It's a book

Preface

"What have you been working on?" *Play Doe* inquired of his cohort and fellow philosopher *Soccer Tease*.

"I just finished my first fiction book."

"So now you've written a novel?" *Play* assumed.

"No, it's an assortment of anecdotes from my misspent adulthood."

"With your record, you had volumes of material to draw upon," *Play* could not resist the opportunity to get in a dig at his mentor.

"That there is," *Soccer* confessed.

"So how did it feel writing your autobiography?"

"It's not an autobiography or a memoir, because they are true – or at least they're supposed to be true. This book is a collection of stories I made up about people I noticed, mostly in bars."

"So what we have is a fictionalized autobiography?" *Play* tried to understand what his friend had written.

"If it were about me that would be true. This is based on the activity you have watched me engage in since we met. You know how I give everyone a name that I feel matches their personality or some tangible trait."

"Yes and the annoying thing is I almost always know exactly who you mean by the name you pick." *Play* was thinking of *Thunder Thighs, Snake* and *Waist Missing*.

"The part you didn't know was that I've usually made up a complete social history on those same people."

"Are you in the book?" *Play* was secretly asking if he were in the book.

"Some may believe that I'm *Soccer* but he is wiser and a better person than I am. Before you bother to ask the character *Play*, in the book, is based on the questions that three of my friends would have asked. If you think you are one of them you have a high regard for yourself."

"So no one in the book is real."

"Right and wrong," *Soccer* gave another of his non-answers.

"That deserves an explanation."

"They are not real to me but inevitably readers will believe they know someone who resembles a character or two. Like when I was young I always saw myself as Tom Sawyer."

"Funny I always saw you as Huck Finn," *Play* mocked. "Who do you believe will read your book?"

"People who enjoy observing others," suggested *Soccer*.

"People watchers; that's a big audience," *Play* admitted.

"Hopefully."

"Anyone else?" *Play* was trying to envision the market.

"Yes, people who enjoy stories." *Soccer* had always seen himself as a storyteller.

"Another big audience."

"Hopefully."

"What caution would you give a reader?"

"If you are looking for yourself in the book, don't bother. The characters are all fictional; however, you will probably believe you see someone you know."

"What's the title?"

"Mahogany Ridge,"

"Where did that come from?"

"A friend who pointed out that the tops of most bars are mahogany."

"Is he in the book?"

"Nope, just mentioned here."

"Did you have any problems writing the book?"

"Since it is not a novel, I was concerned about the sequence of the stories and how it would end."

"So?"

"There are three endings. Readers who want to know which one is the real ending will have to wait for the sequel." *Soccer* was more than content with his solution.

Who's Barbara
What's in a name

Play and *Soccer* were about to engage in their standard game of can you top this story. *Soccer* led off with, "Yesterday, when I went shopping in the mall, I noticed *Whinny* and *Trophy Wife*…" *Soccer* was just beginning the story when *Play* abruptly cut him off.

"Unfortunately, I know exactly who you are talking about and I have been meaning to talk to you about that." *Play's* voice had an uncharacteristically stern tone.

"About that?" *Soccer* was honestly confused by the use of the pronoun 'that'.

Play gathered his thoughts for just a second, "Let me start this way. Describe an Ashley."

"An Ashley?"

"Yes if I told you I was seeing a woman named Ashley, what do you think she would be like?"

"I'm not sure where you are going with this but I'll play along." *Soccer* knew that, however obscure, there was a method to his friend's madness and he wanted to see where the question would lead. "Ashley,… too young for you. In her thirties at the most, well above average looking, reasonably intelligent but more consumed by things than thoughts, unusually clean."

Play was out to make a point so he pushed on. "You can do better than that. What would she wear? What are her hobbies?"

"If I am right and she is in her thirties, she has put on ten pounds since high school and she worries about that. Takes part in the physical workout 'de jour' three times a week. Hair is near perfect; clothes always in style; wants to be a country clubber but knows in her heart she will never be queen bee; has two children, a boy then a girl, three years apart. Good enough?" *Soccer* knew he had fallen into the trap but could not see the clamps.

"Not bad; let's try a male name. Let's go with George."

"Older, family man, probably named after his father, uncle, or grandfather." *Soccer* paused for a minute, "His job requires

physical labor; he is staid, conservative but not overly religious, salt of the earth, someone you can depend on." *Soccer* looked at the expression on *Play's* face, waiting for the punch line.

"So names evoke images. I would even go so far as to say nearly complete images." Even though he had known his friend for years, *Play* was still impressed with *Soccer's* ability to give comprehensive answers to spontaneous questions.

With his bait taken, *Play* opened his thesis. "I have been considering it for a while and think that people should be given a new first name when they are twenty-five. That way people would have names that fit their personalities." *Play* held up his hand in anticipation of his friend trying to jump in. "Then, because people change, every ten years, the appropriateness of their names would be re-evaluated; let's say on the fives. Hopefully people are not the same at forty-five as they were at twenty-five. And based on taking care of my aunt, there would definitely be a need to re-evaluate a name at sixty-five."

"Be a lot of people named *Crotchety* in Nursing homes," *Soccer* responded sarcastically. After the one comment, *Soccer* became uncharacteristically practical. "Can you imagine the record keeping nightmare? A new name every ten years; how would you find anyone from college? Can you imagine the cost of changing marriage licenses, driving licenses, degrees, even credit cards?"

"That's not a problem. Your social security number would never change and that would become your legal label," *Play* explained.

"So the newspapers would carry wedding announcements like 'On Saturday of last week, Ms. 100-00-0000 was joined in holy matrimony to Mr. 100-00-0001 by Rev. 100-00-0002.' Don't see that happening." *Soccer's* eyes were doing their characteristic upward roll at the prospects.

"I said that it would be their legal label not their social label. Now are you going to listen with an open mind to the idea or not?" *Play's* intonation indicated more than a slight degree of frustration with his partner.

"So where did this idea come from?" *Soccer* asked.

"You know your ritual of giving everyone a nickname? I guess it came from there." *Play* paused, making sure his cohort realized he was serious.

"Since I cannot be everywhere, who would pick the names? I've got it; we will all be put under the sorting hat, like in *Harry Potter* where the hat determined which house the young wizards would be part of." A smile protruded from the edges of *Soccer*'s lips.

Play ignored the comment, turning the arrow back on *Soccer*. "There is a part of your names that bothers me. True, I almost always know exactly who you mean, even if I have never heard the name before, but that is because the names can usually be traced to some physical or personality characteristics."

"That is because we only know the people at the physical level. It's not like I do it to friends." *Soccer* was atypically defensive.

"If you think about it you will have to admit that there is something patronizing in the process." *Play* knew better than to give his friend too much credit or take too much away. After all, *Play* understood that friendships are based on navigating the narrow ledge between honesty and rudeness.

Soccer overlooked the term 'patronizing,' appreciating that it was a feeble attempt at a dig, and attempted humor. "I thought the idea came to you at the conference you were just at or at a singles club."

"Are you going to listen or not?"

Still having trouble believing that his friend was being serious, *Soccer* added. "You probably thought, wouldn't it be great if I were wearing a tag that says '*Play* looking for a Tracy or Sandy.' You could even have added 'after 10:00 pm a Nancy or Carol will do.' Hell, take it all the way, by midnight you could just have written 'only avoiding Harriets and Sarahs.'"

"Proud of yourself?"

"Actually, yes. Just think, a person could go to Craigslist and ask for a Phil or a Bonnie and skip all the bull."

"Are you done?" *Play* asked.

"For now."

"There is a serious side to this argument. Although, I will have to admit that your ideas are not ones I had fully considered. Taking renaming to its logical conclusion, I could see how they would work; Craigslist… huh. Actually, your immature concepts are adding credence to my hypothesis."

"Glad I could help."

Play continued, "Let's start at a different point. Take the names Cher, Madonna or Liberace. One word names, but everyone knows exactly who you mean. If you named your son Liberace or your daughter Cher or Madonna, everyone would know what plan you had for him or her." He paused just long enough to consider whether to add "Like Hollis." *Play* decided against it.

Instead *Soccer* brought up "Like Hollis? Now that is a moniker to grow up with."

"Well maybe not like that, but then again, maybe Hollis shows that there are times when a unique name is required." *Play's* cynicism was just barely masked.

"So if the name is not given by a hat, does each person pick his or her own name?" *Soccer* was finally being half serious.

At long last *Play* was able to get to the details of his idea. "No, self-selection wouldn't work. People would find a set of characteristics they thought they wanted to be like, then pick that name, even though it might be totally a mismatch."

"So you admit that if people could pick their own, it would be like the dating sites – a lot of false advertisements."

A slight pause for reflection, "I confess that picking one's own name would be counterproductive."

Soccer knew that his friend's next logical choice was going to be the person's spouse, or significant other, so he returned to his devious self. "So, if it is the spouses that get to select, names like Bitch and Bastard would be very common."

Play ignored the derision. "No the system needs to be like health care for people who are in assisted living. The person would pick two representatives; then two organizations the person

belonged to would pick two more. Then there would be a fifth, or the objective person, assigned." *Play* was marrying other decisions, making prototypes to his. A good model for any argument, thought *Soccer*. Of course he did not say that.

Soccer jibed, "So how would the person go about proving she was a Sally so she didn't wind up an Edith?"

"Oversimplification is one of your greatest talents," *Play* pointed out without hesitation.

"Glad to help."

"There is a plethora of names, even just staying with the common names. If you assume, for a moment, we opened it to new names like you do with your nickname selection process, we could have hobbies like *Fisherman, Seamstress, Golfer*, or *Boater*. If we went to professions we could have *Techy Plug*, or *Teacher Eraser*, or *Lawyer O'mission*."

It was too good an opening for *Soccer*; he had to add, "Or even *Septic Tank*, or *Snow Plow*."

Play took a breath. He was pleased with the additions he was developing. *Soccer's* comments actually challenged him. "Most important, because you had friends involved, you could avoid names like *Cow, Buttercup*, or *Tattoo*." *Play* had learned it was better to get in the smart lines before his cohort.

Soccer could not resist, "If you pick me to be on your name selection committee don't count any name being excluded."

"Don't worry, you will not be on my committee because, as I said, one of the criteria is to be a friend." *Play* went on, "and one of the hidden benefits of the system is that it would allow for behavior improvements."

"How so?"

"You joked one time that you would have chosen John for your name. If people named John were noted for volunteering, acts of charity, and you really wanted to be a John, then you would start to take on the behavioral characteristics of the name you aspire to."

"You are trying to make name selection positive. What if someone wanted to be called *Killer* or *Spike*? Would they change

their behaviors?" *Soccer* enjoyed using absurdities to formulate counterpoints. "And if someone, like me, did not have two friends, would we be stuck with names like *Hermit* or *Thoreau*?"

"Cute, but beneath you," *Play* countered. "If they didn't have enough associates or club memberships to meet the criteria, you know - people like you, then there would be little need to change the person's name because no one would care."

In unison, the two took a sip from their drinks as a temporary stillness settled in.

A silence that lasted several minutes was finally broken when *Soccer* said reluctantly, "You may actually be on to something. In its own way your premise gives us, once more, the unending contention over which came first, the chicken or the egg. Or, said as a hypothesis, does the name our parents' give us affect the way we turn out? Or, more to your point, does a name shape a person's personality?"

"The answer has to be yes. Think about it, two little boys are sitting in the same classroom, one is named John and the other Wendell; the likelihood of the teacher treating them the same is almost nil." *Play* instantly bought into this twist on his theme.

Soccer worked off *Play's* example. "So you're saying that as liberal as a teacher may want to portray himself, the reality is that each child is treated differently – that it's just human nature."

"I think that when the teacher picked up his class list and saw he had a boy named John and another named Wendell, he set his expectations and they were grossly different." *Play* had a point.

Soccer started to agree, "Back when I was in school there was the Smith family. The first four kids were always in trouble; by the time the fifth came along she was condemned simply because of her last name."

Play appeared ready to accept his friend's twist on his original hypothesis. "The research seems to be fairly solid that we set our expectations for children and even adults based on a series of criteria. Gender, height, ethnicity, build; why not name?"

Soccer did not hesitate in pointing out the distinction. "The

difference is choice. At this time we cannot control any of the factors that you just listed; however, parents control the name they give their child." *Soccer* toyed with his glass before adding, "I wonder how many people realize the effect the name they choose is going to have on their child verses how many just think of a name as cute."

Play narrowed the point to specifics, "You're right, how many CEOs have names like Hope, or Charity, or even Edmund." He smiled to himself. "And if you name your daughter Peaches, you can be pretty sure she is going to be a dancer."

"So we actually agree that, to some degree, the name we give a child affects their entire life." *Soccer* wanted to insure that his intern had accepted his logic.

"It may affect the child's life but it doesn't control it. A name is just one more factor in a complex formula that develops into a personality," *Play* maintained.

"That I accept, however, it is one of the few factors that we control. We cannot control height; we seem not to be able to or at the very least unwilling to control weight. We are born with an ethnicity. To the degree intelligence is nature versus nurture is arguable; however, we do control a name." *Soccer* drove home his point.

"To the point the name chosen is inappropriate for the individual, we should have a committee select a better name when the person is twenty-five." *Play* demonstrated that he may have modified his thesis but that he still felt it was correct.

"So, who's Barbara?" *Soccer* asked, insisting on getting in the last word.