

## **What Was that Name Again?**

### **Thoughts on THE UNTEACHABLES**

It was the morning of my thirty-third birthday. I was looking at a website with photos of up-cycling projects, items that had outlived their usefulness turned into artistic displays by creative and conscientious people. One image featured a pyramid-like planter made by taking two wooden crutches, turning them upside-down and covering them with flowers in the center of a garden. It was a beautiful display, but the biggest thought I had was, "How common are wooden crutches these days?" I don't believe I've ever seen crutches that aren't made of metal, apart from maybe a movie or as a prop for Tiny Tim in a stage production of A CHRISTMAS CAROL.

That evening, after the perfect Birthday Dinner (A teriyaki cheeseburger and sweet potato french fries followed by a cookie dough ice cream cone), I was reading THE UNTEACHABLES by Gordon Korman. It was my third night reading it and I had a little over half of the book left, but the story had me so engaged, I finished the entire thing that night. Ok, technically I didn't finish the book ON my birthday since the light blue digital letters of the wall clock said 12:47am when I put the book down, but that does even more to say how engaged I was.

If you're not familiar, THE UNTEACHABLES is about a group of students the school district has completely given up on who get assigned to a burnt-out teacher the superintendent is trying to fire before he can retire. The book is a very interesting, sometimes painfully honest look at the education system and the ways that people behave in accordance with, and sometimes in defiance of the expectations placed on them.

On page 161, while the students are visiting the car dealership, Barnstorm, while trying to help his choking classroom Elaine, hits her in the back so hard that his wooden crutch breaks into two pieces. Huh. Evidently, wooden crutches are more common than I realized.

This is one of several things that stand out to me when reading this book. Others include:

- ✧ Why is Jake Terranova, an adult without any sort of teaching credentials or certifications, just... allowed to hang out in a classroom so much?

- ✧ Apparently, those noisemakers at sports games are called VUVUZELAS. I'm very confident I've never heard that word before but it sure does appear A LOT in this book.
- ✧ As an adult who has been driving for more than half of my life, I think I'd be a little scared to get behind the wheel of any car with 585 horsepower. That's about four and a half times as powerful as the Honda Fit I've been driving for the past eight years. Also, what in the world did those kids do to the frame that a 1992 Buick Concorde could handle an engine that big? All right, they were being supervised by engineers who could advise them, so I guess I'll rescind that question.

However, one of the things I found most striking in this book was at the bottom of page 149. Principle Vargas reacts to Mr. Kermit advocating for his students by reminding him of himself when he was a younger teacher. He then says "That person is gone forever, and he's never coming back."

As it turned out, this reminded me of one of the single most unkind things that I ever said to another person. I would have been about 18, and I had a friend who had been given the name Ashley but chose to go by the name AHAVA. It's a name that means "LOVE." She was someone who had gone through some really bad stuff when she was growing up, and now that she was an adult, she wanted LOVE to be a core part of her identity, the way she introduced herself to other people, the way she thought of herself.

She and I were having an argument. A decade and a half later now, I can't remember what the argument was about except that there was something I wanted her to do, something I felt would be good for her but something that she didn't feel she was capable of. She said, "Ashley MIGHT have been able to do that, but AHAVA CAN'T," indicating she felt that who she was in that moment and who she had been previously were two distinct and separate people.

I didn't like that. I felt it was an excuse and I told her, "You can do whatever you want, no matter what STUPID NAME you decide to call yourself."

Yep... I said that.

Instead of supporting my friend through a time when she felt overwhelmed, I insulted one of the most important things in the world to her: her name, her chosen identity.

I did apologize to her, after a few seconds of silence when the gravity of my words sank in, but the damage was done. I lost a friendship because I said that.

Names are such an integral part of THE UNTEACHABLES. Characters in this story frequently assign names to people and things. Some of them are fun and playful, like the giant coffee mug called THE TOILET BOWL or the car called COCO NERD.

Some names are just descriptive, a quick way to convey meaning to someone. Mateo refers to an angry expression as "Squidward Grinch Face." Jake is called "Jumpin Jake Terranova" because of his car dealership advertisements.

There are some names which are descriptive, but come across, to me at least, as mean. Although, I get the feeling they weren't necessarily intended that way. Names like "Elaine rhymes with Pain," because she is so large that everyone assumes she hurts people, or the substitute teacher the kids refer to as "Dawn of the Dead." Kiana's father calls his wife "Geez Louise" because she is unfocused and even in the very first sentence of the book, we read that Kiana has labeled the poor woman "STEPMONSTER," showing very little compassion for the struggle of a new mother adjusting to life with little ones.

Then, there's the flat-out cruel names, the ones used for the students of Room 117.

LOST CAUSE.

THE UNTEACHABLES.

There are also some names in this book that are enormously encouraging. One of the biggest turns in the book comes when the children are introduced to a system of positive reinforcement. When they learn that they can be "GOOD BUNNIES," they immediately strive for this sacred goal, even Aldo, who initially struggles to even comprehend the concept.

The name I found most fascinating in this book was never actually said out loud, instead only used for narration and internal monologue. Kiana consistently refers to herself as "Short Timer" because she moves from place to place. No one assigns this name to her. She adopts it herself and then she acts in a way that she feels a "Short Timer" should act, using that to determine how involved she ought to be in her class. This idea is such a core part of her identity that in the end, she feels her choice to stay at her school means she is a "Short Timer" no longer.

One of my precious treasures is a letter my mom wrote me when I was four years old. (She saved it for me and gave it to me years later.) 29 years ago, she wrote “I’d be surprised if you don’t grow up to be a writer.” It’s one of the things I’ve always wanted to be, and now, even though I work a regular job in a hotel, I make time for writing almost every single day. It’s my passion.

In one of my novels, I wrote a character based on my father-in-law. I gave him a copy with a note that said he would likely recognize the man in chapters 17, 38 and 53. He later told me he read those chapters first, which struck me as a very unique way to read a book and I wondered how much it would make sense.

A few days before my thirty-third birthday, the same day I began reading THE UNTEACHABLES, I was approached by a woman at the hotel where I work who saw my nametag and said, “Oh! You’re Danny!” She introduced herself as a friend of my father-in-law and said, “He talks a lot about you. You’re the writer.” I responded by reaching under the desk to pull out my notebook I used for writing an alien story when no guests were around. It even happened to be a notebook I’d made myself, recycling some paper that had been sent through the printer by mistake. I was pretty proud in that moment, to have someone know me by my passion before they’d even met me in person.

Reading THE UNTEACHABLES reminded me of the significance of names. I hope I’ll pay attention to the names I assign someone, even if I don’t say them out loud, because I don’t want a label to keep me from getting to know someone, or from treating them kindly.

I am grateful that I’ve built something of a reputation that means at least one person knows me by my favorite name.

-Danny  
THE WRITER  
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