

ment, she herself had no sympathy with it. She thought it intolerant. She had been educated at a convent school in Dominica and towards the end of her life had hopes of becoming a lady-boarder with the Blue Nuns in Holland Park. At the time of her death in 1979 she was working on an autobiography, one of whose provisional titles was "Death before the Fact" — a quotation from St Teresa of Avila. Yet no other group, except prostitutes, have been so romanticised in literature, and if there was one form of classification which Jean Rhys detested more than any other (as she said in her first book, entitled *The Left Bank*), it was the stark differentiation between a "good" woman and a "bad" woman. In an unforgettable scene in *Quartet* the heroine meets her lover in a Paris church at the height of their affair: "[She] stood for a long time staring at the tall [statue of the] Virgin and wondered why she suggested not holiness but rather a large and peaceful tolerance of sin." Miss Angier comments: "Tolerance. . . is a moral value which has room for immorality." Inherent, too, is the same toleration in the familiar prayer dedicated to the Virgin, which ends: "Pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

Neville Braybooke

What, no Maryvonne?

Bloomsbury Dictionary of First Names

Julia Cresswell

Bloomsbury, £17.99

People are generally fascinated to learn what their names mean, so a book on first names seems a safe bet for any publisher. The only trouble is, the genre has been around for a while. There are several books on first names. How to distinguish between them?

Coverage is crucial. Nobody wants to look up a name and find it missing. So, a couple of personal checks. All my family are in. Good. Where next? What about *The Tablet*? I went through the first issue of 1991 and compared. The only omissions were, understandably, various foreign names (*Zbigniew*, *Lech*, *Meir*, *Salman*); also a saint (*Cletus*), an author (*Ngaio*), an American film star (*Lane*), and *Maryvonne*. I can excuse them all except the last.

"Over 1,500 names and their associations explained — from Adam and Eve to Kylie and Jason", the front cover says. This gives a clue to one of the biases of the book. Several television names are in (such as *Kylie* and *Kermit*), as are the recent royal baby names (*Beatrice*, *Zara*, *Eugenie*), and some internationally known names (*Raisa*). But no *Garfield*. My young son was horrified.

The author includes several very rare names (such as *Adina*, *Candida*, *Cosmo*, *Eulalia*, *Lalage*), and I cannot see why. Perhaps they are common in Bloomsbury. I would rather have had fewer names and more information. Some of the entries are

a bit short on facts and theories. For instance, Julia Cresswell does not mention that *Albert* has been declining since the 1920s, or that *Cecil* is currently out of fashion. Nor does she report the liking in the United States for *Blake* and *Calvin*, the Australian use of *Beverley*, and the Black American Muslim use of *Aisha*. The problem is that she *does* sometimes give this kind of information (in *Bradley* and *Brandy*, for instance), so the reader may assume that when these qualifications are not mentioned, they do not exist.

There is a certain inconsistency of treatment which worried me. I do not mind if *Alexander* is by far the longest entry in the book (it is the name of the author's son, so fair enough); but some entries get very little — *Bernard(ette)*, for instance, where there is not even a reference to *St Bernard* (saint or dog). I am a bit miffed that *David* gets only seven lines. Even *Cosmo* gets twice as many.

Cresswell writes in a friendly, leisurely style. She does not approach the depth of detail of Dunkling and Gosling's succinct historical accounts, in their *Everyman* book, and she is not as good on spelling variants and social explanations. Only occasionally does she try to say why a name has become popular or unpopular. The book's bias is noticeably British — she talks about "on this side of the Atlantic", for instance. But it provides sensible basic information about all the common names, and there is a good cross-referencing system, so that you can trace interesting connections. I thought it was especially informative on Celtic names. In short, an enjoyable book for dipping into, which as a bonus contains an introduction of some depth.

One last thought. No names book yet written gives a hint of the humour in

attendance when people start to think about names. There is a great deal of Old Testament seriousness and symbolism, and not enough New Testament joy. My own favourite first name story comes from a fine friendly Douai monk I met when I lived in Reading. "The name's Godric", he said, when we first met, "but you can call me God."

David Crystal

Families and faith

Coming In With the Tide

P. H. Newby

Hutchinson, £13.99

This novel is described in the press release as a "charming, old-fashioned story about very ordinary people". Charm it has, even fascination, but is it old-fashioned? Certainly the tale is set in the period between the end of the last century and the beginning of the First World War but, apart from the fact that the book flows in chronological order and has a hero with occasional undertones of Kipps, the adjective does not seem very valid. And P. H. Newby's characters are the most extraordinary "ordinary people" that I have come across in a long time.

Charles Havelock White describes his forebears as "peasants" — "you can't get no more common 'an that". He comes from Gloucestershire but has settled in the small south Wales town of Penarth where he has found work as a carpenter with Mr Minsky, a Polish Jewish builder. Minsky is tolerant of Charles's tendency to neglect carpentry in favour of reading as many books as he can lay his hands on and