

***The Names*, by Florence Knapp**

Reviewed by Cindy Kennedy

The Shakespearean character Juliet famously mused, "What's in a name? That which we call a rose/By any other name would smell as sweet." The intriguing premise of *The Names*, Florence Knapp's aptly titled new novel, is what parents choose to name their baby could determine the child's destiny.

The Names begins in 1987 at the London home of Dr. Gordon and Cora Atkin, soon after the birth of their first son. The couple also have a nine-year-old daughter named Maia. Gordon, a general practitioner, had met Cora when she was a promising ballet dancer from Dublin.

To his patients and their circle of friends, Gordon is well respected and charming. At home, however, he is a manipulative and abusive bully. Cora "lives not to set a match to Gordon's anger."

For Gordon, their baby son's first name is a foregone conclusion. Arkin men for decades have been named *Gordon* "because sometimes their need to please previous generations is greater than their need to love future ones." Cora dislikes the name *Gordon*, and she does not want the boy "to live in the shadow of his father and his father's father."

Reluctantly, Cora set off to the registrar's office to certify their baby's name. On the way, while wheeling the pram with Maia by her side, Cora discussed the baby's name with the girl. Maia, wondering why her little brother could not have his own name, asked Cora what name she would choose. After Cora responded that she liked the name *Julian*, Maia offered her own suggestion. "It's not a very normal sort of name," Maia said. "But I like *Bear*. It sounds all soft and cuddly and kind. But also, brave and strong."

Cora faced a dilemma: Which name should she choose? As *The Names* continues, three alternative versions of the boy growing up either as Bear, Julian, or Gordon are presented in alternating chapters. In each version of the story, spanning the next 35 years, Cora's choice of her son's name will affect the characters' relationships and careers.

Original and clever, the novel's fluctuating narrative structure at times feels a bit contrived. The weakest character is Dr. Gordon Arkin who remains one dimensional in all three versions of the story. Even so, *The Names* illustrates the power of fiction to engage readers in unexpected ways.