The Origin of Names

Midnight Facts for Insomniacs

Podcast Transcript

(Note: transcript consists of episode outline)

We have some news to report. *Two* pieces of news, actually. One of which is personal, but as clichéd as it might sound the midnight masses feel like family to me, Duncan and I are in regular contact with many of our listeners and hundreds of you are part of the discord community and know us pretty well so we figured we'd just get this out of the way and talk about it on the show. As I mentioned on the Patreon version of a recent episode, Duncan and I are making our life partnership official, we are moving in together. And that's only partly a joke. We *are* actually moving in together…platonically, of course. through various circumstances we find ourselves separated from our wives…who knows what will happen in the future, there is no acrimony or bitterness, it's all good, no one cheated or anything dramatic, but things happen, life happens, and

hey, Duncan and I living in close proximity will make it much easier to create content for this show…at least for the brief honeymoon period before we murder each other. Maybe we should leave the rebuttal here, and not bring it to the new studio. Actually you and I have lived together in the past, back before we were both married so we know we can cohabitate without excessive homicide. Just a little bit of Stabby stab.

The second piece of news is going to be more relevant…to a very specific segment of the audience. If you're listening to this podcast on Spotify and you happen to be a patron you can now listen to the less edited, add free Patreon versions—plus all of the bonus content and after midnight episodes —on Spotify, by linking your Patreon and Spotify accounts. It's super easy. You just have to log into your Patreon account, head to our page, there's a tab that says membership, and all you all have to do is click "link Spotify." Boom, simple, I'm so glad they finally have this option. It's way overdue but it's finally here.

So let's get to today's topic. We'll start with a related fact: According to my research minion, the name Duncan is the Anglicized version of the Scottish DonnChadh meaning

"dark skinned warrior." Did you know that? Your name is inaccurate on multiple levels, you are neither of those things. You are a light-skinned pansy. We both are, neither of us are Duncans.

The name Shane is Hebrew for gift from God. That tracks. So at least one of us lives up to our name. you should feel honored that you're moving in with me. You're welcome. I am bestowing my glory upon you. It can also mean God is gracious, which…meh. Ask some of the people who weren't invited on the ark, they probably have a different opinion of god's graciousness, but whatever.

By now I bet you can guess what this episode is about. Today I'm going to be teaching you all about names. The origin of naming, where the concept of a name comes from, how names have changed over the years, and why choosing a dumbass name for your child inevitably results in decades of humiliation and PTSD. Just ask Seymore Butts… that guy was so traumatized he became a pornographer. Some of you are too young or innocent to know what we're talking about. If you don't know, consider yourself lucky.

So Shakespeare wrote that a rose by any other name would smell as

sweet, pointing out that a name is nothing but a collection of syllables that we use to refer to a person or animal or object, and that the name doesn't affect or necessarily reflect the properties of the thing being described. And that is true, but if roses had not been named roses and instead were called shit sticks, I doubt they'd be as popular and celebrated. you probably wouldn't give your girlfriend a bouquet of shitsticks on Valentine's Day. "Trust me babe, these are the best-smelling shit sticks." So a name often *does* affect our perception of the object, and It's the same with people, if I tell you I'm sending you on a blind date with my hot friend Mildred, you're gonna be skeptical. Names can be social indicators, they can tell us a lot about a person, sometimes even including economic status. If you've been invited to lunch by Sir Mallory Cheswick Humperdink the third, there's a good bet you won't be eating at McDonald's. Multiple studies have confirmed that your name creates a first impression, people judge job applicants based on their names, and immediately assign biases as a result of the perceived race and social status indicated by the name—more on that later. There are even names that are completely off-limits because they've been ruined by some A-hole...there's nothing

inherently wrong with the name Hitler, but it's not even an option post 1939. I had some baby names picked out, if I ever had a boy I was going to name him Vlad the Impaler, but I did some research and it turns out that name has negative associations too...some historical jerk ruined another perfectly good name. That's the worst case scenario, when you name your kid something completely innocent and unobjectionable and then the name later takes on negative connotations...my sympathies to all of the Karens in the audience. Obviously a name by itself doesn't determine your future one way or the other, but it can be an advantage or a hindrance. Some of you out there in the midnight masses might recall the famous case of a Chicago woman named marijuana Pepsi. Her full name was marijuana Pepsi Jackson, and she has described many of the instances of bullying she experienced as a kid and young adult, and even though she is a success story and demonstrates that you can overcome a questionable name choice (she earned a PhD and became a noted educator) she would end up writing a dissertation about the impact of names titled "black names in white classrooms: teacher behaviors and student perceptions." and again, more about those types of

perceptions toward the end of this episode. From a BBC article about names, some very progressive parents have decided that they don't want to saddle their children with a name that the kid didn't get to choose, so they offer the child the option of changing their name at a young age, as in the case of Yo Xing Heyno Augustus Eisner Alexander Weiser Knuckles, the 4-year-old son of author Dalton Conley. Conley wrote a book about parenting; I'm not going to mention the name of the book because I do not trust this person's credentials and judgment. But there is some evidence that giving your child an unusual name may be beneficial. "Conley, who is a sociologist at New York University, says that children with unusual names may learn impulse control because they may be teased or get used to people asking about their names. "They actually benefit from that experience by learning to control their emotions or their impulses, which is of course a great skill for success." That is some chefs kiss level rationalization. Tell us more about how it's a good thing that you're getting your child beat up every day. I love this part of the article: "But for the main part, he says, the effect of a name on its bearer rarely amounts to more than the effect of being raised by parents who would choose such a

name." Thank you. It is very hard to make conclusions about the childhood impact of names because a kid named Alexander Weiser Knuckles is definitely going to be weird, but is that because of the name or is it because he was raised by wackjobs? There are so many factors that can complicate research into the effects of naming…for instance, there are way more Eleanores at Oxford than would be statistically likely…but that's probably not because the name Eleanore gives you any kind of academic advantage, but instead because a bunch of bougie parents who have enough money and privilege and influence to send their kids to Oxford are more likely to choose a stuffy, mopey name like name Eleanor. Apologies to all the Eleanor's in the audience. I think I associate the name Eleanor with Eeyore. Alternately, maybe their parents are just a bunch of Edgar Allen Poe fans, in which case they're actually kind of cool. Mopey and goth, but cool.

So you could argue that names represent the most important element separating humans from the rest of the animal kingdom. They are emblematic of self-awareness and individual identity. Like, we say that a *dog* knows its name, but that's only true in a limited sense, a dog understands that a certain sound is intended to

get its attention, but the dog does not think of itself as sparky. Sparky is a noise that's summons the dog, not a sense of identity. Humans are different, we know who we are, and who we are is Harold, or Phyllis, or Zaphod Beeblebrox.

The science of naming, btw, is called onomastics, and I'm going to pop quiz you on that at the end of this episode because I'm betting no one is going to remember that fact. It doesn't come up a lot at dinner parties. What does zip code stand for, btw?

So here's a quick definition: a name, as we all know, is a word that is used to identify a so-called referent, which is the person or object or even class or category of thing being named. You are Duncan's referent. If you ever start getting full of yourself or getting a big head, remember that you're ultimately just a referent for a name. BTW I feel very stupid giving out a definition of the concept of names, but it turns out that humans can make anything complicated, and names are no exception. The first name of a person is called a personal name or given name, you know that, the last name is also known as the surname—again pretty obvious—but did you know that the people who reside in a specific area or locality are referred to by what is called a Demonym?

We are Santa Cruzans, that's our Demonym. Santa Cruzers? Sounds like we're trying to bang Santa Claus. We're out Santa Cruzin'. The name for an ethnic group is an ethnonym; your and my ethnonym would be "generic white." Eggshell colored, maybe. I'm more of a beach-sand or pale oak. I looked that up once...it's silly that we're called white; we're not. Black people aren't black, none of it makes sense. Anyway, you probably know that a fake name is called a pseudonym, but how about this: A name for a body of water is a Hydronym, the name for a mountain or hill is an Oronym, the name for a region or country is a choronym, the name for a cosmic object is a Cosmonym, and a cosmic object that happens to be a star is an astronym. And now I encourage you to forget all of that because none of it matters.

So scientists and historians don't know how the very first names were created because they pre-date written history, but it's a good bet that they emerged as some of the first elements of spoken language. If you're going to talk to someone it always helps to have a word that indicates who you're talking to and/or who you're gossiping about. I just assume that smack talk was one of the first applications of language. If you're going to bitch about how

someone replaced your toilet leaves with poison oak, you need to be able to clarify that the perpetrator was Og and not Grok. Although come on, we all know it was Og. He was a notorious prehistoric dick. Grok would never do that. So names are useful for identifying the topic of a conversation, or assigning blame, also for keeping track of debt. Who owes Grok three loincloths? Og does, and you know he's never getting those. Some of the first names ever recorded were written on a Mesopotamian clay tablet and were the names of a couple of slaves and their owner. The slaves were named En-Pap X and Sukkalgir and their owner was Gal-Sal. Those names did not have staying power. Not a lot of Gal-Sals around the office these days, I don't know about yours. Many words that are common today as names began as phrases in other languages. For instance Oliver, which originally meant "ancestor's descendent" (I guess that's like naming your kids "the children of me") or Benjamin, which was Hebrew for "son of my right hand." I don't think that's how your kid was made but it was an ancient time, maybe they were confused on the mechanisms of reproduction.

And of course once religions were established you had to have a way to refer to individual deities and so the gods had names...and thus

names could have power. Naming children after Gods was popular in societies that didn't frown on that practice—for instance names like Diana or Thor—but in many cultures it might be forbidden to invoke the name of a god for fear of inciting their wrath. Some societies believed you could invoke spirits or ghosts by saying their names repeatedly… think Bloody Mary, or candy man. Or Gallagher. If you say the name Gallagher three times, somewhere a watermelon explodes. RIP Gallagher. You salty, bitter, fruit smashing bastard.

Now we think of names as being bestowed by parents, but that's not always the case, in the past names could be given by a clan leader, or a medicine man. Often the name would be related to some element of the child's birth or family circumstances, or maybe the time of year the child was born or some specific event that took place during the pregnancy. Maybe a wolf howled incessantly while the kid's mother was in labor, in that case the child might be named Howlin' Wolf, and either grow up to be a shredding blues guitar player or a massive disappointment. Names can be a lot to live up to, as we'll discuss. These days we in the west typically think of names as being something we choose based on auditory aesthetics—we like the sound of a certain name—but that's

only one element of a very complex set of conscious and subconscious motivations that factor into name choice. if it was just about finding a pleasant sound, we would all be named a bunch of random vowels or named after words that we like. Solipsism, that could be a name. I like that word. But there's a reason most of us don't just come up with a random word or a completely innovative grouping of letters, and instead we tend to choose names that are common or at least acceptable in our particular culture. And that's because it can be very risky to not conform. If you're some try-hard toolbag internet troll who thinks it's edgy and hilarious to name your kid X AE A-12, and I'm not referring to anyone in particular here, but if that WERE to happen, you'd be opening that child up to relentless mockery, and most parents wouldn't be that stupid... although I guess when you're homeschooled and everyone you know is on your dad's payroll no one is going to tell you to your face that your name is pretentious cringey bullshit. And while there are certainly exceptions, the truth is that most people name their children based on what they feel is culturally appropriate within their community. Which is why there aren't a lot of Asian or black kids name Caleb, there aren't a lot of white kids named Ping or Tyrone.

These aren't stereotypes, these are just facts, and we can back them up with statistics. From names.org, some of the most popular names for African American boys include Javon, Tyrell, Jamar, and Kendrick; for girls they include Latoya, Tamika, Journee, Lawanda. On the other hand, the top boy names overall—which corresponds to the Caucasian names because white people are still the majority—includes James, Robert, John, William, and David. Popular Caucasian girl names include Elizabeth, Mary, and Jennifer. Karen is currently number 15 and dropping steadily, I'd imagine.

Most names are chosen before birth, but In Jewish tradition, names for male babies were often conferred on the eighth day of a baby's life, which coincided with the circumcision ritual. So you lose something and gain something on the same day. Similarly you might've heard the term "Christian name," which today usually refers to a person's first name, but in the past referred to the Christian tradition of giving a name to a child at the time of baptism. Thus your Christian name.

For the bulk of history most names were monoyms (single names) while last names are a comparatively new idea, and have fallen in and out of favor throughout

history before gaining popularity around the late middle ages, and becoming ubiquitous in the modern era.

"Biblical Jewish people did not have surnames which were passed from generation to generation. However, they were typically known as the child of their father. For example: דוד בן ישי (David ben Yishay) meaning, [David](), son of [Jess](#)e." More on that later as well.

Surnames, or what we would refer to as last names or inherited names, are not universal, but in western cultures are passed down from generation to generation, typically through the male side of the family. Surnames were common in China by around 100 BCE, and In Western Europe they first appear in the Roman empire. Romans would get very elaborate with names, combining family names with descriptive names such as the famous Roman general and dictator who battled Hannibal in the second Punic war: Quintus Fabius Maximus Verrucosus Cunctator. Cunctator means "delayer" because Quintus was famously into edging. No he was one of the originators of guerrilla tactics, delaying any battles and major conflicts and instead bleeding enemies of their supply lines until they were

vulnerable. The warfare version of edging. Make that conflict really last.

But the surname tradition would briefly die out with the decline of Rome. Partly this was due to the increasing influence of Persian and Germanic cultures, and partly to changing circumstances and demographics. Literacy dropped, which meant there was no point in having five names that people weren't going to remember unless they were written down somewhere. Also, when you live in a giant city like Rome or one of its colonies, a dense population requires extra specificity when it comes to differentiating among individuals. But if you live in a little town or a hamlet or a village, there's probably only one Kevin. By the early middle ages most European names were once again mononyms, and that worked for a while. But as cities grew more populated, and specific names— in western Europe these would be Christian names—became increasingly common, a single name wasn't workable anymore. When there are 30 Adams on your block you have to hope that all the Adams have some distinguishing characteristic: fat Adam, skinny Adam, tall Adam, Black Adam... that's a movie. But what happens if all the Adams you know are kind of generic looking? Then you have to

resort to where they're from. Fat Adam from Australia, not fat Adam from Austria. Still can be confusing. And that's actually how surnames regained prominence in the later middle ages, beginning as so-called bynames, which indicated a location or personal characteristic or often a profession that could help identify someone who had a common name. So you might take the name John Taylor, because for your day job you crafted custom-made tails for medieval kinksters who were into pet-play. Are you familiar with these tails? They typically consist of a length of fur attached to a smooth metal plug with a tapered end, i'm not gonna go into detail, but anyway that's what tailors did. I don't like you questioning my research. No of course not, tailors were storytellers. They told tales. are you annoyed yet?

So as mentioned the byname could also indicate an area of residence. This was the toponymic byname, often preceded by the French preposition de or "of"...you would've been Dunchadd de East Berkeley. The dark skinned warrior of Shattuck avenue. This was back when cities were small enough that there was just one Duncan per town. If another Duncan said he was from East Berkeley you had to kill him, obviously. Now a toponymic byname really only makes sense for

someone who moves to another area, because it doesn't help much if there's five guys named Shane who all grew up in Santa Cruz and still live in Santa Cruz and they're all called Shane de Santa Cruz. There were also *topographic* bynames, which did not consist of proper nouns but instead were specific descriptions of places, usually employing some form of word-mashup. So Atewode, meaning at the woods or of the woods, or theffelde meaning "in the field" etc.

There were also those so-called personally descriptive bynames. For instance, a survey was commissioned in 1086 covering England and parts of Wales, and the results were compiled in a book called the doomsday book, so named because it included the final and unalterable record of debts and lands and all the names of people in the realm. And Once you were in that book your fate had been sealed, it was very cryptic. Anyway there were 40 entries in the book for the name Richard, and they included Richard of Coursey, Richard the butler, and Richard the bald. Ouch. Now we know what your medieval name would've been. Also, obviously bynames could change over time because for many years you would've been Duncan the not-*yet*-bald. It feels like some of these

names were just insults. Not cool. I don't want to be Shane the short. I don't like that one bit. I want to choose my moniker. Shane the superlative. Shame the splendiferous. Shane the pretentious and delusional? seems fair. But names could also be lengthened to further identify the individual. So you could combine locations and descriptions. Duncan the bald of Berkeley. Shane the short of Santa Cruz. Incidentally, that famous survey compiled in the doomsday book was commissioned by William the conqueror. That's a much better byname. I guess he might've also been bald, but no one would point it out, because he was doing so much conquering. I think the key is that you have to do something notable that eclipses your most embarrassing trait. Or do something that people just can't ignore. I'd rather be Shane the flasher than Shane the short.

Inherited Family names came back into common usage around the 13th century, and the original construction often was to add the father's first name as the last name of his son. So Thomas Richards actually stood for Richard's son Thomas. It was like Thomas of Richards But this tradition only identifies a single generation, because when Thomas Richards had a son named Mark, he'd be

Mark Thomas, and there was nothing connecting him back to grandpa Richard. Presumably this pissed off a lot of wealthy grandfathers and eventually their kids started paying attention… if you're hoping to inherit some of those lands and a. accumulated riches, it's probably a good idea to butter up granddad.

Now of course inherited surnames originally only applied to male children. It will surprise no one to learn that for many centuries women were marginalized when it came to naming…and also when it came to pretty much everything else. This rampant misogyny was enshrined in English common law as "coverture" as far back as the middle ages. From a linked article on brides.com

"Coverture is a legal formation that held that no female person had a legal identity," …A female baby was covered by her father's identity, and then, when she was married, by her husband's." Under coverture, a husband and wife became "one" under marriage. "It sounds romantic, but the 'one' was the husband,"… "She becomes, and this is the phrase, 'legally dead." Mazel tov. a medieval marriage was also kind of a funeral.

So moving to the modern era, The

current trend in naming is toward uniqueness. At the dawn of the 19th century in England, the four most popular names for men—Harry, Oliver, Jack, and Charlie—were monikers for more than half of all Englishmen. Those names now account for a mere 7%. Same goes for the United States: back in 1950, barely 5% of parents chose a name for their child that wasn't in the list of the top 1,000, but by 2012 that percentage increased to more than a quarter of all newborns. Obviously one of the primary reasons is the increasing diversity of the population. As the proportion of non-western-European people increases, the number of non-western-European names grows as well. Unique spellings of names are also on the rise...which I find personally annoying...and I apologize for that because I shouldn't, it's none of my business and I don't have any problem with using pronouns, but for some reason if you are a Jazzmine with two "Zs" I will give you side-eye. That shouldn't bother me but it does.

I told you we'd eventually talk about racial bias in naming, this goes all the way back to Marijuana Pepsi, who wrote a paper on the subject. In fact, there have been a ton of studies that have confirmed name-bias. From that BBC article: "In **a study from 2003**, called Are Emily

And Greg More Employable Than Lakisha and Jamal? Marianne Bertrand and Sendhil Mullainathan sent nearly 5,000 CVs in response to job advertisements in Chicago and Boston newspapers. The CVs were the same, but half were given fake names that sounded like they belonged to white people, like Emily Walsh or Greg Baker, and the other half were given names that sounded African American, like Lakisha Washington or Jamal Jones. The call-back rate from employers was 50% higher on the "white" names than the "black" names. The effects were noted even for federal contractors with "affirmative action" policies, and companies boasting they were "equal opportunities" employers.

The researchers inferred that employers were using first names to discriminate unfairly against black candidates, perhaps at an unconscious level. Those same prejudices might also come into play at the interviewing stage, but a black applicant called Greg Baker, who receives an invitation to an interview, has at least got his foot in the door."

And as many of you have guessed by the depressing turn this episode has taken, we're approaching the end. As is our custom, we have finally found the lowest possible note to end on. We're done, this

one was short but sweet.

Time for your pop quiz: What do we call the science of naming? I forgot.

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