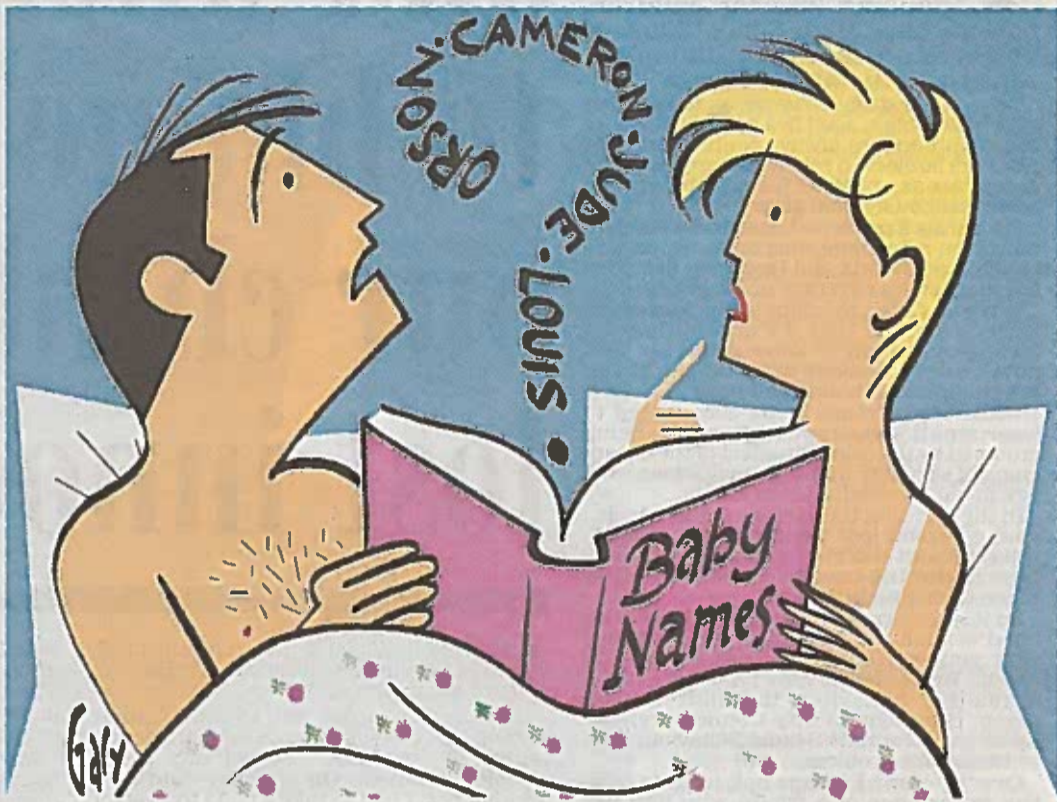


# NAMMED & SHAMMED

by Rob McGibbon

Trendy or fuddy-duddy, your child's name is a life sentence. No wonder it's such agony to choose one



**H**OW I laughed last week when I read that several names for children had become more or less extinct during the past century. The likes of Walter and Percy, Edna and Olive have all but disappeared.

This tickled me because, as a soon-to-be father for the first time, I have wilfully rejected hundreds of names for being old-fashioned, dull or just plain naff during, ooh, the past fortnight alone.

Such is the ruthless nature of the baby name game. In fact, a good name is so hard to find I'm amazed anyone gets named at all.

I realised that naming our baby would be an experience to remember when we chanced upon a meaty paperback in a second-hand bookshop in the earliest days of the pregnancy. I groaned when I saw the cover: 40,001 Best Baby Names. Surely we had the individualism and imagination not to resort to such crass measures?

But it's just a starting point, it will give us some ideas, said Emma. Forty thousand and one — a starting point? I nearly passed out.

I accepted the book's purchase — for a princely £1 — on the condition it was not opened until this baby was definitely happening. I did not want to jinx anything.

Sure enough, the name game began after the 12-week scan, during which I had unwittingly doubled our workload by insisting on us not knowing the sex.

It is the one time in life, I concluded, that you can actively choose to be surprised. Yup, and it will come as no surprise that you also get to spend countless hours searching for a name that will never be used — unless you really want to call your son Amber.

**T**HE naming started at a gentle pace with occasional suggestions arising at random moments. A silence during a car journey: 'What about Myrtle?' 'Er, no. Myrtle-the-Turtle. She'll never live it down.'

Or, out of the darkness during a sleepless night: 'How about Ernest?' 'What? Er, no. Hemingway. And Ernie — the Fastest Milkman.'

'Orson?' 'No. Welles. Goodnight.'

Soon, the big book came out, and thinking up names became something of an obsession in our lives. Not an unpleasant one, it has to be said, because we do have fun with it. But it's fair to say that I have not been participating quite so enthusiastically of late.

The romantic in me wants to stumble upon a name in a cosmic

moment — like when I look into my baby's eyes — and find that it fits ('Oh, hello — Sharon').

But I suppose we have to be a bit prepared, so I go with the flow while Emma calls out names. She puts them up and I knock 'em down. I have become the resident Mr Negative.

In fact, I have been amazed to discover what strongly adverse feelings I have towards so many names. Some are like invisible pressure points that release a residue of buried memories.

James — no, he was a nasty snitch at school. Allegra — an ex-girlfriend (although, obviously, I've changed that name and of course I didn't reveal the real reason when it was initially floated).

Entire lists of names are instantly ruled out because they are friends, or the names of their children. Leaving parenthood as late as me, aged 43 — delayed decision-making again — you find that great chunks of the Best Baby Names book have already been annexed.

And it is alarming quite what a subtle impact celebrity culture has on your selection, too.

Louis? God no, Louis Walsh. Vincent? Van Gogh — great, although a bit sad, but it'll get shortened to Vinnie. Vinnie Jones. Enough said.

Jude? Jude Law, Cameron? Diaz, or worse, David. The association list is miserably endless.

Even if you dismiss all the preconceived ideas as hogwash, the baby book also gives the meanings of names, which presents yet another trap. We could probably

live with Jude except that it means 'patron saint of lost causes'. Er, no thanks.

While we were watching television one night, I finally realised I had to up my tempo in this game. Emma was diligently plucking out names from the 40,001 bible like a bingo caller. 'Claude?'

'No, too French.'

'Xavier?'

'Even more French. Non!'

'How about Martha? Or Constance — that means loyal?'

'Hmm. Short-listers, definitely.'

I could watch TV while editing scores of names. I was multi-tasking effortlessly and knew I could get this list down to 200 before delivery day. I do love a deadline.

'Isaac?'

'Er, no. Bit too biblical.'

'Job?'

'Blimey, no. Same problem.'

Then silence. Phew, the name game was over for another night.

'Rob — have you got ANY suggestions?'

I paused. 'Umm. How about — Radiator? I'm sure we'll warm to it.'

The book hit the floor with a heavy, defeated thud.

Since then, I have been more productive, but we are still alarmingly thin on the ground.

**A**NYWAY, what is it we are looking for? We are agreed that we want something that feels original, a bit rare, but not so out there — Apple, for example — that it will make us, or our darling little one, sound a bit daft. And the last thing I want to be is a pretentious Try-Hard.

A name with a worthwhile meaning would be a bonus, but does any of this really matter? These days everyone tries to be a bit different and the moment the pack is onto something, that's when I instinctively want to go the other way.

The good news is that we might have a name for a girl. It's a bit old-fashioned, a classic, but it might just work. I can't say what it is or you will all nick it and before long it will appear on one of those Most Popular lists, then we'll all hate it.

Anyway, it could be utterly pointless because Emma is convinced she is having a boy — and we don't have one single boy's name without a line through it.

Hang on, I have just looked at that ever-so-shortlist of fuddy-duddy dying names and, you know what, Percy is growing on me. Yeah, that'll do.

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