

On Archie Leach, *The High-Bouncing Love*, *Catch-18* and *Nowhere, Forever*

Would you have bought any of the following novels?

Among Ash-Heaps and Millionaires,

Under the Red, White, and Blue

The High-Bouncing Love

Trimalchio in West Egg

Nor me.

But in fact, as I'm sure you already know, they're all one book. These are some of the working titles for *The Great Gatsby* ? a name finally suggested to Scott Fitzgerald by his no-doubt fatigued editor, and a fine example of what my friend Noel calls a "clunk-click title"; perfect, solid, throughly right-sounding.

The "Tom Barnaby" debacle (see below, if you must) has got me obsessing about this even more than usual; about names and their uncanny power to shape things.

Cary Grant was handsome and effortlessly urbane, the epitome of masculine elegance. Archie Leach was none of these things. But like *The High-Bouncing Love* and *The Great Gatsby*, Cary Grant and Archie Leach were the same entity.

Joseph Heller's (him again) first novel had the working title *Catch-18*. In order to avoid confusion with Leon Uris's *Mila 18*, which was due to be published in the same season, Heller was asked by his editor to change his title: *Catch-11* was considered, and *Catch-14*. Would any of these spectral almost-books have wormed their way into the cultural imagination, indeed the language, the way *Catch-22* did?

I include myself in this exalted company not because it's where I belong, because obviously it's not, but because it's a source of comfort (and sympathetic horror) that the very best could get it so calamitously wrong...and so very nearly right.

My first novel was eventually published as *Mr In-Between*, which I still think is good; but

for years it toiled under the working title *Adrenochrome*. That would've been an okay name for a hard-core science fiction novel ? but it's a terrible name for the gothic crime story to which it was originally attached, and to which it bore no connection.

Holloway Falls began life as *Nowhere, Forever...* which is downright terrible. Not as bad as *Trimalchio in West Egg*, but getting there.

Heartland, which is a memoir, was named after a song by *the Sisters of Mercy*.

(They had another song called *Adrenochrome*. I was a fan).

Heartland had great personal relevance, but given it's a vanishingly obscure, thirty year-old B-side, it's not so amazing that almost nobody got the reference. I wish I'd called it something else, but half a decade later, I still don't know what.

Some of the suggested names for the novel that became *Burial* were:

OUT OF THE WOODS

THE COMEBACK

DENIAL

RESURFACING

THE HAUNTING

THE RETURN

THE DIRECTION OF THE DEAD

None of which is bad, but none of which feels quite right, either ? because, without changing a single word of the text, they would have changed the book's identity. I lobbied quite hard for *the Direction of the Dead* but my editor, Francesca, cordially vetoed it ? and was absolutely right.

Giving a book a working title is a bit like naming your puppy before you've visited the pet store ? you need to know an animal's temperament before you name it. And this animal hasn't even been born yet.

I do have a working title of sorts, but I'm fretful that in two or three months it'll seem as

clumsy and obtuse to me as *Nowhere, Forever ?* or *Ba! Ba! Black Sheep*, which incredibly, was Margaret Mitchell's working title for *Gone with the Wind*.

Or, like Tom Barnaby, it'll be a name that already belongs to something else.

So until I've made up my mind, if it's okay with you, I'll just keep referring to this thing I'm writing, and writing about, as *The New Book* (TNB).

When I've got a name I'm reasonably sure isn't going to embarrass me, that'll change ? because everything changes. No book ends up being exactly the one you planned.

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