

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

How to name a rose

A new book provides a road map to finding literature in nature.

Michael Engelhard | Jan. 13, 2017 | *Web Exclusive*

Ever since 18th century botanist Carl Linnaeus introduced his Latin binomial system to the world, scientists have felt reassured that every species can be classified in relation to every other species — that order in nature could be achieved. We believe that by knowing a thing's name, we understand something about its essence. Linguists tend to differ, arguing that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is generally arbitrary and meaningless. All names are abstractions; the vanilla scent of cliffrose is not. Still, it seems to matter if we refer to a plant as a “weed,” which is easier to eradicate than a rose.

On the flip side, the knowledge of species names betrays a certain literacy of place, and their allure might tempt us to further explore relationships and interdependencies that link *Homo sapiens* and all other life forms. (From that, true wisdom might spring.) Unfortunately, the proverbial city slicker's repertoire rarely extends beyond “pigeon,” “rhododendron,” and “sewer rat.” How many of your friends can name 10 local birds?

In his creative manual, *Language Making Nature*, the writing instructor, *L.A. Times* columnist and Yosemite naturalist guide David Lukas asks us to reinvent nomenclature in an attempt to bring back the richness of language that is owed to the surrounding world. By charging scientific discourse with passion, he hopes to forge a vehicle for nascent ideas and to excite fledgling naturalists. Older and perhaps more jaded ones may feel rejuvenated as wordplay sharpens their lens on the environment.



***An Alaskan wild rose (*Rosa acicularis*)
which we could also call a "pricklepink."***

Walter Siegmund/Wikimedia Commons

Lukas, who memorized names and pictures from field guides as a child, honed his ideas while hiking thousands of miles in wilderness. As part of his love affair with the English language, he scrutinized its trajectory. Many names given to plants and animals, he argues, can be classified as “shallow” placeholders, “concocted by scientists who had little to no experience with an organism’s life or character when they named it.” Lukas explains that such impoverished names — which often reference color or shape or the name of a naturalist — were coined because new species first are named and classified and only later studied in detail. A good example is the hermit warbler, a quite social bird.

Lukas favors three-dimensional words, not flat representations, words that jolt us awake with Zen insights. “When language breaks open, what do we have left, and what does it feel like?” he questions in a koan. Seeking ways to infuse word husks with magic, this Chomsky-esque tinkerer spent four years synthesizing every book he could find on the history, formation and word-making process of his mother tongue. Eager to peer beneath surfaces, he delves into arcane vocabularies with Anglo-Norman roots (*dragoncel* — “young dragon;” *tremble* — “aspen;” *bogee* — “badger”); into “eairthy” Newfoundland English (*pant* — “the swelling of ocean waves;” *conkerbill* — “icicle”); ritual words; and haiku-style place names. Even our sensory perceptions have been muted. Who now thinks, or writes, of the colors “leek green,” “deep sea-foam,” or “fawn”? Who — like Chaucer — accuses speakers of “jangling like a jay”? Much that we experience is straitjacketed by

verbal convention. Lukas encourages experimentation, “democratic” neologisms, rebuilding the world from the Ur-clay of language. Dissecting words into their Greek, Latin and English components, he shows how to alter or amalgamate them to great effect. In the book’s spirit, from now on I’ll refer to Alaska’s wild rose, *Rosa acicularis*, with my own made-up label “pricklepink.” A former classmate, should he appear in my writings at all, will be described as “toadine” (not just for his lack of chin). And if I ever buy a house, the neighborhood needs to be “aspy”: lush with silver-barked, swaying trees.

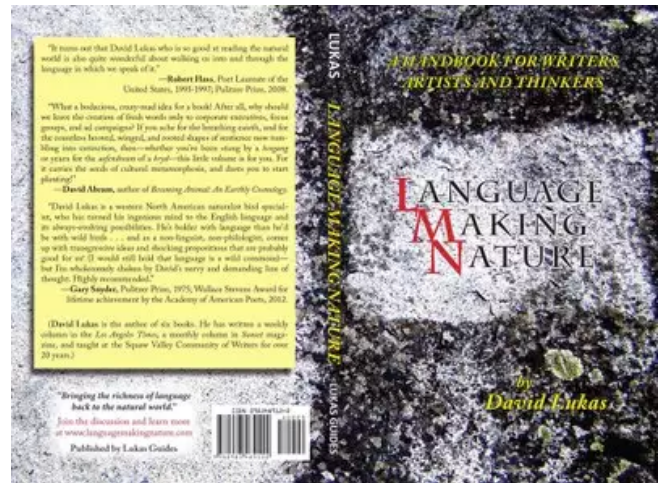


A frozen rose hip after the flowers have successfully been pollinated. What would you call this particularly ice-encased one, following Lukas' creative naming strategies?

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People who distrust self-published books or shun discussions of grammar or etymology should not let that deter them from buying this one. Luminaries such as Robert Hass, the former national poet laureate, Beat poet-essayist Gary Snyder and the cultural ecologist David Abram have endorsed it. The author himself is a honey-tongued bard, reminding us of the task, in this age of advertising and political sloganeering, “to paint in words the feel of a meaningful life well lived, to share the authenticity of a well-worn haft in hand, the touch of something handmade, the sound of things that are real — words with real meanings, songs of friends, the whisper of wind in a healthy forest.”

Describing a region no European had written about, Lewis and Clark added 1,500 words to the English language. In times to come — with changes so profound that the emerging era has its own name, the “Anthropocene” — truthful new words will be tools of resilience, allowing us to imagine and inhabit a re-enchanted but different West.



Language Making Nature: A Handbook for Writers Artists and Thinkers

David Lukas

256 pages, softcover: \$22.

Lukas Guides, 2015.

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