

Dear Rin Tin Tin: An Analysis of William Safire's Dog-Naming Survey from 1985

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This paper contributes to the study of how and why we bestow particular types of names upon companion animals, specifically dogs. The research is based on a cache of letters written in 1985 in response to a request from *New York Times* columnist, William Safire. Although the survey is in no sense scientific, it nonetheless taps trends in dog naming that have become steadily more prominent to the present day. Dog names as well as the criteria by which they are selected reflect central aspects of the relationship between pet owners and their canine companions. The letters reveal a growing preference for people names for dogs, which accords with the increasing treatment of companion animals as human. Dog nicknaming is common, particularly for those pedigree canines registered with the American Kennel Club. Dog naming provides pet owners a creative outlet, and a way to reinforce and communicate publicly a particular self-image.

KEYWORDS dog names, companion animals, nicknames, humorous names, folklore of naming, William Safire, American Kennel Club

To the memory of William Safire

Early in 1985, I spied a nearly inconspicuous anonymous notice in the *San Francisco Chronicle* asking readers to submit stories about how and why they named their dogs the way they did. At the time, I was not a dog owner myself. But I had begun to collect written material relating to the multiple ways in which Americans had begun to anthropomorphize companion animals. In search of additional documentation, I wrote to the *Chronicle* with a request that I be informed of any results that might come of that survey. On December 22 that same year, William Safire published an article entitled “Name that Dog” (1985). The article appeared in his weekly column “On Language” from the *New York Times Magazine*. It was only then that I realized that I had responded to a notice sent out by Safire, whose political commentaries and

linguistic analyses appeared with frequent regularity in the *New York Times* over a period of several decades.

Two years passed with no response to my request. I satisfied myself with the minimal information I could glean from the entertaining but hardly probing “Name that Dog” column. Then unexpectedly, in January 1988, a large packet arrived for me in the mail from Safire himself. The packet contained the original letters — precisely 410 of them, specifying nearly 12,000 dog names — sent to him from readers located in every corner of the United States. Safire provided me these letters on one condition alone: that I acknowledge his contribution to my research. For nearly two and a half decades those letters have sat in my office waiting to be examined. It is time that I glean these fascinating documents for what they can tell about pet-naming trends that actually began in the 1980s but continue in increasingly conspicuous form to the present day.

William Safire died in 2009 at the age of seventy-nine. I will forever be moved by his generosity in forwarding these primary sources to me, a complete stranger. The letters hail from every corner of the country, from urban and rural areas. There is even one letter from a prisoner. The letters also vary substantially in length and content. Some respondents communicate via postcard, with just a line or two informing Safire of their pet’s name. Others present simple lists, which they diligently collected from neighbors or colleagues at work. One reader sent a list of 1418 dog names, gathered in a survey of elementary school children. Many writers accompany their letters with photographs of their pets, and some respondents attach photocopies of the American Kennel Club registration form to their communications, as if incontrovertible evidence were needed of their dogs’ names. For my purposes, the most interesting letters are those composed as essays, short or long, which reveal a lot more about name selection and the relationship between owner and animal than does the moniker alone. There is only one recurrent note of discord, that is, in letters from readers who are either mystified or miffed that Safire failed to include cats in his survey.

Safire’s principal message in “Name that Dog” appears in the column’s opening lines:

Canine nomenclature is taking a turn toward the human. More and more we are giving dogs the names we used to reserve for people [...]. [W]e tend to give our dogs the names we had left over for children we never had, or we name them after favorite uncles or cartoon characters or rock stars. Instead of turning verbs and adjectives into proper nouns (for example, by calling a puppy that likes to nip your finger *Nipper*), we are using proper nouns directly, calling the little nipper *George*, *Daisy* or *Charley*.

In “Name that Dog,” Safire tried to categorize names thematically. In accord with his main argument, he discovered that the largest single category was names of people, with *Max*, *Belle*, *Ginger*, *Walter*, and *Sam* predominating. Reader letters also indicated that particular dog breeds often inspire appropriate ethnic names, so that Irish setters are sometimes called *Kelly* and German Shepherds *Fritz*. Aside from human names, Safire also identified categories of names based on food (*Cookie*, *Candy*, *Taffy*, *Peaches*), emotional disposition (*Pepper*, *Rascal*, *Bandit*, *Crab*, *Tide* [“like me,” writes the owner, “he has his regular highs and lows”]), color of the canine coat

(*Blackie, Amber, Midnight*), and the owners' occupations. Hence, in Safire's words, "lawyers like *Shyster* and *Escrow*; doctors prefer *Bones*; tennis stars try *Topspin*." A psychoanalyst named his dog *Psyche*. Sensitive as always to grammatical nuances, Safire notes in his article that "Certain syllables recur: -ie and -y are the favorite endings, perhaps because large animals seem less frightening if named with a diminutive like *Binky*."

Safire's main point is borne out by more than anecdotal evidence. A survey from 2008 of 450,000 pets in the United States, carried out by Veterinary Pet Insurance, revealed that a good number of the most popular dog and cat names rank among the Social Security Administration's most popular baby names (Veterinary Pet Insurance Co. 2009). Hence, the ten most common dog names for that year, in order, were: Max, Bailey, Bella, Molly, Lucy, Buddy, Maggie, Daisy, Silvie, and Chloe. One of Safire's correspondents accompanied his letter with the Annual Report, from 1984, of the James A. Baker Institute for Animal Health at Cornell University, an organization devoted mainly to canine wellness. This document gives names of donors to the Institute, along with the dogs to which they offered money *in memorium*. Of 331 dogs identified, 157 bore human names, by far the largest category.

As additional evidence in support of Safire's hypothesis, a recent analysis of pet cemetery gravestone inscriptions reveals a distinct trend towards the application of human names to companion animals. Founded in 1896, the Hartsdale Pet Cemetery, located north of New York City, is generally considered to be the oldest pet cemetery in the world. The inscriptions found on gravestones vary enormously from one generation to the next. Before World War II, dogs were called *Laddie, Rex, Rags, Boogles, Trixie, Snap, Jaba*, and similar names that are entirely uncharacteristic of human beings. Even through the 1980s, at least at Hartsdale, pet names — for instance, *Champ, Happy, Rusty, and Spaghetti* — were unlike those that parents would give a child. Over the past two or three decades, naming patterns as registered on gravestones have changed radically. It is now very common to encounter inscriptions to dogs named *Ronnie, Rebecca, Jasper, Marcello, Oliver, Fred, and Timothy*. This is a trend that accords perfectly with evidence that Safire discovered from his admittedly non-scientific sample of reader letters. It also accords with observations I have made at the second oldest public pet cemetery in the world, founded in 1899 and located just north of Paris at Asnières-sur-Seine (where Rin-Tin-Tin is actually buried). Speaking of the Western world as recently as the 1960s, anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss could assert confidently that, in the case of dogs, "Not only do they not form an independent society; as 'domestic' animals they are part of human society, although with so low a place in it that we should not dream of following the example of some Australians and Amerindians in designating them in the same way as human beings — whether what is in question are proper names or kinship term" (1966: 205). In fact, since composing this passage, the pattern has changed radically, so that kinship terms, people names, and other human attributes are nowadays frequently bestowed upon dogs (Brandes, 2009).

These new naming patterns above all reflect wider developments in animal-human relations. Adrian Franklin (1999: 57) expressed the matter succinctly: "recent trends in pet keeping can be understood as the extension of familial relations to non-humans." To the degree that there has been a blurring of the classificatory boundary

dividing men and women, on the one hand, from beasts, on the other, these animals are treated more and more as if they were actual human relatives. It is the growing feeling of kinship between humans and animals that best explains why people in recent years devote so much money, time, and emotional energy to the upbringing and nurturance of cats and dogs. The widespread classification of animals — particularly household animals — as virtually human receives expression in the bestowal of human names on these canine companions (Brandes, 2009; Franklin, 1999; Slovenko, 1983).

Although Safire's essay focused on the increasing prevalence of human names, something must be said about naming an animal at all. After all, various species of cattle, barnyard animals, and other creatures that occupy space outside the home are rarely given names, human or otherwise. Anthropologist Edmund Leach (1964) long ago proposed that we tend to name those animals that share our intimate space and that therefore become akin to family members. One of Safire's letter writers put it well when recounting the moment that she and her husband chose "to add a dog to our family." A closely related pattern comes from the case of names derived from species identification. Among the 410 letters sent to Safire, only two owners indicate that they call their pet by the term "Dog." Alexandra Horowitz concludes her phenomenal best seller, *Inside of a Dog*, with a condemnation of this practice.

To name a dog is to begin to make him personal — and thus an anthropomorphizable creature. But we must. To name a dog is to assert an interest in understanding the nature of the dog; to not name the dog seems the pinnacle of disinterest. Dogs named *Dog* make me sad: the dog is already defined out of being a player in the owner's life. *Dog* has no name of his own; he is only a taxonomic subspecies. He will never be treated as an individual. What one is doing when naming a dog is starting him on the personality that he is to grow into. When trying out names for our dog, calling words out at her — "Bean!" "Bella!" "Blue!" — to see if any prompted a reaction, I felt that I was searching for "her name": the name that was already hers. With it, the bond between human and animal — wrought of understanding, not projection — could begin to form. (Horowitz, 2009: 296–297)

To bear out Horowitz's point, one of Safire's readers writes that someone inquired why her terrier was named *Joan*. The response: "Well, she was going to be *Anne*, but she just wasn't an *Anne*, if you know what I mean." Asked to explain his dog's name *Charlie*, the brother of a writer states simply, "She looks like a *Charlie*, doesn't she?"

It is easy to predict what Horowitz's reaction would be to a reader from Forest Knolls, California, who named her dog "not 'Dog', a seven-year German Shepherd resident of Woodacre, but his neighbor, whose name is pronounced 'Dee-oh-gee,'" with an accent on the second syllable. Horowitz's interpretation of the meaning of *Dog* as a name for a canine companion reveals a growing intellectual movement — asserted most vigorously by Donna Haraway (2003) — favoring egalitarian and mutually respectful, rather than hierarchical, relations between dogs and people. This academic trend is yet another manifestation of a wider cultural transformation in relations between pets and their people.

Aside from changes in actual dog names, the letters to Safire bear additional evidence of a transformation in the animal-human bond. In his widely syndicated request for information, William Safire asked that readers send their stories to “Rin Tin Tin,” c/o “On Language” at the *New York Times* Washington Bureau. The vast majority of letters bear the salutation “Dear Mr Safire,” a clear indication that they were aware of authorship of the “On Language” column. Those readers who might or might not be aware use a variety of salutations, including “Dear Bill,” “Gentlemen,” “To Whom it May Concern,” “Dear Sirs,” “Dear Sir/Madame,” “Dear Friends,” and “Dear Mr Language,” among others. Almost ten percent of letter writers, however, address their comments to an imaginary dog. And this salutation is used even in cases where the content of the letters indicate knowledge of Safire’s identity. Among these salutations, the most common is “Dear Rin Tin Tin,” followed by “Dear Mr Tin” and “Dear Rin.” Frequent as well are letters addressed to “Rinty,” “Rinny,” “Mr Rin Tin Tin,” and “Mr Tin Tin.” One reader uses the salutation “Dear Mr Rin Tin Tin,” and then adds parenthetically “or is it merely Mr Tin?” Another address her comments to “Mr Tin Tin,” with the addition of a parenthetical plea, “may I call you ‘Rin’?” A few readers resort to stereotypical dog monikers, especially *Fido* and *Pooch*. By way of salutation, one respondent actually calls out to the addressee, “Here Boy.”

One telling salutation reads “Dear R.T.T.” The San Franciscan writer follows this opening with the statement that “Initials are being used instead of names for many dogs in my canine territory. I think it has to do with the trend toward owner initials, in place of first names, for greater security in phone book listings today.” This interesting hypothesis is yet to be verified. Nonetheless, the writer’s claim raises a central point: dog names, as recorded in the Safire survey, follow human names not only through precise replication. They are also humanized by being shortened or otherwise altered to act as a substitute name, just as occurs with men and women in Western society generally (Brandes, 1975; Skipper and Leslie, 1990). In the writer’s neighborhood, there were several such cases, including a Russian wolfhound with the nickname “M.G.” to stand for Mikhail Gorbachev. A terrier mix from Forest Hills, New York, called *Fast Dog* was actually called *Fasty*. A reader from Brooklyn writes that his dog is named *Felix Frankfurter*, but called simply *Felix*. A highland white terrier from Burke, Virginia is named *Flexx Ability*, but answers to the simplified name *Flexx*. Golden retriever *Corduroy Cheddar*, from upstate New York, is referred to in the owner’s letter as *Cordy*. *Principe* in San Diego is called *Zip*. *Short Stop*, from Cambridge, Massachusetts, is usually called either *Short* or *Stop*.

In general, nicknames as applied to dogs follow the same patterns as those given to boys and girls, men and women. They tend to be shortened versions of the official name, affectionate modifications of the official name, or a word that bears no phonetic relation to the official name, that is, a name based on a dog’s looks, personality, or other individual characteristics. Sometimes a shortened name is simultaneously a name based on specific attributes of the pet. For example, a reader from Manalapan, New Jersey, writes, “When my wife and I adopted our puppy, breed Americus Muttus, this past August, we held off naming her until she had ‘earned’ a name. After a week of trial and error, dumb ideas and suggestions, my wife looked at her sad face and eyes and said, ‘What a Shayna Punim’ [beautiful face in Yiddish]. She became Shayna [beautiful] and has smiled ever since.”

For a variety of social and financial reasons, countless owners of pure-bred dogs — having paid a premium price to acquire their pet — seek registration of their canine by name with the American Kennel Club. The Club publishes detailed rules as to naming, which occupy two full pages of their informational booklet. Because of the vast number of registrants, and the prohibition on name duplication, AKC guidelines advise, “The longer and more unique the name chosen, the greater the chances for approval.” “In the quest for originality,” writes one California respondent to the Safire survey, “these registered names become decidedly peculiar. A neighbor of mine registered her Labrador as ‘Mel-O-Dee-Mel’ since the AKC wouldn’t permit the more familiar ‘Melody.’ Someone else had already used that name.” (Actually, the AKC allows up to thirty-seven registrants with the same name, each bearing a separate number following that name.) The AKC also takes it upon itself to assure owners that “the dogs [*sic*] ‘call name,’ that is, the name he responds to, does not have to be the same as his registered name. If you name your dog ‘Spot’ and it is not approved, you may continue to call him ‘Spot,’ even though his registered name may be different.” From this wording in an official document, it seems that the AKC feels it need to offer dog owners permission to call their pets what they wish on a daily basis.

A surprising number of pet owners in Safire’s survey own dogs that are registered in the American Kennel Club. Naming rules are numerous and stringent (as they are equally with the British Kennel Club, as described in detail by Claude Levi-Strauss [1966: 181–182]), which explains why some readers had to submit several names until receiving approval from the AKC committee. (Even the first submission requires nomination of two names in order of preference.) At times, the AKC itself imposes what it considers to be a suitable name, without the owner’s approval. Consider the following case, recounted by a reader surnamed August, from Oakland, California:

When we put in our AKA papers to officially register our Bassett Hound as “Broken Doggie,” we were notified that we could not use such a name [...] although it was not said why, apparently such a comic name was beneath the dignity of such breeds, especially the pick-of-the-litter son of a Champion known as Pepper. They named our dog, “August’s Pepper.” Of course, we called him “Broken Doggie” and over the years this has been shortened to “Broken Dog,” “Broken” or just plain “Broke.” Owners with a flair for originality can invent a short name that conforms to AKC guidelines from the outset. For example, a professional economist from Dallas was given a Scottish Terrier by a family named Adams. The recipient of the gift registered his new dog as *Adams Myth*.

AKC names are often long, and reflect social aspirations equivalent to those that inspired dog owners to register with the AKC in the first place. Consider the case of one reader from Cherry Hill, New Jersey, who writes, “Recognizing the aristocratic heritage both of our family (directly descended from the High Kings of Ireland) and the pedigree of the animal, we designated it as ‘Maximiliano Primero, Imperador [*sic*] de Mexico.’” Continues the letter-writer, “We permit him to be familiarly addressed as: ‘Max.’” A reader from Oceanside, New York, tells of a pedigree canine registered under the “lofty, yet uncommon moniker” *Limestone’s Pennyweight Gockington*, an animal “known to family and friends as ‘Bootsie.’” A San Francisco owner of a

Shetland sheepdog registered her pet with the AKC Sunnyglen Saltwater Taffy.” This dog, writes her owner, “is plain, unpretentious Taffy to her friends.” A Cocker Spaniel registered as *William Albert Nobleheart* bears the simple call name *Bill*. I

Perhaps the most dramatic examples of long AKC names in the Safire survey comes from a Jersey City reader, who owns four dogs of unspecified breed. They are registered as: (1) Ring A Ding Rexvik Maestro C.D.X.W.D., known familiarly as *Nigel*; (2) Gordon Hill Tartan Tri Me C.D.X., whose call name is *Nisa*; Flashback Turbulent Turner, known in daily life as *Turner*; and Flashback Just in Case, who is generally called *Justine*. The owner of these dogs explains that “The registered names are not entirely absurd when one knows how to read them. To a person familiar with pedigrees, registered names can identify what kennel bred a dog, who owns the sire, and other pertinent information.” To explain, the letter writer divides into discrete segments the first her four dog names, as listed above. *Ring A Ding* identifies the owner and breeder of the dog’s kennel; *Rexvik* identifies the co-owner of the dog’s kennel and the breeder of the litter; *Maestro* identifies a particular litter — the “music” litter (many breeders give all puppies in a litter names that derive from a single theme); and *C.D.X.W.D.* indicates the titles the dog has won.

Dog breeders, with a commercial interest in the animals, are particularly eager to register with the American Kennel Club, often with the goal of showing the dog in competitions. Selecting unique names also presents a particular challenge to the breeder. The director of the AKC Library, located in New York City, submitted a packet of information to Safire, along with a cover letter, explaining this situation. States Director Roberta Vesley,

Typically, a breeder will select a kennel name and use the word in naming all his dogs. Often, this is a made-up name such as one that uses parts of his children’s name or reversing his own name. For example, a well known Boxer breeder named Harris in the 1950s called his kennel “Sirrah Crest.” His dog “Bangaway of Sirrah Crest” won Best-in-Show at Westminster in 1951.

A few letters to Safire express irritation at the snobbishness of American Kennel Club naming standards. Writes one dog owner from Long Island,

The AKC and I are not on speaking terms. They have gotten the last money out of me they will ever see. What kind of a dog registry is it when you send in the form with Spot, (Spotty, second choice), and the poor dog is stuck forever with the moniker Spot III? Spot the third, my eye! Son of a bitch, he is, but stuck up, he isn’t! Will, or Willy would turn over in his grave. Out, out, damned Spot III.

Dog breeders and owners often take account of the number of syllables in a name. Roberta Vesley of the American Kennel Club took it upon herself to inform William Safire that “dogs respond better to names of one or two syllables.” An apparently knowledgeable reader offers Safire the observation that

Serious dog fanciers have their own game. Obedience buffs most often choose two syllable names that don’t even remotely sound like obedience commands and usually have a soft a or i sound in them (i.e. *Nisa*, *Impy*). Many people involved in field trials give their dogs short (one syllable) names that lend themselves to being shouted across large fields.

Reading owners' stories of the reasons they named their dogs the way they did, it is impossible to overlook the impact of the creative impulse in the bestowal of a name. Many owners bring playfulness, jocularly, and verbal artistry to the task of naming a pet. Often it is nothing more than the syntactic or lexical character of the names themselves that determines why a name is selected. Consider the case of owners with two companion canines. The Safire survey includes multiple instances in which owners select matching names for the animal pair: for example, *Scotch* and *Soda*, *Salt* and *Pepper*, *Up Up* and *Away*, *Mac* and *Tosh*, *Heaven* and *Hell*. Owners also choose paired names based on comparable morphemes: to wit, two Bullmastiffs called Clarabell and Tinkerbelle.

Among reader attempts at jocularly in dog naming, there are a few cases that fall within the domain of folklore in that they constitute distinctive items of speech that get shared within a specific language communities and repeated in multiple variants. Such is the case with the name Peeve, which is reported in nearly a dozen of the Safire letters. Writes one contributor to the survey, who reports that his sister "always thought it would be great to name one of her animals 'Peeve', thereby giving her the opportunity to introduce her mammalian friend as 'my pet, Peeve.'" Another reader writes, "Some people name their dog Peeve, so that can show people their Pet, Peeve." A third offers, "My favorite name for a dog or any domestic animal is 'Peeve.' Get it, — 'My pet ____.'" Most statements about Peeve come from readers who do not actually own a dog with that name. However, a few, such as one dog owner from Simsbury, Connecticut, claim actually to have bestowed that name on their companion animal. He writes, "My Rhodesian Ridgeback is named 'Peeve' and is introduced as 'my pet, Peeve.' As you might expect, he has been true to his name since puppy days. While many dogs may be peeves, I suspect that few others are Peeves." There might very well be few real dogs with that name, and yet it is clear that the gag line "pet Peeve" is known to a substantial number of canine fanciers.

Another jocular naming story concerns the French version of the stereotypical English name Fido. A reader from Arlington, Virginia narrates the following story, repeated with variants in at least half a dozen additional letters.

Dear Mr Tin: In response to your plea in William Safire's column of October 13, I conducted a poll of some of the neighborhood dogs. I talked to three, two French poodles and a mutt. The first French poodle told me her name was "Fifi, F.I.F.I." The second French poodle identified herself as "Mimi, M.I.M.I." The mutt growled that his name was Fido, P.H.Y.D.E.A.U.X.

A variant of this narrative comes from a San Francisco reader, who writes,

Dear Mr Safire: [...] In reading last week's article including Canine Query, I was reminded of the story of the thug-type dog trying to pick up two very classy French Poodles. The thug asks the first poodle, "what's your name sweetie?", she says "mimi, M.I.M.I." Then she turns away snottily. He looks to the second French Poodle and says, "hey sweetheart, what's your name?", she says, my name is FiFi, F-I-F-I. She turns away with her nose in the air. Finally, the first French Poodle looks around slyly and says, "What's your name, Butch?" to which the thug replied, "No." My name is FIDO. P-H-Y-D-E-A-U-X.

To identify an authentic item of folklore, all one needs is two variants. Although the stories reproduced above are sufficient to qualify, there are a number of additional variants of basically the same narrative in the Safire letters as well. The fictional dog name *Dammit* — reflected in one reader’s account of the opportunity to call out “Dammit! Get outta there/stop that/come here!” — is similarly reported with multiple variants in the Safire letters.

Variants of the fictional dog name *Sex* appear often enough in Safire’s files to have had him annotate them (in red ink, as he did all the letters) with the statement “Very old joke.” What follows is one example, from a reader in Calistoga, California:

Dear Rin Tin Tin (a truly tinny name). A few years ago I was given a truly handsome Labrador puppy — male. A jillion names came to mind until I discovered the young pup seemed to have a perpetual interest in sex, constantly demonstrated by an overwhelming desire to hump my leg. So, in jest, I decided to call him SEX. What a mistake, even though the pup obviously admired his name. But what problems it created. — two weeks ago his license had to be renewed. I went down to City Hall and told the young lady in charge of renewals I wanted a new license for SEX. She not only said it wasn’t necessary but slipped me a note with her telephone number! — Several nights later the pup slipped out of the house. At midnight I’m still trying to find the poor lost pup downtown when a policeman stopped me and asked what I was doing. I told him I was simply trying to find SEX. If you wish to communicate with me, I’m being held in the Calistoga jail. Please find SEX. He must be lonely without me.

A reader from Glen Rock, New Jersey offers Safire five variants of this bawdy narrative, including the following:

Now, Sex has been very embarrassing to me. When I went to City Hall to renew his dog license, I told the clerk that I would like to have a license for Sex. He said, “I’d like to have one, too.” Then I said, “But this is a dog.” He said that he didn’t care what she looked like! Then I said, “You don’t understand. I’ve had Sex since I was nine years old.” He remarked that I must have been quite a kid!

There are other humorous stories of dog names in the Safire cache, names that stand alone and lack variants, at least in this collection. One such story concerns a letter-writer’s friend, owner of a dog named Bascomb: “Thus my friend could stand in front of his yard in the early stillness of the night and loudly call his wayward pet home (the decibel count dropping precipitously on the very last syllable) with, ‘Come here, YOU LITTLE BAScomb.’”

These comic stories, both real and fictional, point to a central feature of dog naming. The Safire letters reveal that to bestow a name on a dog is a way for the owner to communicate publicly something about him or herself. Aside from the unusual case of registration with the American Kennel Club, owners enjoy complete liberty when they give their dog a name. The only present-day strictures on dog naming derive from an owner’s acceptance of and conformity to societal norms. It is the outright rejection of societal norms contained in the stories of bawdy dog names that produce (or at least aim to produce) a humorous reaction.

Many letters from dog owners display their acute sensitivity to public opinion. One New Yorker has summarized the phenomenon well: “Come to think of it, all of my

friends have christened their dogs in such a way that they will never be embarrassed to holler down the street.” It is indeed the public utterance of the dog’s name that concern a number of owners. A female Floridian with a dog named Tiz writes, “I must exercise caution when walking him, lest men get the wrong idea when they hear me say, ‘Here TIZ, HERE TIZ.’” A Washingtonian tells of acquiring a rescue dog in Eugene, Oregon, which came with the name *Blackie*. “I soon moved to San Francisco, and with the thought of standing in a crowded urban park yelling ‘come here, Blackie,’ I changed its name to ‘Curry,’ for a favorite spice. I felt, and Curry seemed to agree, that the name was similar enough in ‘dog intonation’ to do the trick, both rhyming and holding the same number of syllables as *Blackie*.”

Some writers explain in detail the complications caused by inappropriate naming of their dogs. Consider the following account of a dog with neither a bawdy nor a politically incorrect name.

We had two Poodles, both called “Pe Pe Pierre.” When we bought our third poodle I wanted to give him a “real” name. I called the dog “Arthur.” When I sent out my holiday cards I signed them, Loretta, Bernie, Jane and Nancy plus Arthur. Needless to say not one person thought Arthur was my dog. My daughter Jane received a happy engagement card to none other than Arthur. Everyone thought he was my future son-in-law. My second problem was that my husband’s good friend (so he calls her) has a husband named Arthur. So my husband was upset that this good friend find out that we named our dog Arthur. The third problem was that when I called for my poodle I would call “Artie, Artie come here.” People passing in cars would look at me like I was out of space. No person was around. All they saw was a dog. So [...] we went back to calling Arthur Pe Pe Pierre and had no problems thereafter. You can’t say I didn’t try!

In the Safire survey, accounts of the way dog names are uttered in public give good evidence that owners are cognizant of the social consequences of bestowing one or another name on an animal. Dogs are social animals, not only for the ways in which they create a bond with humans, or even with the ways in which they bond among themselves. To an equal extent they are social because, in comparison with cats, they serve to relate humans to one another. The breed, behavior, and name of a dog reflect a good deal about the owner. The choice of companion animal and the bestowal of its name are, in these respects, vehicles of communication and self-identity for the owner.

There is a lot of evidence, from the Safire letters and elsewhere, that owners nowadays, and since the 1980s at least, identify in substantial ways with their dogs. Over the past generation, dogs have not only acquired human names to a greater extent than ever before, but also have been given religious and ethnic identities, as demonstrated by changing animal gravestone inscriptions (Brandes, 2009). Owners endow these animals as never before with cultural, not merely natural, characteristics. A number of Safire’s letter writers have named their dogs for human relatives, living and deceased. This practice would never have occurred in the pre-World War II era (*ibid.*), and expresses a feeling of kinship between the owner and his or her dog.

Dog owners in the Safire collection show their identification with their companion animals in even more dramatic ways. A number of survey respondents actually write their stories in the voice of their dogs, much as playwright Eugene O’Neill did in his

famous document “Last Will and Testament of Silverdone Emblem O’Neill,” the Dalmatian whom he familiarly called *Blemie* (Brandes, 2009: 115–116). From McLean, Virginia comes a letter that begins thus:

Dear Mr Tin: In reply to your poll [...] we dachshunds are of course named for people because we are people. Didn’t you know that? I am a long-haired daxy named Rosi. My predecessor was a mixed-breed named Laurie. When my mistress read your article today, I was sitting beside her. My master and mistress were so lonesome when 17-year-old Laurie died. They visited my mother and chose me.

A writer from Washington, D.C., uses a similar canine voice:

Dear Mr Tin, Having lived on New York City’s West Side, home to innumerable canines, since I was a mere pup, I have become quite knowledgeable (though I claim no authority) about the names by which my neighbors are known to their two-legged companions

These sorts of letters, surprisingly frequent in the Safire collection, serve to underscore the identification of many pet owners with their companion animals.

The selection of a name for one’s dog wittingly or unwittingly communicates information about feelings the owner holds for his or her place in society. Claude Levi-Strauss put the matter well when he wrote, for the French case, “I may [...] regard myself as free to name my dog according to my own tastes. But if I select ‘Médor’ I shall be classed as commonplace; if I select ‘Monsieur’ or ‘Lucien’, as eccentric and provocative; and if I select ‘Pelléas’ as an aesthete” (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 182). The respondents to William Safire’s survey show themselves to be, on the whole, highly literate and able to express their feelings and ideas with clarity and self-awareness. There is no doubt that dog owners like these invest a good deal of time and effort in the selection of a suitable name for their canine companions. That name, as they well know, is a condensation of who they as owners are, how they want to be seen by those around them, and their conformity or not to social convention and the fashions of the times.

Acknowledgements

I wish to thank the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and the Committee on Research at the University of California, Berkeley, for providing financial backing for this project. I would also like to express appreciation to Laura Nader for supplying me with a plethora of documents and consistent encouragement in support of my research into contemporary American attitudes towards pets. Without the late William Safire’s extraordinary generosity, this paper could never have been written.

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Author Query

Journal title: NAM

Volume and issue: 60-1

Article title: Dear Rin Tin Tin: An Analysis of William Safire's Dog-Naming
Survey from 1985

Author name: Stanley Brandes

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