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Mythcon 51: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico • Postponed to: July 30 – August 2, 2021



Abstract

Discusses the significance of choosing names in fantasy, drawing on statements from Le Guin and Tolkien.

Mythopoesis

A Column by Sarah Beach

Naming

There is some magic that lies in names which gives one a deep sense of satisfaction. A name can be called a label of identity, for it helps in some fashion to describe its possessor. In many folklore traditions, names have power. Even the seemingly ordinary name might carry a weight of significance. Any Sub-Creator should be aware of these points when he begins the process of naming his creatures, for the magic of names may reach up and entangle him in unforeseen problems and possibilities.

In *The Language of the Night* (G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1979), Ursula K. LeGuin mentions the process of naming while discussing her Earthsea books:

For me, as for the wizards, to know the name of an island or a character is to know the island or the person. Usually the name comes of itself, but sometimes one must be very careful: as I was with the protagonist, whose true name is Ged. I worked (in collaboration with a wizard named Ogion) for a long time trying to "listen for" his name, and making certain it really was his name . . . if the name had been wrong the character would have been wrong -- misbegotten, misunderstood.

A man who read the ms. for Parnassus thought "Ged" was meant to suggest "God". That shook me badly. I considered changing the name in case there were other such ingenious minds waiting to pounce. But I couldn't do so. The fellow's name was Ged and no two ways about it.

(p. 52)

In these two paragraphs, Leguin brings out four points about the process of naming: the relationship between knowing a character's name and knowing the character, that proper names are gained by careful attention or "listening", that a reader can easily have a mistaken assumption as to the name's "meaning", and that a character will often insist on keeping his proper name. Each of these points is something a Sub-Creator ought to consider when he begins to assign names to both people and places.

In folklore there are many references to magic attached to names. Sometimes it is said that knowing the true name of a person or object gives one power over that person or object. In a sense this is true for the Sub-Creator, for as long as a character is known to the author only as "the Hero who carries the Green Sword and kills the Water Dragon", not much will be known about him. The moment the character acquires a name, however, the author may discover any number of things about the character.

The Sub-Creator must be careful about bestowing a name upon a character. The Proper Name can be a great source of satisfaction, but it cannot simply be contrived. There are many things which can affect the choice of names, but none of them are idle. In a letter printed in *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*

(Houghton Mifflin, 1981), Tolkien observes "I do not think that an inventor catches noises out of the air" (p. 375). There is usually some sort of appeal in the name for the author. LeGuin observes of the Earthsea names that

three small islands are named for my children, their baby names . . . None of the other names "means" anything that I know of, though their sound is more or less meaningful to me. (LN, p. 51)

Indeed, the call of "meaning" in names is very powerful, and many readers pursue this elusive butterfly far afield from the Sub-Creator's world. Many an author has had to endure mistaken assumptions similar to that expressed by LeGuin's reader. Tolkien, in another letter, points out the problem for the author on this matter.

Investigators, indeed, seem mostly confused in mind between (a) the meaning of names within, and appropriate to, my story and belonging to a fictional 'historic' construction, and (b) the origins or sources in my mind, exterior to the story, of the forms of these names. As to (a) they are of course given sufficient information, though they often neglect what is provided. (LT, p.380. italics Tolkien's)

Yet, admittedly, readers will continue to pursue the "meaning" of names and there is little an author can do about the situation, aside from flat out stating what the name meant to him.

It is perhaps this underlying but unexplainable "meaning" hiding in the name which occasionally surprises the Sub-Creator. As LeGuin observes, when she contemplated changing Ged's name, she found it impossible. Not only was it the Proper Name, but the character had laid claim to it. The Sub-Creator can easily find himself dealing with characters who refuse to give up their Proper Names, but also with characters who will refuse to accept or acknowledge ill-chosen names.

In Genesis, Adam is given the challenge and delight of naming the creatures of the world, but we are given no stories of how the names came to him nor of how long it took him to complete the naming process. For the Sub-Creator, the bestowing of names echoes that Edenic chore, but roughly and uneasily. In one case the author may say "But of course his name is Ap l'Don!", while in another, a character may maintain a lengthy, shadowy elusiveness until the author trips over the name one day. Either way, when the author learns a character's name, it is for him a bit like being personally introduced to a new friend.

"What's in a name?" Juliet asked the night. Shakespeare knew what hid in names. It is after all the weight of two family names, their power and poison, which kills the young lovers. Any Sub-Creator would do well to remember that.