On Cool Names
Robert S. Griffin
www. robertsgriffin.com

I've got a thing about people's names.   The basic idea is that parents assign a name to their tiny newborn offspring--often without giving it a lot of thought--and this human being goes by that for the whole of its life, 75 or 90 years, whatever it is. That name, that label, I'm speculating, will have an impact, perhaps a major one, on the fate of this person: how he or she is viewed by the world and views him- or herself, and what he or she does with his or her life and how productive, fulfilling, and happy a life it is. Did Gwyneth Paltrow affect her daughter's life in a significant way by naming her Apple?   Very likely.   Did Gwyneth realize how much was at stake when she made that call of a name?   I'm guessing, no, she didn't.

When I was a kid, I asked my mother what she and Dad would have named me is it hadn't been Robert. She said Gary; she liked the movie actor Gary Cooper, who was big at the time. Gary Griffin--alliterative, and I don't know if that works, plus it seems kind of soft to me, like Kevin or Scott.   Robert's better, I like it actually (the outside world tacked Bob onto me, which I never liked but went by anyway and finally jettisoned in mid-life).

But the point here, there I was all bundled up in the nursery at the hospital, not even able to focus my eyes, and Robert, Gary, was Mother and Dad's pick, and so it could be Gary Griffin right now sitting here in front of this computer screen typing this up. Or would I be doing something else other than typing up things like this if I had been Gary Griffin all along, or Walter, the name my parents decided on for my brother?   That's the question I'm raising.

I got at this possible-importance-of-one's-name idea in a September 2011 thought for this web site called "On Brian Daubach."   At that time, Brian Daubach was a recently-retired first basemen for the Boston Red Sox baseball team.   Brian

Daubach was about as good a baseball player as you would have guessed he was if you'd only had his name to go by: a non-descript mediocrity; not bad, not good, so-so. The all-time great player for the Red Sox was named Ted Williams. Would Ted Williams have been as great a ballplayer if his name had been Brian Daubach? Seriously, I don't think he would have been.

If Martin Luther King had been named Brian Daubach would we have a Brian Daubach holiday every January? If Albert Einstein had been named Brian Daubach would he have still been *Time* magazine's Man of the Century? Brian Daubach, Man of the Century, you think so? It's 1933 and Brian Daubach (not Franklin Delano Roosevelt) announces to the American people that the only thing we have to fear is fear itself—really? Would Brian Daubach (not John Lennon) have written "Strawberry Fields Forever"? Would we have been as torn up if Brian Daubach had been assassinated in Dallas?

But then again, Wayne Gretzky was a super hockey player and Justin Bieber is a pop star. Anyway, you get the basic idea.

It's taken me some time to get to what I want to deal with here, sorry: that I take note of, what to call them, cool names, names that strike me, that seem to have a special ring to them.   Let's just call them cool names.

The best way to get at what I'm talking about is to give an example. For the example, I'll use the name that is at the very top of my cool name list, number one: Alger Hiss.   Alger Hiss was a U.S. government official who, back around 1950, was accused of spying for the Soviet Union.   Alger Hiss. What a name!

I use two tests in deciding whether or not a name is cool: the "say it out loud" test, and the "hotel reservation" test.

Say Alger Hiss out loud--listen to it, heard how it sounds. Resonates, no?   It does in a big way for me.

Imagine someone checking into a hotel.

The desk clerk asks, "Do you have a reservation with us?"

"Yes, I do."

"And the name on that?"

"Alger Hiss."

"Ohh."

I'll throw out a few other cool names to get us going, and, if you are of a mind to, you can take it from here and come up with others. For me anyway, they meet both the "say it out loud" and "hotel reservation" tests.

• In July of 2010, I wrote a web site thought on the murderer of a young mother of four children, Dick W C Anderson. Very cool name; too bad he couldn't keep himself in check (did his name, even though it seems cool to me, have something to do with that?). Note that there's no periods after W and C, because they don't stand for anything, like William and Charles or something. Anderson just made those initials up--as did President Harry S Truman--which I think makes Anderson's name even cooler.

• Staying with the crime area, in 1948 a big story in my home town of Saint Paul, Minnesota was the unsolved murder of eighteen-year-old Geraldine Mingo. Especially too bad Geraldine didn't live on into adulthood, because she had a super cool name.

• I went to Cushman K. Davis grade school. Davis was a governor and senator from Minnesota in the late 1800s. Cool name.

• Another governor, of Georgia in the late 1960s, Lester Maddox. Rings a bell for me.

• And the last one here, a name I read last night in a biography of the journalist Walter Lippmann (good name but not cool) prompted me to tap out this web site thought after breakfast this morning: B.O. Flower. Flower was a journalist in the Progressive Era in America in the early 1900s. I don't know if B.O. Flower is cool exactly. It's more out there, even ludicrous, than cool, so I suppose it muddies the concept. But anyway, it does get my attention, and I ponder what it meant to go through life as B. O. Flower. Would Ernest Hemingway have written *For*

Whom the Bell Tolls if his name had been B.O. Flower?   Would B.O. Flower have painted the Sistine Chapel?

If anything comes to you around the importance of names, or names jump out at you for one reason or another, feel invited to use the contact-me link on this site to let me know about it. And you could take some time to think about your name might have affected your life. I'm suspecting that it has.