

I HAVE A PET NAME FOR YOU

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Onomastics is the mouth-filling word for the study of names, but it can be much more interesting than that forbidding Greek-derived word suggests. Take, for example, the names of pets. All across the United States, there are millions of little creatures (and some not so little) who are part of the family circle: Al (Gator), Pussy (Cat), and generations of dogs named Rover or Spot. I knew an English professor who took his dog's name from Lady Macbeth's famous sleep-walking scene, so that he could cry "Out, out, damned Spot!" I'm an English professor, too, but my old English sheep dog is named Randall (derived from the Old English word for house wolf, as names like Ralph and Randolph derive from the Anglo-Saxon word for wolf). An earlier dog of mine was named Lady Brett, Hemingway's heroine in the novel The Sun Also Rises (her surname was Ashley, too).

In Commerce, Texas, about sixty miles northeast of Dallas, English professor Fred Tarpley and his students decided in 1973 to study the names of the pets in that small university town. The results of their sober investigations may assist you the next time your kitty litters or a stray dog arrives on your doorstep ("Hey, Mom, can we keep him? Please?") -- or you may simply be interested in how and why pets are named. The students of East Texas University fanned out along Sycamore and Live Oak and Chestnut and Walnut streets (as well as Rix and Mayo and Arp and Faye) and this is what they found:

- people who didn't know why the cat was called Peppermint or Wienia
- people who called a dog Onya ("it was always on ya") or Bippy ("you bet your sweet bippy" from TV's Laugh-In) or Fang (after Phyllis Diller's husband)
- people who had a hawk named Youngblood (from the novel of the same name) or a cat named Decon (because they bought it instead of rat poison)
- people who named their goldfish Moby (from Moby Dick) or even their plant Priscilla (their split-leaf philodendron was "so big we felt it deserved a name")

Some names had really surprising origins, such as Lingo (named for the postman who brought him) or Rinda (named for "a Boston witch who reads tea leaves near the Common"). When asked why his dog was named Laddie, his owner replied, "Well, we couldn't call him Lassie, could we?" He was evidently unaware that the Lassie of the movies is not a bitch at all (unlike so many stars in Hollywood).

Some animals were named because of a trait: Alfa was the calf that led the herd, Winky the turtle that blinked his eyes. Others were named for physical characteristics: Midnight for a black cat, Ginger for a red one, and Raven Beauty for a raven (what else?). Others were named for characters in books, radio or movies: Alfie (from the movie of the same name), Aragorn (from Lord of the Rings) and Frodo (also from Tolkien), and Mitch (from the sudser Edge of Night). One family called their dog RCA because it resembled the attentive one in the famous advertisement for His Master's Voice. (In case you wondered, the RCA dog is really called Nipper.) The Stowell family called their dog Harriet Beecher Stowell (which reminds me of a friend whose cat was called Norma Vincent Pee).

German breeds tended to get names like Schubert, Wurst, Hitler, Greta or Pretzel. Most Scotch terriers were called Scottie rather than Mac (Roosevelt's scottie was called Falla, as those older than Nixon's Checkers generation may recall). Siamese cats were named Mei-Lei (too close to My Lai for comfort), Pasha Regina and Tocsin (the first king of Siam). A Norwegian elkhound was named Tonya (a queen of Norway), and French poodles were called Jouet, Napoleon, Pepe Pierre (a misunderstanding of Lucky Pierre?), Fifi and, surprisingly, Jock.

Many people didn't know why their second-hand dog was named Bojo, or who first called their rabbit Bugs or their horse John. Others shrank from the mental effort of finding a suitable name; one family named all their dogs Caesar, and another explained that Lady V was the fifth cat they had owned.

A similar survey of New York City pet names would make interesting reading. Here are the results of my own casual survey. Their sophisticated owners go in for exotic dogs with fancy names: dobermans named Ulrich, weimaraners named Klaus, and salukis and corgis and pulis with native names I won't even try to pronounce. Even the recently-deposed Emperor Haile Selassie, The King of Kings, The Conquering Lion of Judah, is outclassed by the kennel or personal names that breeders attach to their proud champions (which reminds me of a friend with a tomcat named Highly Salacious).

I like the apocryphal story about the kitten that was named Benjamin Franklin until it had kittens of its own -- then its owner renamed it Ben Hur. I also think a budgie named Rachel Prejudice was cleverly-named, but I deplore the attitude revealed by the man who called his dog Washington "because it's 80 per cent black".

Pet names can reveal a lot about their owners and, if the same holds true for pets as for people, the names given can greatly affect the personality of the pet. If kids named Elmer are automatically given lower grades in school, if droodle expert Roger Price is right when he asserts all girls named Lois are alike, if lots of Judys would rather be Michelles, and Linda is in while Ivy and Rose and Violet are out, perhaps it's true that the name molds the pet.