "true names": "LIAR, BED WETTER... ROMANTIC... GRIFTER... PEDERAST" or the one he reserves for himself—"FUGITIVE." He muses that we "spen[d] our lives trying to keep our true names inside and hidden, because if they were let out we would be known and ruined." This observation is of a piece with an even sharper one he makes later, that "He liked his epiphanies American: brief and illusory." The "true name" labeling idea is particularly American: Break it down for me, fellas. In five words or fewer, sum it up. Give me the PowerPoint, I'm a busy man. Distill the essence.

With Whitehead himself, recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, you can play the label game if you like: Genius. Gifted Writer. Black Dude. The next coming of Wideman, Baldwin, Ellison, Wright. Author on whom Richard Ford spat. The limitations of the American epiphanic approach begin to reveal themselves rather quickly.

And while we're on the subject: *Apex Hides the Hurt*? Perfect tagline for a fictional bandage, mediocre title for a novel, at least for a good one like this. Just goes to show that you really can't judge a book by its cover.

What's in a name? Everything and nothing, as it happens. Whether it's a book title, a company name, a stereotype, a talking point, or the handle our parents have saddled us with, a name may contain multitudes, or it may be as shallow as a puddle, sometimes both. As Whitehead reminds us, the trick is in recognizing the differences, striving to mine the rich layers of meaning in a name while also taking care to tease out its dangerous limits and, sometimes, its lies. ● ● ●

Michael ("Who is like God?" in Hebrew) Larkin ("fierce" in Irish Gaelic) can't figure out why he's got such an inflated opinion of himself.