

Book review

**Debré, C. (2025). Name (H. James, trans.).
Profile Books. ISBN: 9781800819870**

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Jesse van Amelsvoort & Joja Bos

Jesse van Amelsvoort (JvA):

Nom, published in French in 2022 translated into English as *Name* three years later, is the third novel in an autobiographical trilogy by the French writer and former lawyer Constance Debré. In the first two parts, *Playboy* (2018, also spelled *Play Boy* in the French edition; English translation 2024) and *Love Me Tender* (2020, English translation 2023), the main character—an autofictional ‘I’ who resembles Debré—chronicled the discovery of her lesbianism and the subsequent end of her marriage. She starts to move from one temporary apartment to another, fleetingly takes up lovers, and discards the material possessions that she now considers are holding her down. She rids herself of her old life, while a new one has not yet taken form. It is a radically queer gesture, through which Debré aims to unshackle herself from the bourgeois, patriarchal life she led up to that point.

In *Name*, Debré takes this process further by interrogating what her last name means. There are passing references in *Playboy* and *Love Me Tender* to the weight of her father’s, as well as her mother’s, last name and the expectations that come with it. The name ‘Debré,’ it is suggested, is about as aristocratic as one can be in post-revolutionary France. Indeed, her grandfather served as Prime Minister under President Charles de Gaulle and drafted the Constitution of the current Fifth Republic. A quick Wikipedia search confirms the presence of more politicians in the family, as well as painters, prominent scientists, and a rabbi—her great-great-grandfather Simon Debré. Due to France’s patrilineal naming customs, establishing her mother’s family’s pedigree is less easy, yet in *Name*, Debré writes about them as well: her mother was born in a château with ‘a marble bust of an ancestral baron’ in the entrance hall, while her grandfather was an MP, ‘a government minister even’ (11). ‘Aristocracy makes you crazy,’ the narrator concludes (12).

Debré suggests a parallel between ridding herself of the furniture, the books, and other material possessions, as well as familial connections, earlier in the trilogy, and the reckoning with her name and its symbolic meanings in *Nom*. She cannot discard her last name the same way she threw out her books, but she can try to reconfigure its meanings. Joja, I would like to think about this parallel a bit more with you.

After the first references to her family’s historical importance, the narrator later continues:

‘In my family there are no factory workers, no farmers, no maids, no schoolteachers, no shopkeepers, no low-level civil servants, and also no convicts, whores, fags, murderers, no strangers, no refugees, no immigrants. In my family there are government ministers (under de Gaulle, Pétain, Giscard, Pompidou, Napoleon III, Louis XV, etc.), deputies (under each government), counts, barons, a duchess, two famous

painters, a railway-station architect, a winner of the Prix de Rome, some rabbis, pastors, medical-school professors, diplomats, members of the Jockey Club and of the Académie Française' (33).

If we are our name, and if we are our family, then this is who Debré is. An old family, an imperial family, a morally wrong family; a Christian family, a Jewish family; and above all: a political family. By embracing her lesbianism, however, Debré turns one of the negatives—'In my family there are no'—into a positive: 'In my family there is at least one "fag."' This special issue of *The February Journal* asks what it means to be named and what happens when our names cross a border. It seems to me that Debré, or her narrator, grapples with exactly that question. Perhaps *Nom* itself constitutes a border-crossing, staging a confrontation with a legacy, a tradition, and an inheritance that the queer protagonist rejects.

Joja Bos (JB):

Although I appreciate your framing of *Nom*, Jesse, and the book is particularly generative for thinking about 'naming,' both as a concept and a potential queer gesture, I must confess that I approach Debré's book(s) from a position of hesitation and with a certain unease. Perhaps before we discuss the family name of Debré, we need to delve into the naming of homosexuality—the term she uses for herself throughout the books—and the practices she describes as such. Because my main doubt throughout the books was the question that returned to me: is this 'queer,' or is this just a provocative and 'radical' (for the heterosexual order) description of homosexual practices, where we find patriarchal and heteronormative ideas behind a homosexual façade?

And yes, I already hear the question: who am I, or anyone for that matter, to decide whether something or someone is 'queer,' especially if this is not a term the author uses for herself? Perhaps the question is not the queerness of a subject per se, but queerness as a gesture: a movement that disrupts but can also reproduce normative arrangements. Think Lauren Berlant (2022, 16): 'To queer something doesn't mean just to stick an antinormative needle into it, but to open up a vein to unpredicted and nonsovereign infusions.' I think in some ways Debré is convincingly doing this: take, for example, how, in *Love Me Tender*, she describes her relationship to motherhood, and how, for her, there is no essentialist love between a mother and child:

'I don't see why the love between a mother and son should be any different from other kinds of love. Why we shouldn't be allowed to stop loving each other. Why we shouldn't be allowed to break up. I don't see why we shouldn't stop giving a shit, once and for all, about love, or so-called love, love in all its forms, even that one. I don't see why we absolutely have to love each other, in families or elsewhere, and why we have to go on about it in the whole time, to ourselves to each other' (Debré, 2023, 7).

In this quote, Debré is clearly taking an unpredicted turn, a non-sovereign perspective on the relationship between a mother and a son, often taken for-granted as a natural order, interrogating how we are supposed to relate to

our biological family subjects. It seems like a radical gesture, a queer gesture maybe, in Berlant's conceptualization.

But then, throughout the books, these attempts to break with normative family relationality and her broader 'freedom' project (no house, no belongings, except some clothes and her swimming pool pass) are repeatedly infused with what I would call an ontological determinism of the body that are dipped in normative (or might I say misogynist?) ideas like this:

'A woman's body is made to be touched and tasted, a woman is made to be fucked. Breasts are made for hands to feel, an ass is made to be pressed up against, a cunt is made for a face to go down on, to breathe in the scent, to slip in the tongue, the fingers, to suck and to taste, that fucking sweet taste. No man can compete with that' (Debré, 2024, 91).

Here, the body is not opened to 'unpredicted and nonsovereign infusions,' but rather fixed into a set of functions and desires, constituting what a woman is or is supposed to be; a sexual object reduced to its availability to and consumability by another, articulated through a deeply ingrained logic of desire that closely echoes patriarchal formations. In this sense, the rejection of familial inheritance does not necessarily entail a break with inheritance as such; rather, it seems to reappear elsewhere, disciplined in the body and in the structuring of desire. As a reader, I find myself pulled back into that familiar script: a body rendered as an object—as a surface for pleasure—articulated through a logic of desire that echoes patriarchal formations. Even in its homosexual articulation, this trope risks reproducing a structure in which the body is defined through what it is for, an object for another's sexual desire, rather than a subject in itself (did de Beauvoir not already critique this dynamic in 1949?).

If, as you suggest, *Nom* stages a form of border-crossing in relation to name and inheritance, I find myself wondering to what extent this crossing is sustained elsewhere. That is, whether a break with familial and nominal structures is accompanied by a reconfiguration of the body and of desire—or whether, at that level, more familiar logics persist. It is precisely this tension that makes me hesitant. This is the uneasiness throughout the books that I keep returning to: whether these moments constitute queer gestures, or rather a form of radicalized, provoking normativity that remains structured by the very logics that queer gestures seek to reconfigure—forms of violence that feel, to me at least, all too familiar within queer experience.

JvA:

You write about Debré's rejection of her familial inheritance and end by saying that her refusal to break through society's heteronormativity feels all too familiar to you. I am struck by these two words, 'familial' and 'familiar'—by how closely they resemble each other while at the same time pointing in different directions. I wonder if we need to think through them more to untangle the questions we are wrestling with. The familial: that which we all

get from our family, and that of which Debré tries to rid herself. Against that, beyond that, the familiar: societal structures that are forms of violences, 'all too familiar within queer experience.'

Do these books show, on the one hand, Debré's successful attempts to undo the traces of her family in her life, which culminate in her attack on her family name? ('Successful,' if we do not want to make too much of the fact that the only traceable names are her paternal and maternal grandfathers. That is, if we accept the invisibility of her female ancestors, those whose names and families have disappeared in the mists of history.) And does it show, on the other hand, her failure to reject social norms around identity, gender, and behavior? In these novels, Debré takes much more issue with the source of her family name than—as you, to my mind, correctly suggest, Joja—with the names available to identify herself as homosexual.

I am mindful that I think of these novels as somehow building on each other, each new volume extending the reach of interrogation. *Nom* begins in a very different place than *Love Me Tender*, which began elsewhere than *Playboy*. As if these books are teleologically building towards a grand indictment of... well, I do not know what exactly. At the same time, to refer to them as a trilogy suggests closure that prevents such an indictment, which is perhaps queer in nature. I suppose these reading strategies oppose each other, but I mean to lay bare my interpretation that Debré interrogated progressively more who she is, and that maybe a critique will follow of the names we give to the loves that do not dare to speak their names.

Or, alternatively, the familiarity of the social is where this literary project meets its end: not queer, merely performatively radical. There is a sense in which these novels seem especially interested in shocking, in being loudly queer—'queer' as in 'not-heterosexual,' 'not sexually romantic'—that is, in drawing up the façade that makes you uncomfortable.

I suppose the resistance to the inheritance of names is bordered as well by the paratextual information around this trilogy. *Nom* is printed next to 'Constance Debré' on the book's cover: she has not renounced her father's name and has not adopted another one. Surely this is difficult, legally speaking, and commercially there is something to be said for not changing an author's name either—but still: what does it mean to interrogate the weight of a name's past as a queer subject? Can those meanings be configured—also for an audience who did not know them to begin with—without the name being renounced fully and completely?

JB:

Your focus on the paratextual and on the similarity of signifiers strikes me as particularly productive, Jesse. It becomes a semiological question—with a queer undertone—of how to make sense of the relation between the signifier and the signified in these books: of the familiar—familial, and the extent to which they might overlap. Is a familial inheritance something that

is maybe inherently linked to the logics of the societal structures of violence?
This also reminded me of a statement by Debré in *Name*:

'I would have written the same book with any other parents. With any other childhood. With any other name. I would still have the same things to say. That you have to escape. From wherever, however. Escape. Get further and further away' (126).

I find this passage useful here, as it seems to radicalize the desire to escape not only familial inheritance, but the conditions of belonging more broadly. At the same time, even as Debré imagines such an exit from naming and inheritance, the text reasserts the impossibility of a complete break. In that sense, I agree with your suggestion that the continued presence of 'Debré' complicates any narrative of renunciation while also foregrounding the relative invisibility of her maternal line.

Yet I find myself wondering whether this reasoning can also be interpreted as something akin to what you earlier called 'performatively radical': as a mode in which refusal becomes legible through its own staging, through its capacity to shock or to displace expectations. I keep returning to the question of naming here. From queer theory's poststructuralist investments in performativity, subjection, and the epistemologies of sexual naming, to antisocial accounts of refusal and anti-relationality, naming has remained a crucial topic: one through which subjects become legible but are also fixed, disciplined, and constrained. It is precisely this tension that I keep returning to in my reading of Debré; it is this tension that continues to produce a kind of frustration in me, for it does not resolve into a stable position or a teleological reading.

JvA:

Joja, you are right in drawing attention to naming in a broader sense when it comes to queerness and queer theory. The very word we use, 'queer,' has a history in which its pejorative meaning has in recent decades been superseded by an embracing counter-gesture. Its direct predecessor, 'homosexuality,' if you allow me this framing, is not even a century and a half old; coined in 1869 in a Prussian legal context, 'Homosexualität' combines no less than four distinct earlier meanings (Halperin, 2000). One of these is same-sex desire. At the same time, political radicalism is not necessarily a component of how we usually define homosexuality—but it is of queerness. I started our exchange by calling Debré queer but have warmed up to, or even have been convinced by, your reluctance to do so. So let us say that *Nom* and the two books before it are clearly gay/lesbian—that is our critical act of fixing or disciplining what these novels are or do. (And, importantly, what they do *not* do.)

And so, we return to the politics of naming. It matters how we name things: calling Debré and her literary project queer or gay/lesbian does not create the same-sex desire she evokes—these terms are, after all, in fact spurred by it—but it does influence how we perceive those desires and how

we value them. From this perspective, *Nom* shows there are limitations to what we can renounce: how difficult it is to fully take a step back from one's family and inheritance. I suppose there is some stability in that reading. But I would like to ask you to return once more to your frustrations, to the tensions you feel when reading Debré. What is it that you would want from this novel?

JB:

Jesse, thank you for naming these tensions existing between naming, renouncing, and the desires that accompany them. Returning to your final question, I think my frustrations with Debré are indeed bound up with these questions of naming and, implicit in your response, its link to relationality. In a way, the novel reminded me of the debates around the anti-social thesis in queer theory, particularly because Debré's refusal of familial and social bonds raises the question of whether refusal itself can ever escape relation. Debré seems to make a move similar to Lee Edelman or Leo Bersani: one of rejection, negativity, and refusal to relate to what is clearly experienced as a failing social world. Yet what I find myself wanting from this novel is precisely a refusal of that refusal—not in the sense of restoring optimism or a naïve sense of hope, but in the sense of insisting that even refusal remains relational. As Teagan Bradway (2024, 2) reminds us, '[n]o one does queerness alone.' In that sense, I think you are right in pointing out that a homosexual subject does not necessarily produce a queer subject (or relationality) and vice versa; what is important is how relations are made, refused, or reconfigured through those positions, and that this matters. So, no, Debré would not have written the same book with a different family.

If I return to your question—what I want from this novel—it is perhaps a way of holding onto relationality even within withdrawal: a way of thinking queerness not as an exit from relation, but as a disturbance of how relation is structured, named, and withheld. The equivalent of complete renunciation—of family, naming, or social attachment—risks, for me, becoming a kind of dead end, precisely because it imagines a position outside relation rather than a transformation of it.

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