



## A Mother's Name

For a woman to pass her surname to her child is a radical act,  
a gesture of defiance, an invitation to attack.

**W**HEN I WAS FIVE MONTHS PREGNANT WITH MY son, I went to a dinner party in Florence, where my husband, Luca Passaleva, is from. The conversation briefly left politics when someone suggested that I name my child Silvio, after Berlusconi, the Italian Prime Minister at the time.

"No," a friend said, "Silvio Passaleva sounds terrible."  
"Actually," Luca responded, "his last name will be McPhee."

Silence in a room of Italians is a rare event, but Luca's rather exotic announcement left the diners wordless for several seconds. Finally, another friend blurted out, "McPhee, McPhee, what the hell does McPhee have to do with anything?" I could think of no response to his question. All I could do was ask myself, "Yeah, what the hell does McPhee have to do with anything?"

I have been asked the same question, in milder tones, many times since that evening, and I am still not sure how to answer it. What I do know is that every time I am asked why I gave my son my name, my gut response is deep embarrassment at my own brazenness. Like Hester Prynne's A, my name becomes a symbol of shame. For a man, passing on his name is expected, traditional, unnoteworthy. For a woman to do so is a radical act, a gesture of defiance, an invitation to attack. It is also illegal for a married woman to pass on her name without a court order in some countries, like Italy. Even here, as recently as 1996, a judge in Missouri ordered a divorced woman and her son to use the father's surname. Another judge justified a similar ruling, saying, "It's a philosophical matter."

Surnames first became an issue for me during my parents' divorce, when I was 8 years old. My mother resumed using her "maiden" name, introducing me to the idea that power could be found in a name. I have since learned the origins of the male monopoly on names in our culture. In the 11th century, the Normans invaded England and established a system for recording paternal surnames. By the 14th century, it was the way property was tracked. And by the time the English colonists came to America, the custom had become entrenched as a method of determining the ownership of property — which included wives.

---

*Jenny McPhee is a writer and editor living in New York.*

By the time I got to college, I was convinced that feminism had pretty much eradicated the traditional patriarchal practice of exclusively passing on the male name. But since graduation, one female friend after another has slipped on a new name. Mrs. Fred E. Green, for example, explains away her choice with, "My name was so colorless." Other friends say they are happy to get the chance to start over with a new name. (In fact, more than three-quarters of American women still take their husbands' names.) And when it comes to the children, the most frequent response is, "His name means so much more to him." Though names can mean a lot to women, girls learn very early that they will probably lose their names when they marry. If you know you will lose something, you do not get very attached to it. Thus, the connection for women between name and identity becomes insignificant and unimportant. I return to the question at the Florentine dinner party, which I am unable to answer, and I feel as if I were 5 years old again, when I would ask myself over and over, "Why am I me?"

Giving my son my name has invited all sorts of weird accusations: "He'll have trouble in school." "He's sure to be gay." "You're undermining the integrity of the family." "You're demeaning the role of the father." "You're doing it because your father is John McPhee, a famous writer." And some people are awestruck by my powers of manipulation: "How did you finagle that one?" "Luca must be a saint." Or, most commonly, "Luca must be a pushover." And many people insist that my name is not my own to give: "It's your father's name anyway." Unlike Hester Prynne, I have always envied her A because that letter gave her a solid identity. In many ways it was horrible for her, but it was acknowledged by all to be hers, and, inasmuch as that was true, it was a source of empowerment and even pride.

On May 29, 1996, Tommaso McPhee was born. The act of naming my son after myself did something astonishing for me. By claiming my name as mine and passing it on, I have experienced something that I was not expecting, something that is at the heart of self-confidence and a strong identity — pride in myself. I know that my name is mine and that no cultural practice will take it away. I know that I can hand it on to my children and that is a wonderfully powerful sensation. Why did I give my son my name? I suppose that judge was right — it's a philosophical matter. ■