[REVIEW] On Nicknames and the Ringmasters

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"We were clowns, children, things…." So starts Rémy Ngamije's *The Giver of Nicknames*, where readers are launched into the mind of a hyper-literate narrator who recounts his teenagehood at a private Catholic School in Namibia. From the beginning, Ngamije's sets out to make the reader aware of the title character's deft use of language, more specifically, his name-calling; not only of people but of relationships and the situations that shape them. Throughout the story, the far-reaching implications, and history, of the act of name-calling, is refracted through the narrator's retelling of his experiences with three classmates, all of them named Donovan but given nicknames: Donnie Blanco, Donnie Darko, and Fatty.

To read Ngamije's writing requires, sometimes, to have a Google browser opened alongside in order to fully appreciate the many inter-textual and unconventional words the writer places in a reader's path. This is a writer who is not afraid to challenge readers to linger a little longer with a particular comparison, phrase, or archaic word. For this narrative in particular, the striking comparisons—and words that force one's mouth into unfamiliar shapes—is quite pivotal in giving life to the title character Ngamije imagines. From comparing school scholarships to 'communist pamphlets in the Soviet republics' to equating teenage politics to the taxonomy of Carl Linnaeus, the world, and its categories of inquiry and expression, are bent to the will of the giver of nicknames. So much so that, for most of the story, the reader is entertained by this sharp-witted narrator who seems, at most turns, to level the playing field between himself and the Donovans he comes up against by using his caustic ability to name and maim.

Coming up against the first Donovan (Donnie Blanco), the striking contrast of haves and have-nots among the pupils at the prestigious Catholic school is illuminated. Donnie Blanco's family is rich, filthy at that, and his English essays—detailing his travels around the world—are enough to infuriate the narrator, and please their British English teacher, Mrs. Braithwaite. Mrs. Braithwaite is a prime example of a character who places the center of the world elsewhere—never in the textured, local

lives of the less-privileged students in her class. Within this dynamic, the narrator is painfully aware of the ways wealth allows people to move through the world differently, to the extent that a questionable sexual encounter between Blanco and another student allows the wealthy Donnie to continue his studies, unscathed. Here, naming a situation for what it is takes on a vital juridical function for the giver of nicknames, especially when the 'chemistry of consent' between two teenagers in a changing room does not neatly add up to randy teenage shenanigans, but something a lot darker.

One thing readers can always expect from Ngamije's work is a willingness to experiment on the page. This comes out delightfully in the dramatization of the race scenes between the narrator and the second Donovan (Donnie Darko). Here, the issue of what teenage boys use to make themselves into 'real people' is particularly striking. For the narrator, Donnie Blanco and Donnie Darko running forms part of a selfhood made with the feet, one that is threatened when Darko—a Zimbabwean 'poverty scholarship kid'—steals the running limelight from the narrator. These scenes of teenage competition (the prize being a share of the social capital at the school) were particularly nostalgic for me and drove home the point of how little we have to go on as teenagers when, at the end of high school, we are supposed to make life-altering declarations of who we want to be, often in the form of what we want to study at university. One thing the narrator in this instance shows is that prized nicknames, like 'Onion Marks', trace a space of recognition for burgeoning manhood—recognition itself a way of shoring up one's sense of worthiness, in a world with a complex history of how 'worthiness' and 'unworthiness' have been measured.

The Giver of Nicknames is suffused with a range of recognitions such as these; recognitions that exceed themselves in what they could mean, and how they could be interpreted. From seeing his 'father's absence' in his mother's face, to a smug Donnie Blanco at the end of a race—where the narrator loses his prized nickname 'Onion Marks'—Ngamije draws out the precarity of giving names to people and moments. This is because, as the narrative suggests, people always mean more than the names ascribed to them and pivotal moments in a life often rewrite themselves over time—as we come to understand personal history as an organic 'thing' that can be stunted, pruned, and even fertilized to produce different fruit.

In the character of Fatty, the fruits of the diasporic black experience hint at the slipperiness of identity tied to categories of personhood. Both African American and black (a separation the character insists on) Fatty faces a host of aporias in the 'motherland': one of them being the term 'Coloured' and the varied history the name has, depending where in the world one uses it. In Fatty's character, the conglomerate empire of American culture is decentered, perhaps because the 'motherland' (as Fatty calls it) contains categories of privilege, blackness, and African'ness that are informed by a different set of preoccupations, tensions and possibilities.

In this last section, a more overt tone of adult retrospection emerges as the narrator looks back on the ways his nicknaming of classmates was a kind of shield against insecurity, even admitting a sense of pleasure in 'character assassinations'. Here, Ngamije complicates the reader's view of the title character through a skillful compression of time—the reader feels caught between both the adult and teenage version of the giver of nicknames as he tries to reconcile the 'thing' he was then and the 'man' he is now. By the end of the story, I am left wondering whether such a process of reconciliation between 'thing' and 'man' ever completes itself, or does the teenage tendency to name, maim and deflect guilt *leak* into the structures of the adult world: as we 'grown-ups' substitute our hormonal ringmasters for a host of others.

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