Notes on: "A Roshanda by Any Other Name" (the final chapter of Freakonomics) plus Endnotes (to Freakonomics).

The most interesting part of the book Freakonomics (to me) was the lengthy section of (much of which was relegated to the endnotes) devoted to the topic of names. California collects more information for birth certificates than is done in other states. The final chapter mines through the mountain of data of every birth certificate issued in California since 1961.

The final chapter of the book is preceded by a chapter investigating various factors associated with high or low test scores in children, which debunks some myths about how a parent can help their child succeed (the author's verdict: it's really not what a parent does, but what they are that influences the child's success – the emotional impact of divorce on children is not discussed, but it is stated that parents deciding to keep their family "intact" (not divorced) for the sake of the children will not help the kids out any when it comes to test scores. Likewise, actions such as reading to your child don't seem to matter according to the data. It is things like high levels of parental education (and other things indicative of smart genes) that impact the child's academic success.). The final chapter continues that thread (at its beginning) with a discussion of how parents shape their children's future (if at all) with the names that they choose for them.

The chapter started out with an anecdote about a man (Robert Lane) who decided to name one of his sons "Winner" (born 1958 in Harlem). Three years later the man had another son (his seventh and last child) who he decided to name "Loser". Winner Lane, at the time the book was written, had racked up a criminal record of almost 3 dozen arrests. Loser, on the other hand, was a "success" – he went to college and then joined the NYPD, where he made detective, and then sergeant. He never hides his full name, but his colleagues feel uncomfortable calling him "Loser" and so call him "Lou" instead.

After a couple more anecdotes, the chapter moves on to a discussion of race, as it relates to naming. The book talks about work done by Roland G Fryer, who is a black economist who is best known for the work he did when young investigating and analyzing the phenomenon of blacks being put down for "acting white". Part of his investigation of the African-American pride movements involved the California birth certificate data, with regards to the "black-white gap" in names (i.e. the phenomenon of children receiving names that are "distinctively black" or (less commonly) "distinctively white"). Here is an extended quote on the matter:

> "The data… show the black-white gap to be a recent phenomenon. Until the early 1970's, there was a great overlap between black and white names. The typical baby girl born in a black neighborhood in 1970 was given a name that was twice as common among black than whites. By 1980 she received a name that was twenty times more common among blacks. (Boys' names moved in the same direction but less aggressively – probably because parents of all races are less adventurous with boys' names than girls'.) Given the location and timing of this change – dense urban areas where Afro-American activism was gathering strength – the most likely cause of the explosion in distinctively black names was the Black Power movement, which sought to accentuate African culture and fight claims of black inferiority. If this naming revolution was indeed inspired by Black Power, it would be one of the movement's most enduring remnants. Afros today

are rare, dashikis even rarer; Black Panther founder Bobby Seale is best known today for peddling a line of barbeque products.

   A great many black names today are unique to blacks. More than 40 percent of the black girls born in California in a given year receive a name that not one of the roughly 100,000 baby white girls received that year. Even more remarkably, nearly 30 percent of the black girls are given a name that is unique among every baby, white and black, born that year in California. (There were also 228 babies named Unique during the 1990's alone…)"

The book goes into an extremely extensive amount of lists (the names included on these lists all appear in the data at least 10 times – names with fewer than 10 actual instances are left out of consideration, since meaningful statistics cannot be drawn from small datasets), starting off with Top Twenty "Whitest" Girl Names vs. Top Twenty "Blackest" Girl Names, and so on for boys. Next come lists that also factor in parental income levels ("Top Twenty Low-Income White Girl Names" for low, middle, and high incomes, both black and white, both boys and girls). Next come lists of names correlated with level of maternal education. Unfortunately these particular lists do not give as much information as they appear to (or perhaps it is just that they do not give the information the I would like). For instance, the top 2 names on the list of "The Twenty White Girl Names That Best Signify Low-Education Parents" are Angel and Heaven (corresponding to an average of 11.38 and 11.46 years of completed education on the part of the mother, respectively), but these are not the top 2 names corresponding to the lowest amount of education completed by the mother generally, they are the top 2 names that are distinctly white and correspond to lowest level of maternal education. Names that are "black" (as well as names that are neither "black" nor "white") are not included in the list. (Luckily, there is a supplement in the back of the book with many, many more names than are included on the various "Top Twenty" lists and the corresponding number for average number of years of maternal education [highlights from this later].) A notable fact about the "Twenty White Boy Names That Best Signify Low-Education Parents" list: the top 8 names on the list all end in the letter -y (or in one case –ie) - the children were given nicknames as their actual names, such as "Johnny" instead of "Jonathan" or "Bobby" instead of "Robert". The same lists are also given for high-education. And then there are even more lists, comparing naming trends over different time periods (showing among other things how names popular among high-income parents in one decade will be popular among low-income parents in the next decade).

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The most interesting lists to me were the ones correlated with level of maternal education. Here are a few highlights from the supplement at the back (the number in parenthesis is average number of years of maternal education):

girl names (followed by years of education of mother):
Lizbeth (9.66) - lowest
Chastity (10.66) – extremely low
Patience (11.80) – very low (names associated w/ virtues tend to VERY STRONGLY indicate (or rather "correlate with") LOW levels of maternal education.)

boy names (followed by years of education of mother):
Jesus (8.71) – lowest
Zebulon (15.00) – very high
Satchel (15.52) – very high

So apparently if you want people to think you're smart you should name your child "Satchel"! (I'm sorry, I just love intentionally mis-interpreting statistics. I find it hilarious. Most people don't get this.)

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An interesting list from the chapter (Note: it was not directly stated for this list that each name occurred at least 10 times in the data the way it was stated for other lists.):
Jazmine (11.94)
Jazmyne (12.08)
Jazzmin (12.14)
Jasmyne (12.18)
Jasmina (12.50)
Jazmyn (12.77)
Jasmine (12.88)
Jasmin (13.12)
Jasmyn (13.23)

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Some additional interesting anecdotal tidbits:

- The California data show 8 instances of the name "Harvard" given to babies in the 1990's – all of them black. There were 18 babies named "Princeton" – again, all of them black. But interestingly enough, of the 15 babies who were named "Yale" over this same time period, every single one was white.

- One woman (black) named her baby Shithead, though she got very upset when people pronounced it as it would normally be pronounced – according to her the baby's name was to be pronounced shuh-TEED. (A case with superficial similarities is that of the parents who named their twin boys OrangeJello and LemonJello but decided to use the pronunciations of a-RON-zhello and le-MON-zhello – but this case is essentially different because these parents clearly knew how the names would normally be pronounced, whereas in the case of "Shithead" the mother is portrayed as outraged when people pronounce the word in the normal way, leading one to suspect that she had no idea whatsoever how to spell and didn't know what she was doing when she chose the name.)