

CROSSWORD

*One Man's Journey into America's
Crossword Obsession*

MARC ROMANO

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America's Crossword
Obsession

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To Alan D. Williams,
in very fond memory of
a punster, a polymath,
and, best of all, a gentleman

■ A Note on Crosswords

This is a book about my yearlong journey into the world of competitive crossword solving—although saying that is a little like saying “Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds” is a song about a girl or *The Scream* is a painting of a guy standing on a bridge. The real topic of any book about crosswords is all the information in the world; more to the point, it's about the type of person who has enough of that information at his (or her, of course) disposal to walk into a tournament and know with a degree of confidence that he (or she, on occasion) will be able to accurately finish in a few minutes a puzzle that would take most ordinary civilians several hours or more to complete. *Crossworld* is also, for the record, rare among books about crosswords in that it doesn't actually contain one.

Specifically, *Crossworld's* subject is the American-style crossword as exemplified by the *New York Times* puzzle, whose defining characteristics are a symmetrical grid, a ban on the use of words fewer than three letters long, the absolute avoidance of stand-alone letters, a proportion of white squares to black that never falls below 70 percent, and the injunction that a clue and its answer must be substitutable for each other if used in a sentence. The use of rebuses (symbols that stand in for a word or phrase), multiple letters within the same square, and numerals (Arabic or Roman) have all, over the last two decades, become increasingly popular and acceptable elements within American crossword puzzles.

Like all specialized fields in the realm of human endeavor, over the years crosswords have engendered a specific vocabulary that constructors and editors use to describe the technical aspects of what they do; the average solver can live a perfectly normal life without needing to know these terms, but in a book about crosswords they will inevitably make frequent appearances, so it would be best to explain what they are at the outset. (Should you forget what they are, no worry—they are explained again in the text.)

A crossword puzzle is made up of three parts: the grid, the fill, and the cluing. The grid is the arrangement of black-and-white squares you see when you open up your newspaper and turn to the puzzle page; the fill is the set of correct answers that, when you're done, will populate the puzzle; the cluing is the list of prompts and hints, numbered sequentially across and down, that when interpreted correctly will yield the fill. The only other term you'll need to know is “keying”—the placement of letters so that they form a word, phrase, or abbreviation. A stand-alone letter would be completely unkeyed; a letter in a corner, where it becomes part of the 1-Across and 1-Down word, would be double-keyed. In crosswords, a “word” is defined as any single answer across or down; quite commonly, a “word” in the puzzle sense is in fact made up of several real words.

Not all people like solving crossword puzzles, and not many of those who do spend a whole lot of time talking about them, so there won't be many occasions, unless one day you attend the American

Crossword Puzzle Tournament (held annually every spring in Stamford, Connecticut), when you'll be called upon to know the activity's specialized vocabulary.

But this knowledge still could be useful to you. Imagine you're at a cocktail party and fall into conversation with a knot of particularly wonky guests who are talking about that day's *New York Times* puzzle. Even if you don't know anything about that puzzle except the name of its constructor (a piece of information made available by only a small number of crossword venues, including the *Times*), you can pretend that you do by saying something like: "Ah, yes—elegant grid, fresh and creative fill, great clueing. Classic Cathy Millhauser." The mavens might think you're a puzzle expert and, with luck, start talking about another and more congenial subject. Congenial to you, that is.

■ ■ Chapter 1 ■ ■

■ ■ My Puzzling ■ ■ Problem

I am hopelessly addicted to the *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

Like many addicts, it's taken me time to admit I have a problem. The hints I was heading for trouble came, at first, only occasionally. The moments of panic when I realized that for whatever reason I might not be able to get my fix on a given day. The toll on relationships. The strained friendships. The lost hours I could have used to do something much more productive.

It gets worse, too. The high no longer lasts as long as it once did; what initially could occupy me for a whole afternoon now takes me twenty minutes or less to get through. I have become increasingly alarmed that the supply of the thing I need is limited. The *Times* publishes only one puzzle per day and when that's done I find myself rooting about for substitutes—the *Wall Street Journal*, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and *New York Sun* puzzles, to name just a few—that are somehow less satisfying. Sure, there are a couple of thousand puzzles in the *Times*'s electronic archive. But a puzzle you've already done being something of a dead letter, falling back to that recourse is something like accepting an herbal cigarette when you're a smoker plumb out of Camels. There is no substitute for the genuine article, and a sort of panic sets in once it's no longer available. To badly paraphrase the British novelist C. S. Forester, it is prospect and not possession that affords the greatest pleasure, and the delicious agony of the twenty-four hours between completing one puzzle and starting another makes up the circadian rhythm by which my life has been regulated for nigh on two decades now.

If you've ever been to or listened in on a meeting of any of the twelve-step groups—Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous, Overeaters Anonymous—you may have noticed the pattern that emerges from the narratives of the people who get up to publicly confess their addictions. These men and women all seem to be describing, in their own ways, how they were caught blindsided by the particular object of desire. At an AA meeting, it may be the woman whose parents owned a tavern; at those surreptitious sips of liquids from colorful bottles as a little girl transmuted, for her, into a spirit of inebriation and promiscuity that ended only six months before in this very room. At an NA meeting, it may be the regional salesman whose toots of cocaine on the road, originally just to help clear his head, paved the way for divorce, petty theft, and finally grand larceny and imprisonment.

What these stories say, in essence, is that all addicts go through a lapsarian event of some sort or another, which may be why so many twelve-step meetings take place in churches: It's comforting to explain one's own fall from grace in an environment where the fact of being out of grace is dwelt upon so constantly. Addicts seem to fetishize the fact of their own fall, even though the process of falling is in the end, rather the same whether you happen to be the reformed floozy, the now reemployed and sober salesman, or Adam and Eve. Only the substance changes: alcohol, cocaine, knowledge of good and evil. Or crosswords.

My own fall was right down the pipe, in addiction-narrative terms. Along with a few friends from my hometown at the northernmost end of Boston's North Shore (white-clapboard public buildings, preppies, gulls wheeling in the deep, snug, boat-filled harbor), I was invited down to New Canaan, Connecticut, for a house party hosted by a friend of ours whose parents had, the year before, moved from the Bay State to the Nutmeg State. This was late summer 1985; I was between my sophomore and junior years in college. The six of us drove down in two cars at far too great a speed, with me at the helm of a Ford F250 pickup whose nervous owner sat beside me, constantly doling out advice about the way I was handling his beloved truck.

Apart from the nagging, which occurred both on the way down and the way back up (and which I resented from someone who not only regularly treated his friends to hundred-mile-an-hour dirt-road horror shows, but who also needed me to do the piloting because the Commonwealth of Massachusetts had suspended his license for drunken driving a month before), it was really a perfect weekend. New Canaan was in its late-summer torpor, the hired band was unexpectedly decent, the cold beer flowed, and our friend's new Connecticut crew was so much like we six in thought, dress, and background that everyone seemed to have known one another for ages. We had, in short, a ball.

I went to bed late but woke up, as I generally did then and still do now, early. No one else in the house was stirring except the mother of the family. When I appeared in the kitchen, seeking coffee after a dip in the pool, she said the newspaper hadn't appeared and wondered if I'd be good enough to pick one up at a store in town (or village, really, at the time).

“Or two,” she added. “With so many of you kids in the house, someone else is bound to want another magazine.”

I drove into town and bought, as specified, two copies of the *New York Times*. When I returned, coffee was ready, no one as yet had emerged from the bedrooms upstairs, and my friend's mother was dropping a celery stalk into a Bloody Mary. With a grunt of thanks, she took one of the papers I'd extracted from it the *New York Times Magazine*, and flipped it open to the puzzle page.

Then she sipped her drink, examined the black-and-white grid, and set to work. The house was silent but for her sipping (Bloody Mary), my sipping (coffee), and the rapid-fire scratching of her pencil. I didn't know yet that it's perfectly acceptable in *Times*-buying households to say nothing to a houseguest, even if the guest is your daughter's and not your own, until you've finished at least half the puzzle and a Bloody Mary.

Feeling vaguely offended, I reached for the spare magazine out of sheer retributive spite. The next moment, I became a puzzler.

This is not to say that I'd never done a crossword before. I had, in spades: the *Boston Globe* puzzle, most of the time, or the puzzle in *TV Guide*, or any other puzzle one picks up at moments when one needs distraction. The one common denominator is that they were easy, pastimes rather than challenges, so at the time I preferred reading to puzzling. I still do, except for when a fresh *Times* puzzle is to be had.

Ten minutes later, my friend's mother mixed herself another Bloody Mary and returned to the kitchen table. After maybe another twenty minutes, she sighed contentedly. Then she mixed herself a third Bloody Mary and rummaged through the other sections of the paper. My coffee was cold and barely touched and I'd completed less than a third of my puzzle when the daughter of the house appeared, with the other houseguests more or less in tow, if two hours later counts as "in tow." My friend said good morning to her mother and then drifted over to ask me how I was doing with the crossword. I grunted by way of answer. I had begun, you see, to understand.

I couldn't believe that a New Canaan matron with two stiff prebreakfast drinks under her belt had managed to complete the same puzzle I was working on a full three hours before I did. I was at least thirty years younger than she and the lazy salutatorian of my high school graduating class—and a second-year student at Yale, for God's sake, even if an unmotivated one. My performance was shameful.

When I finally did finish, barely minutes before we were all due to drive home again, and after having spent several hours skulking around the house, avoiding the presence of people who wanted "help" with the puzzle, I glanced at the top of the page to see who was responsible for it. The only hint that it had not been constructed by Satan himself—that there was a human agency behind the puzzle—was the single line, "Edited by Eugene T. Maleska."

Maleska Versus Shortz

That name "Maleska" imprinted itself upon my brain at once and forever. It was an odd-sounding collection of syllables: odd-sounding in the sense that it echoed any number of East European names whose possessors had bedeviled me up to then with their machinations physical (Erno Rubik), literary (Ernst Kantorowicz, Mikhail Bakhtin), and scientific (Dmitry Mendeleev, cursed be all chemistry).

"Fine," I thought to myself as we piled into our cars. "Fine, Eugene T. Maleska, from this day onward, you'll publish no puzzle but that I'll complete. Eugene T. Maleska, you probable Slovakian evil genius, from this day on your ass is mine."

In truth, from that day on, the ass-ownership situation was the other way around completely. Eugene T. Maleska had possession of my puzzler's soul from that day in August 1985 until he died in 1993; I mourned his passing the way someone else might mourn the closing of a favorite corner restaurant—with a sense of grief partly admixed with an anticipatory dread of what new institution might come to take the departed one's place.

Many others, over the ensuing years, were also to mourn Eugene T. Maleska. A former teacher of Latin and then administrator in the New York City school system, he was an iconoclast and, some had it, a world-class curmudgeon, famous for developing instantaneous and permanent grudges against

crossword constructors who violated any of the myriad iron (but never actually spelled out) rules that seemed to govern the world of puzzles. Yet he had built up an ardent following of people who agreed with him that puzzles should mainly concern themselves with high culture and disdained words or phrases that had originated since roughly 1960. If you knew the names of opera stars, the titles of popular songs from the 1930s and '40s, and which horses had won the Kentucky Derby in the first half of this century, you stood a fair chance of completing any crossword the *Times* published under Maleska's tenure, which began in 1977. If, like me, you didn't have this body of knowledge at hand—or if you were unfamiliar with Maleska's favorite filler words, such as “adit,” “oryx,” “anil,” and “esne,” among a dozen or so others—you were forced to rapidly develop a working understanding of both the references and the vocabulary. If you were of a certain age or a cultural snob or raised in or around New York City (or, ideally, all three), he was your hero: You knew what to expect from the crossword that would appear on your doorstep the following morning, and you could be reasonably certain you'd eventually finish it. In a sense, consistently solving Maleska's puzzles made you an honorary New Yorker, back when New York was Ed Koch and not Rudy Giuliani or Michael Bloomberg.

All that changed when Maleska went up, in 1993, to that big crossword grid in the sky. The puzzle's new editor, a person named Will Shortz, had a very different understanding of what a crossword should be, and, for the effect he would have on me as well as on literally millions of other puzzlers, he turned out to be a far, far more baneful figure than his predecessor. Largely this is due to the fact that Shortz is a much cleverer puzzle editor than Maleska or his predecessors, Margaret Petherbridge Farrar and Will Weng (my deep apologies, Eugene T.; you were fun while you were around, and I do still miss you). Shortz is also a more technical, more engaged, and more democratic puzzle editor than any of his forebears.

What the words “clever,” “technical,” “engaged,” and “democratic” mean when applied to crosswords is an indication of the changes Shortz was to bring about in the august institution of the *Times* puzzle (which began running every Sunday as of 1942 and daily as of 1950). For now, the words “fiendish,” “difficult,” “evangelic,” and “irksome” can stand in for them. But the point, again, is that the old *Times* puzzle used to demand of its solvers little more than a general body of knowledge acquired over a lifetime spent in the United States from about 1935 to about 1985. This is not to say that Maleska's puzzles weren't difficult enough. Under Will Shortz's direction, however, the puzzle began to demand much more extensive knowledge of contemporary culture, plus the ability on the would-be solver's part to come to terms with a number of other puzzle dimensions: themes that depend on how one interprets clues correctly, rebuses, squares containing more than one letter or figure, graded levels of difficulty, and so on.

Perhaps the most significant change instituted by Shortz was radically reinforcing the policy of scaling puzzles by difficulty, with the week's easiest appearing on Monday and its hardest on Friday or Saturday. (Although larger than the weekday crossword, Sunday's is usually, in terms of difficulty, about the Thursday level.) For many, including me, this meant it soon became almost pointless to pick up a copy of the *New York Times* on Monday or Tuesday, since the puzzles appearing in them were constructed with the beginning or inexperienced solver in mind and, in a noncompetitive context, simply weren't worth doing. For many other people, this time not including me, it also soon became pointless to pick up Friday or Saturday's, either, since their difficulty upped the frustration factor.

manyfold, causing legions of faithful crossworders to abandon a particular puzzle for perhaps the first time in their lives. And, needless to say, to curse this interloper who had ruined the classic crossword experience so carefully nurtured by Maleska.

Even Shortz's name seemed an ill omen, since all his predecessors had sounded, or at least on the printed page looked, more imbued with gravitas than he. Margaret Farrar (née, and for a while editing puzzles as, Margaret Petherbridge, which sounds like a character out of Wodehouse) had echoes of Farrar, Straus and Giroux and serious books; the unusual moniker of the *Times's* second puzzle editor Will Weng, didn't bring any specific image to mind, but that odd combination of Western-sounding first name and Asian-sounding last certainly caught the eye. "Eugene T. Maleska" is of course a showstopper, evoking images of scholars poring over massive tomes in the lugubrious silence of the Slavic Reading Room at the New York Public Library. By contrast, "Will Shortz" sounds like someone you'd meet in the cattle-feed section of a farm-supply store in Indiana.

Shortz was in fact born in Indiana, and when you meet him in person he's every bit as warm, open, enthusiastic, and friendly as you'd expect someone from the Hoosier State to be, but that's about where the whole expectations-met game comes to a shuddering halt, Shortz-wise. Sometime around 1960, when he was less than ten years old, he fell in love with puzzles. After a couple years of practice, he sold his first one for publication when he was fourteen. He entered Indiana University as an economics major, but soon realized the school had an independent-study program that allowed a limited number of students to design their own major. He applied and, as every press piece on Shortz since has reported, he convinced the docents to grant him an undergraduate degree—the only such degree granted by any university anywhere, ever—in the field of enigmatology, or the study of puzzles and games and their relationship to the cultural environment in which they are created and solved. After college he went to law school, and for a while it seemed that, his unusual undergraduate concentration aside, Shortz was headed for a career that would raise no eyebrows in his Indiana hometown.

While contemplating a life of torts and contracts, he continued to pursue his passion by constructing and publishing puzzles for, among others, *Games* magazine. When the editorship at the periodical opened up in 1978, the publishers offered him the position. Of course he accepted, and he became one of that very rare breed of persons whose consuming passion corresponds precisely to his career arc. Before he even joined *Games*, Shortz founded the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, held annually in Stamford, Connecticut (the next town over from New Canaan, for which that's worth), and now in its twenty-eighth year. Shortz also created the World Championship Puzzle Competition, which features four-person teams from various nations vying with one another to solve a series of language-neutral math and visual problems. When Eugene T. Maleska sloughed his mortal coil in late 1993, the list the New York Times Corporation's headhunters came up with as potential replacements probably numbered only one.

Once he was hired, Shortz's decision to begin instituting more carefully calibrated levels of difficulty in the *Times* puzzle may have shocked and horrified many longtime and faithful solvers, but it did have the effect of radically broadening the base of people who at least try to do the crossword on a regular basis. The *Times* has never audited itself to find out how many copies the puzzle was responsible for selling under Farrar, Weng, and Maleska. But under Shortz, and with the advent of the World Wide Web, some pretty astounding numbers have begun to come in. The *Times* puzzle Web site

has forty thousand subscribers (or more—the nonpublic Times Corporation holds this number pretty close to its chest) each paying \$34.95 a year; *Times* puzzle books, all published by St. Martin's Press, regularly sell in the tens of thousands. And five hundred or so highly motivated solvers actually go to Stamford every year. By any measure, it looks like Shortz's decision to make the puzzle at once much easier on some days, much harder on Fridays and Saturdays, and more contemporary every day has paid off handsomely for the *Times*—which, incidentally, only in 2003 raised the remuneration for a given freelance-constructed weekday puzzle to \$100 and for the Sunday puzzle to a dizzying \$350. My on-the-napkin calculations indicate that the *Times* puzzle as edited by Will Shortz probably adds a hundred thousand newsstand sales of the newspaper per day and maybe two hundred thousand every Sunday, and this at \$1 and \$3.50 per issue, respectively. Whatever the real numbers may be, they're definitely large.

Yet Shortz's policies have also alienated some—for example, Michael D. Coe, professor of anthropology emeritus at Yale University and author of, among others, *Breaking the Maya Code*, *The Maya*, and (with his wife, Sophie) *The True History of Chocolate*. A lifelong *Times* puzzle solver, Michael is the person you'd want on the phone if you ever needed a lifeline on *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire*. Soon after Shortz was named puzzle editor, an annoyed Coe vowed never to try the crossword again, since it had, in his view, become filled with impenetrable clues involving rap artists and the like, not to mention what, in his view, amounted to product placements (all those anathema-to-Eugene brand names). He in fact canceled his *Times* subscription because of Shortz, or rather because the puzzle under Shortz no longer made up for the fact that, to Coe, the *Times* seemed an insular, self-congratulatory newspaper not really worth the cover price it kept jacking up. He bought a computer and went online a few years later, however, rediscovered the *Times* puzzle in its electronic version, and now scans the occasional *People* magazine in an effort to absorb the contemporary cultural information he needs to solve it, at least Sunday through Thursday—Fridays and Saturdays remain impenetrable to him.

More than anything, though, Shortz has, via personal magnetism (he hosts the popular “Puzzle” section of National Public Radio's Sunday broadcast every week) and sheer hard work (he provides about half the clues, on average, for any given puzzle the *Times* publishes 365 days a year, while at the same time maintaining a busy speaking schedule and organizing a dozen or more cruciverbalist gatherings per year), built around crosswords a thriving, very active, and very social community of solvers and constructors. Their annual gathering in Stamford is an energetic geekfest the likes of which you haven't seen unless you've been to the annual high school Math Olympiad or, to use a cognate from the animal world (and to mix a metaphor), seen the swallows flocking at San Juan Capistrano. It's hard to imagine how the grumpy and reclusive Eugene T. Maleska could ever have broadcast the love of crosswords as widely as has Will Shortz in the space of just over a decade—and as Shortz looks to continue doing for decades to come.

Perhaps only marginally less important than the grades of difficulty that Shortz has imposed on the *Times* puzzle is the technical virtuosity he has built into it, or caused to be built into it by the selection of constructor whose work he chooses to publish. Simply put, the crosswords are marvelous, engineered now in a way they never have been before—including the way they are today in, for instance, British newspapers, whose cryptic puzzles have baffled and delighted countless millions for almost eighty years. (And that, for the record, have also completely mystified billions of others who

aren't acculturated Englishmen and Englishwomen and haven't the slightest idea how those jokes, from associations, and puns could ever cohere into the specific answers that show up in the newspaper next-day edition.)

Word-Cross

Given the millions upon millions of people who do them every day all over the world, it would seem that crossword puzzles must have an ancient history, but they don't. The first one appeared in December 1913, in the "Fun" section of the *New York World* newspaper, and was constructed by that section's editor, Arthur Wynne. The concept of the crossword, which at first Wynne styled "word cross" until a salubrious typographical error reversed the order of the words a month after the first one appeared, found nearly instant mass appeal. By the early 1920s, several dozen American newspapers carried their own, usually weekly, version of the puzzle. Internationally, crosswords caught on almost equally as quickly, with British, French, German, and Russian examples coming into print a few years after the conclusion of World War I. (In his autobiography, *Speak, Memory*, Vladimir Nabokov claims that his father, the jurist and politician Vladimir Dmitrievich Nabokov, coined "*krestnoslovo*," the Russian equivalent of "crossword"; the Russian word used for "crossword" today is in fact *krosverD*.)

In the early 1920s, the youthful founders of the publishing house Simon & Schuster took a gamble on their first book, a collection of commissioned crosswords, but hedged their bets by making sure their company's name appeared nowhere on or within it. After the first four-thousand-odd-copy run sold out in a few weeks, the next run that came to market bore their imprint; it sold about a quarter-million copies in its first year, launching not only one of the two new major American publishing companies to set up shop that decade (the other being Random House), but also bearing witness to the fact that the crossword had within eleven years graduated from transitory fad into a fully fledged—and, for the people who published it, either in newspapers or in collected forms in books, an extremely profitable—national institution. From the beginning, publishers found that crossword constructors would work for either very low pay or for free, while crossword solvers would shell out lots of good hard dollars for both the newspapers in which the puzzles originally appeared and the volumes into which they could eventually be collected. The same dynamic still operates today; now, though, a star system is beginning to emerge in which constructors can make money on the book end of the crossword-publishing spectrum by demanding standard author's royalties for volumes made up entirely of their work. At the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, the only place where high-profile constructors reliably appear en masse, they're even mobbed by autograph seekers.

Since such books commonly sell in the tens of thousands of copies apiece, a good year's work for one of these constructors (about 1.2 puzzles a week) could, today, conceivably translate into a solid upper-middle-class income. On the other hand, constructing a crossword publishable in the *Times* takes a huge amount of time and energy, even given the development and brisk sales, over the last decade, of crossword-building computer software. To make a living off his or her work, the busy constructor has to wonder whether he or she can keep up the pace. This is why there are three hundred-odd people in the current roster of *Times* puzzle writers and why the crossword editor of America is so much better-known than the average constructor—because he or she is the person whose name most frequently and most prominently appears on the masthead. Millions of people will spend anywhere from three minutes to several hours focused intently on the puzzles editors coproduce and

publish day in and day out. A crossword constructor doesn't necessarily have to worry about being crucified by millions over a minor mistake; crossword editors do.

Throughout the 1920s in America, crosswords were both a phenomenally successful fad and, again, a burgeoning national institution. Hit songs and stage shows were based on them; women and men sported crossword-themed clothing (as some of them do still at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament). But while other fads from that ditzy age, such as bobbed hair or flagpole sitting or goldfish-swallowing, came and went, crosswords remained, if anything growing more entrenched over time went on. In 1942 the *New York Times* was then (as now) the highest-profile American newspaper and its undoubtedly much-cogitated decision to begin publishing crosswords on a regular basis—and to keep publishing them from that date to now—was and is a singular vote in favor of the puzzle's powerful cultural status and likely staying power. And yet like rock and roll and chewing gum, they're one of those homegrown American cultural inventions that were somehow destined not only to thrive in North America but also to find resonance among peoples as fundamentally different as, say, the Russians and the Japanese.

What is it about crosswords that made them an instant public sensation, and keeps them a sensation today, pretty much all over the globe? One reason might be that they act as a sort of barometer of one's own acculturation; if you can do the crossword in your nation's newspaper record, it means you're smart and mentally agile and hip (to use a word that has never to my knowledge appeared in the *Times* puzzle) enough to say "I belong here"—a pretty persuasive reason to do big-city-newspaper puzzles, especially if you're a second-generation immigrant or (as I was when I ran across that first *Times* puzzle in New Canaan) a provincial kid aiming to make it in the big city. Another reason, which a lot of people I've raised the question with bring up, is that crosswords are the ultimate way of dealing with immediate worries, or at least burying them for a determinate amount of time: Trying to figure out what seven-letter word begins with "p" and ends with "a" and has a "k" or "g" in the sixth position is an almost magical way of forgetting, for instance, that your live-in girlfriend is coming home in twenty minutes and that you just happen to have spent the night with a different girl entirely, but neglected to explain beforehand that you were going to do so. When your girlfriend does come home, slamming the door on her way in, there'll be hell to pay, but in the meantime you think to yourself, "Way to go, pal: The answer is probably PAPRIKA!" And you get that amount of time off from the otherwise relentless dread hanging over you, which while it's happening is a very good thing indeed. Except for writing or (so I'm told) engaging in close combat, nothing removes imminent social contingency from one's life better than solving crosswords.

Overlord

The odd thing about crosswords, though, is that they work as a psychic balm for you only if you've developed the knack for solving them, and that's not as easy as it might seem. Learning to solve one crossword doesn't necessarily give you the tools to solve all others. The person who has spent a decade decoding the way Will Shortz thinks a *New York Times* crossword should be built may be good at solving Shortz-edited puzzles, but will likely be helpless when confronted with a *Times of London* puzzle. Let's say the scenario with the cuckolded lover above involves a British girlfriend, that you've already done that day's *New York Times* crossword, and that all there is in the house as you're waiting for the sword to fall when your loved one appears in twenty minutes is the cryptic puzzle in her *Tim*

of London. (You have, naturally, already done the American-style “Quick” puzzle you've found in the same paper.) The puzzle that remains would be a cryptic crossword, and the references it makes use of are, broadly speaking, utterly impenetrable to you. You don't know what on earth the constructor may be driving at with a clue such as “Goes back on a tractor with Stalin to spare.” You think it might have something to do with Russia under Soviet collectivism, or perhaps with an older Stalin growing fatter around the middle, and hence maybe with Russia in the early 1950s, but you know the answer is likely to be something reconditely British, such as BOVRIL or BEDLAM (assuming you've figured out that the first letter of the answer is “b,” in which case all I'll say is “Good for you”). You know your English girlfriend isn't going to be of a mood to help out with nation-specific insights once she does get home. Under these circumstances, crosswords will help you out not one jot, and you'd better hope the other girl has a spare room in her apartment, because, without the familiar *New York Times* puzzle to calm your nerves, you'll be jittery and incoherent and will plead for hopeless mercy as soon as your girlfriend tosses her bag on the table beside you.

One particularly interesting example that may shed light on the cultural specificity of crossword puzzles comes from the late stages of World War II. Building on work already accomplished by the French and Polish intelligence services before their two nations were overrun by the Germans, the British had done wonders breaking the enemy Enigma code (or, actually, reverse-engineering the enciphering machinery that made Enigma possible) and by May 1944 were pretty much—though not entirely—on top of all nontelephonic communications the Germans maintained worldwide. A great part of the Enigma code-breaking effort was housed at a facility outside London called Bletchley Park, and included among the linguists and mathematicians and WRENs hired to staff it were crossword-puzzle experts, who presumably had some talent in the field of deciphering hidden clues and messages. Some or all of these experts must have been doing the *Daily Telegraph* cryptics over May and June 1944, since someone noticed that five of its answers over the period looked suspiciously like code names for various components of the Allied assault on occupied France scheduled for early the following month: OVERLORD (the code for the whole Allied assault operation), MULBERRY (the artificial British harbors meant to supply the invasion forces until French ports could be secured), NEPTUNE (the Allied supporting naval forces), UTAH, and OMAHA (the two Normandy beaches assigned to American landing forces).

British counterespionage agents promptly visited the *Daily Telegraph*'s puzzle editor and no doubt put him through the third degree, though they quickly exonerated him after it became clear he hadn't the slightest inkling about anything in the real world except puzzles. But the assumption that he might have been passing on vital military information to potential German spymasters through the *Daily Telegraph* puzzle is wonderful, though perhaps as reflective of the paranoia reigning at the time as of anything else. The clue that resulted in the answer OVERLORD, for instance, turned out to be “But some big-wig like this has stolen some of it at times.” Even after two decades of close analysis, I haven't the slightest notion how to go about squaring the answer with the clue. (Though, to be fair to British counterespionage, the other four clues are more solvable; the clue for UTAH, for instance, was “One of the U.S.,” and with a four-square blank to fill in you couldn't go very wrong, given a brain and at least an atlas.) The point is, the OVERLORD answer was apparently obvious to the couple hundred Englishmen who solved the *Telegraph* puzzle daily, but crosswords have fine margins that are not exportable. Americans have a tough enough time solving American crossword puzzles dating from before about 1970; that temporal gap, though, is infinitely easier to overcome than the cultural gap.

between British and American puzzles, and infinitely more so than the cultural gap between English and American puzzles and, say, German puzzles (and, of course, vice versa).

So let's call the solving divide insurmountable and set the odds against the Germans gleanin information from British cryptic clues in any reasonable amount of time at close to infinite. Granted the correct answers would appear the day following the publication of a given puzzle; yet the mo critical of the five clues, OVERLORD, appeared on June 4, meaning the answer appeared on June the day originally scheduled for the Normandy invasion. By that time, five thousand Allied ships would have been off the French coast anyway, and five thousand ships were likely to tip off th Germans to the fact that something big was up. The British intelligence community's response to th *Daily Telegraph* crosswords in June 1944 was perhaps wise, given the scope and risk of what th Allies were then undertaking; but definitely paranoid and ultimately groundless, had anyone had th leisure to think the matter out in relative peace.

The Puzzler's Paradise

Relative peace, indeed, is what a puzzler needs while going about solving a crossword. At th American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, where hundreds of people sit elbow-to-elbow at scores o long banquet tables, sensory deprivation is ensured by the positioning of barriers between ea contestant and his or her neighbor. (When I asked Will Shortz if these are there partly to preven peeking, he tersely answered, "No one here cheats.") At the 2003 tournament, these barriers we makeshift manila-paper contraptions because the Stamford Marriott had lost the sturdier usual one. These occasionally fell over, since the hotel's cavernous Grand Ballroom, where the event is held, prone to drafts, which means that, during each of the eight heats, the termitelike sound of hundreds no. 2 pencils scratching on paper is regularly punctuated by the swish of falling partitions—a distinct combination of sounds you'd be unlikely to hear anywhere else on earth.

A measure of how important this temporary separation from the world is for crossword puzzle comes from a comment made by Jon Delfin, a New York–based pianist who has won the tournament seven times in the last ten years. By way of practice, Delfin sometimes solves puzzles with his righ hand (he's a leftie) while listening to the radio or talking on the telephone. Doing crosswords whi deliberately distracting oneself is, it seems, a great way to hone solving skills that will eventually b called on in the much quieter ambience of the competitive environment. Or at least the tactic seems have paid off handsomely for Delfin, whose apartment must look, by now, like a museum for first place crossword-tournament trophies.

While I'm nowhere near Delfin in terms of solving skills (he can do the *Sunday Times* puzzles less than ten minutes with something approaching 100 percent accuracy, while it takes me an average of twenty-three or so minutes to do the same), I did, over the years, lower my time on the *Sunday* puzzle from three hours to less than half an hour by adopting certain techniques, at fir unconsciously, then very consciously. Until about 1996, my puzzling was purely recreational and wa likely to stay that way until I heard about the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament and decide that, one day, when I was ready, I'd compete in it.

I had moved from Boston to New York City in 1991 and have remained there pretty much ever since. As it turns out, life in the city is ideal for the dedicated puzzler, simply because it offers s

many opportunities for downtime increments of twenty minutes or less in which to complete crossword—the level of speed one needs before even contemplating doing reasonably well in a puzzle competition. Of all the cities on the planet, maybe only Paris and Moscow offer something similar and it's perhaps no coincidence that Paris and Moscow also happen to be the two other cities worldwide that have active and extremely competent puzzling populations. (Tokyo would seem to fit the bill, but overcrowding is a big problem there; it's hard to do a crossword when you're constantly jostled on the streets or packed sardinelike into a subway car, where all you really can do is grope other people, if that's your particular vice, or be groped, or read a paperback.)

For most non-New Yorkers (or non-Parisians or non-Muscovites), one's downtime between, say, work and home is spent either driving or being driven or bicycling or walking to and fro, none of which is safely or conveniently conducive to doing crosswords. Unless you enjoy walking into street signs, cycling into ditches, driving into other cars, or falling victim to motion sickness, you're not going to be motivated to solve puzzles while commuting; your time with a crossword will happen at breakfast, at lunch, or after dinner, none of which offer automatically structured time limits. In a city with a large and relatively undercrowded subway system, though, the chances are high that you'll spend a limited but temporally predictable (usually) stretch every day either sitting in or leaning against the door of a train car.

One of the virtues—one of the few, some would say—of the New York City subway system is that it forces its users, at least when they're traveling in Manhattan or in the immediately outlying districts of the other boroughs (trains go elevated in each after several stops), to do something other than stare out the window (there's nothing to see but dark tunnel walls most of the time) or at other passengers (which can be dangerous in many respects). New Yorkers in the inner subway system tend to read, write, do crosswords, or doze—though the latter practice can be unwise, given the prevalence of pickpockets.

Many a first date, I suspect, has been arranged after Party A on the subway asked Party B what his or her take was on the answer to 22-Down, because to some people crosswords are only slightly less sexy in and of themselves than are the people who do them. (In one 1998 puzzle that has become famous among the solving community, one hopeful suitor even managed to convince Will Shortz to encode a message asking the woman of the young man's dreams—an avid daily puzzler—to marry him. Shortz agreed, as did the girl.)

Once, one Saturday, as I was taking the ferry out to the island beach house I was sharing that summer with a dozen or so friends, I thought that I, too, was on the verge of stepping into the place where sex and crossword puzzles meet. The ferry ride was twenty minutes long, perfect for doing a Saturday-level puzzle, but in this case I was only about a third of the way through when the ferry reached the midpoint of its passage, and I was beginning to feel nervous. Someone interrupted me, and, waving the person off, I forced myself to concentrate on the puzzle in my lap. As the ferry was wheeling its stern around to greet the tail end of the dock, I finished. When I looked up, a young woman was smiling at me.

As a general rule, it's impossible to tell from just looking at someone if he or she is a crossword person; in terms of personal appearances, we're kind of unexceptional. But when it's summer, you're on your way to a beach house, and a pretty woman is smiling at you, it's one and the same if she wants

to hit on you or talk about the puzzle, since both will be pleasant experiences. I smiled back and said, “Hi. Sorry about being rude, but I was doing the crossword.”

“I know,” she said. “I was watching. You were doing it in pen. Can I—” I didn't know what she was going to say, but my male ego was preening itself for something nice, so it was something of a letdown when she said, “Can I have your paper if you're done with it?”

I rarely actually read the *New York Times*, so giving it away was okay by me, but something about her made me feel it was the puzzle she was really interested in. Some crossword fanatics like to put their completed oeuvres into dated scrapbooks, but I've always been the sort who looks at a finished puzzle as a done thing, and it's of no more interest to me than a spent shell would be to your average marksman. I could no more imagine someone would want an already-completed crossword than I could imagine someone wanting, say, an item pulled out at random from my kitchen trash can.

“Of course. But the puzzle's done.”

“Thanks. I just want it to show my friends.”

I don't think I would have been more taken aback if the young woman had announced she was Mother Teresa's secret love child. She obviously wasn't going to show the puzzle to her friends and say some guy had done it on the ferry trip over; she was going to toss it on the kitchen table and let them think *she* had done it. Maybe I have a suspicious mind—but for what other reason on earth could she want an already-completed crossword? Granted, she may have already done the puzzle herself and simply wanted to check her answers against someone else's, or maybe she liked the look of the thing and wanted to frame it and hang it on her wall. If you believe the first reason, you're no cruciverbalist; if you believe the second, I really, really hope to meet that young woman again, because I could see her enough completed puzzles to wallpaper the den, too.

I suppose it was this incident with the young woman on the ferry that finally made it clear to me that there are puzzlers and nonpuzzlers, and that we—that is, puzzlers—are somehow more honest, in the main, than our nonpuzzling fellow humans. That's maybe an extravagant claim to make on the basis of an action committed by one single person in one specific place at one particular time, an action whose guiding logic, granted, I was then and am now unable to understand. At the time, however, that's how it felt. Now that I've twice been to the largest single gathering of crossword aficionados in the history of humankind and have seen and talked to the people who were there, I can't help but believe the world would be a much better place if everyone in it did puzzles, and took pride in doing them, and didn't go around asking other people for theirs (not that this is a very common activity, at beach resort towns or elsewhere, but in this case I'm speaking metaphorically). Will Shortz often argues that doing crosswords makes for better people: Those who solve puzzles need to know a lot about the world around them and have to think in a very closely directed way, and this combination, Shortz believes, is a positive good. After talking to so many crossword solvers and constructors, I'm increasingly beginning to think he's on to something.

Crossworld

Will Shortz is right—no one who takes part in the annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament

ever cheats. I'll go even further and say that no one *ever* will cheat there. To a puzzler, cheating is more than just a poisoned chalice—it's almost an impossibility, since the things you're vying against when you do a puzzle are, in this order, the puzzle maker, your control over the workings of your own brain, and, if you're in a competitive situation, the clock. Almost by definition, none of those things can be hoodwinked. If you look over your shoulder at the grid being filled in by the puzzler competing beside you (which, if you're a true puzzler, you won't have time to do), you're in effect admitting that that person has better control over his or her brain than you do over yours (since neither of you has any control over the two other variables facing you: the puzzle maker's deviousness and the ticking of the clock), and that would be an intolerable thought. If you're desperate to become at any cost the best solver of the *New York Times* crossword in history, in other words, you won't get there using underhanded tricks.

At the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, there are a lot of clear contenders for the title of best solver, though among them is certainly Jon Delfin. I was lucky enough (or guileful enough) to attend the 2003 competition as a reporter and had the chance to witness Crossworld in operation firsthand. (I had convinced my editor at the *Boston Globe* that it would make for a diverting human-interest story, which it did, though I felt vaguely guilty throughout, like a chocolate fiend who had wangled a reporter's badge at the annual conference of the National Confectioners Association.) The feats of solving to be seen there are astounding—Friday- and Saturday-level puzzles finished in six minutes or less, Sunday-size puzzles in ten; the top placers, though, usually take longer than that to get through a heat, since correctly finishing a puzzle is worth more points than doing it in so many minutes under the time limit. Competitors leave the Grand Ballroom at the Stamford Marriott (which I described in the *Globe* as “the size of a Zeppelin hangar,” though that is perhaps an understatement) as soon as they've completed a puzzle and a referee has picked it up. After about three minutes, they begin flooding out to gather in the hotel's hallways and breathlessly compare notes, which means that about eight minutes into a given heat the place is filled with a conversational hum equivalent to a jet engine at full throttle. The hotel employees, after about the first two hours of this, walk around glazed-eyed and not saying much, knowing they still have another two days of it to endure.

Before heading up to the tournament with a photographer in tow, I'd called an acquaintance at Sports Illustrated and asked for the name of a puzzle constructor I could get in touch with once there. The name I was given was that of Brendan Emmett Quigley, which sounds like a character in a Raymond Chandler story. This impression was only reinforced when I asked him to describe himself so I could pick him out of the crowd: He said he was tall, very thin, red-haired, with red muttonchops, a combination Chandler would have been ecstatic about. The Grand Ballroom was packed with puzzlers who sometimes tend to have eccentric sartorial styles, and I was having a hard time trying to spot Quigley; the *Globe* photographer, whose stock-in-trade is separating signals out of visual noise (and, with the crossword-themed clothing and excited toing-and-froing, there was a lot of visual noise), pegged him immediately.

Puzzle constructors are the *crème de la crème* of the crossword world, but as a group they don't tend to do that exceptionally well in a competitive environment; like National League pitchers, other practitioners of their rarefied trade can often stump them. Jon Delfin, who has published puzzles in the *Times* a couple of times to date, is one exception, as are Trip Payne, Tyler Hinman, and a handful of others. For constructors, whose work is exceptionally difficult (and, again, very much underpaid, f

the most part), attending the competition is really more about collecting a year's worth of kudos and having a lot of shop talk than actually vying for the top prize—and there's a lot of kudos and a lot of shop talk.

For three days the amount of ambient energy at the Stamford Marriott is almost alarming, since it's the only time every twelve months when puzzlers, who are generally introspective and solitary creatures, can really let their hair down, obsession-wise. Perhaps the swallows at San Juan Capistrano aren't the best analogy from the animal world. The American Crossword Puzzle Tournament is more like those few nights in May or June when, all along the East Coast of the United States, horseshoe crabs, those 350-million-year-old arachnoid relics of the Paleozoic, clamber up onto beaches from Florida to Maine for their annual mating festival. Horseshoes spend the rest of the year solitarily hoovering the ocean floor for food (sort of like puzzlers hoovering for puzzles, though horseshoe crabs don't have Internet chat rooms). On their one social occasion each year, they make for a spectacle one really has to witness to understand, which is sort of what it's like being at the Stamford Marriott on the March or April weekend devoted to the tournament.

It's an eclectic group that comes to Stamford, insofar as any solidly middle-class group can be eclectic. The crossword-themed clothing makes them seem like a modern throwback to the early 1920s, when the fad initiated by the first Simon & Schuster puzzle book had millions of people wearing crossword earrings or crossword ties or smoking crossword-branded cigars. It's also, in the main, white, although Will Shortz strives mightily to broaden the demographic appeal of crossword puzzles and consequently of the tournament itself. There are two reasons why the participants look, at first glance, so—well, homogeneous. As the difference between British cryptics and American crosswords goes to show, puzzling—or at least puzzling that involves words as opposed to images or symbols, including mathematical ones—is intensely associated with one's degree of acculturation in a given society; immigrants don't do well at them, and immigrants are disproportionately poor and usually nonwhite. There's also the socioeconomic factor: To attend the tournament, you need to be able to afford the entrance fees (a couple of hundred dollars) and travel expenses, plus two or three nights at a relatively pricey hotel. On the whole, the tournament—like the National Spelling Bee—is a barring sponsorship arrangements, biased toward the middle class, and the East Coast middle class and that.

It also helps to be a mathematician or a musician (or, to a lesser extent, a poet, translator, or editor). Eric Wepsic, a usually strong finisher who didn't attend the 2003 event because he was getting married (which shows that being a word geek doesn't necessarily preclude having a functional social life), was a winner of the high school Math Olympiad, a managing director of my old hedge fund in New York at the age of twenty-nine, and generally the sort of individual you wouldn't want to meet late at night in a dark algorithm. Jon Delfin is, of course, a professional pianist. Will Shortz himself was, again, very nearly an economics major at Indiana University. That doing crosswords well involves having what I call a “garbage mind” (a strong associative memory, in other words, coupled with a magpielike obsession with collecting trivia) as well as an unusual ability to pick up on patterns and symbols also represents a challenge to women, who until very recently haven't, on the whole, been encouraged to develop, in grade school especially, their faculties in this respect. I wish I was talking nonsense on this score, but the fact is that female winners of the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament are disproportionately outrepresented by male winners, even though the sex ratio among

the participants is about fifty-fifty. (In the under-forty category at Stamford, this disparity is gradual disappearing.)

This book, then, is the story of my quest, born in that one almost revelatory moment watching a room filled with hundreds of the most accomplished crossworders in the nation at work, to place at least near the top half of the single largest such competition in the nation. It's also the story of crossworders themselves, and of word puzzles, and of the people who make them, solve them, and occasionally become consumed by them. It's the story of hard-core puzzlers everywhere who, working in English or French or German or Russian or whatever language have you, strive to impose some sort of order on a chaotic world one little white square at a time.

■ ■ Chapter 2 ■ ■

■ ■ Enter the ■ ■ Crossword

Arthur Wynne was born in Liverpool, England, in 1862, and as a young man emigrated to the United States, where he hoped to make his fortune in the newspaper business. As it turned out, he was no Adolph Ochs, Joseph Pulitzer, or William Randolph Hearst; his contribution to American journalism was, in the conventional sense, utterly negligible. But among his baggage on the pack boat that brought him across the Atlantic Ocean in the 1880s were the metaphorical seeds of what, in December 1913, would become the most singularly popular word game in history and an absolute financial windfall for publishers in every nation in the world. Unfortunately for Wynne, he never patented the idea.

The ancestors that begat the crossword puzzle have a long, long history. When, many millennia ago, one human uttered to another a word with a definite and specific meaning, some wag in the clan likely used it the following in day some unexpected manner that had all his caveman friends scratching their heads and wondering at the perverse nature of this new means of communication. That a word has a fixed relationship to a thing or concept that everybody can agree on is a great natural advantage: Yelling “Tiger!” is a much more effective way of alerting your friends that a saber-tooth tiger is prowling just beyond the flickering light of the campfire than a series of gibbering shrieks that could mean anything from “Rocks are falling down from the cliff” to “I think a scorpion just crept into your loincloth.” But “tiger” can also be used metaphorically. There are those in our times, for instance, who'd characterize their bedmate as a tiger, and everyone would understand what they meant when they said it; I can imagine some well-rattled cavewoman fifty thousand years ago postcoital whispering the same thing to her swain, only to have the poor fellow leap off the straw and react in panic in his eyes, for the nearest sharp stick.

What I'm trying to say, I guess, is that words are good things, very useful, sometimes pretty and evocative in their own right, and always fun to play with. From the day they were developed, though they've been used to confound, befuddle, and amuse their hearers, or at least a high enough proportion of them: In the same way that some people don't have a head for mathematics or an ear for music, there are others who lack an affinity for, or ability to do, wordplay—such as the troglodyte mentioned above, who probably spent the rest of the night at watch against an imaginary tiger, when a mo-

word-disposed individual might have enjoyed a second go at his witty and logophiliac bedmate. (Or, as a psychotherapist of my acquaintance, Evangeline Kane, argues—convincingly, in my opinion—the particularly violent criminals such as rapists display an inability to understand the multivalent value of words. They don't *get* concepts such as irony and rhetorical overstatement; all they know is that other people are constantly trying to pull verbal tricks on them, which may be one of the reasons for their huge reservoir of pent-up anger. Someone should probably look into this question from a statistical angle, although I'm not sure what could be done about the problem of violence even if an inability to handle words correctly were proved to be statistically associated with it. What I do feel confident saying is that violent felons rarely attend crossword-puzzle tournaments.)

The fact is, enough people have enjoyed wordplay for so long that there exist examples of it dating to the birth of recorded writing itself—which, to be true, isn't that long, if you exclude hieroglyphs and ideograms found in the Egyptian and Chinese systems and concentrate solely on alphabetic writing, which postdates Homer by at least three centuries. I've yet to find a clear instance of hieroglyphic wordplay in the modern sense of the word. Chinese and Japanese writing are eminently suited to punning, I'm informed—Will Shortz once told me that there exists a great Japanese book on the subject, but, speaking no Asian languages, I'll take him on his word for it.

Primitive word squares—stacked words that read the same if looked at vertically, horizontally, or crosswise—appear on Greek stelae dating from the early part of the first millennium BCE. The Hebrew Bible is rife with acrostics—a game in which the first or second or whichever letters of lines in a passage themselves add up to a new sentence. A particularly fine example of anagramming—in which the letters in a word or sentence are rearranged to form an entirely new word or sentence—involves the apocryphal exchange between Jesus Christ and Pontius Pilate in which Pilate asks Jesus about the nature of truth. Supposedly, Pilate asked, “*Quid est veritas?*” Jesus answered, “*Est vir qui adest*”—“[truth] is the man who stands before you.” The reply uses precisely the same letters as those that appear in the question: A neat conceit, and it would be lovely were the anecdote true, but the whole exchange, famous as it is, ignores the fact that Jesus and Pilate would have been conversing in Aramaic, not Latin, and so is obviously the invention of some brilliant if anonymous medieval cleric who probably bored the daylight out of the local gentry by repeating the squib at every possible opportunity.

Although they liberally make use of anagrams, puns, and other forms of wordplay, crosswords are by definition architectural creatures. Apart from Greek stelae squares, the earliest example of a diagrammed and structured word puzzle is a mysterious thing called the Phaistos Disk, which was discovered on the island of Crete, in the eastern Mediterranean, in 1908. (You can check it out at a person at Greece's Iraklion Museum, in the island's capital city of Heraklion.) The object—a clay disk measuring about six and a half inches across, with some forty-five glyphs making up perhaps 24 distinct words that spiral around both the obverse and reverse sides—must have had some sort of religious or political import to whomever its makers were. It was found in what appears to be either a reliquary or counting room in the great palace at Knossos. (The interpretations you find in scholarly books and on the World Wide Web are as divergent as can be—some think the disk is a representation of a complex mathematical calculation, others say it's a prayer wheel, still others think it might be a property record of landholdings in a Mycenaean mountain town. Like people who speculate about the location of Atlantis or the oracular meaning of the Mayan calendar, though, you can be pretty sure the

anyone expressing a definitive view about the disk is both deeply passionate and supremely clueless and so hardly a scientist.) It's always problematic to ascertain the age of a fired clay object, but the thing has to have been made somewhere around 1600 BCE, if you accept the rough archaeological consensus.

Whoever made the Phaistos Disk used forty-five manufactured dies, pressed into wet clay, with the divisions between "words"—in effect, clusters of die imprints—apparently predetermined, given their regularity. In reality, the disk cannot be translated—whatever language the dies represent is impossible to determine, given that they're the only extant example of their own peculiar letterforms and the sample is too small to draw any conclusion from. In English, an equivalent problem would be to assume you have an eight-letter word with one "c" in it; based only on one thin shred of information—that the letter "c" is in there somewhere—you could argue it has to be "concrete" or "accruals" or any of a thousand other similar words, but in no instance could you bring to the table any proof one way or the other weightier than the extent of your own personal convictions. Plenty of people apparently want to knock their brains on the subject, to no avail. I suppose it's preferable to say, applying that same intellectual energy to the invention of stock-market prediction scenarios that get people to invest Junior's college funds in a pyramid scheme, but still you wonder why so many people seem to have so much free time on their hands these days.

The point, though, is that someone, more than three millennia ago, had both the desire to make the letterforms and the foresight to ensure their aggregate impressions would fit perfectly on a preformed disk of set proportions—it would have been an embarrassing disaster to everyone involved in the project had a crucial word been abbreviated or dropped entirely, given that the consequences of such a thing happening would have been great. Gods don't like half-assed measures on the part of the followers; nor do deed holders on the part of their registrars.

The fact remains that someone in the age of Homer knew a letterform of a given size would produce marks of a certain size that would fit into a template of a given size and produce an artifact record important enough to preserve in the inner sanctum of the great palace of Knossos on the island of Crete. The one thing everybody who writes books or posts Internet messages about the Phaistos Disk can agree on is that it's the first instance ever of the use of movable type, whatever that series of imprinted words or syllables actually means in the aggregate. We'll never know what the maker of the Phaistos Disk was trying to do with his piece of wet clay, but we certainly know that as he constructed it, he experienced an anxiety that has bedeviled crossword builders since the crossword was first invented: how to fit words into a delimited space.

And the crossword constructor has ancient cognates, at least in terms of the anxiety imposed upon him by his profession. Think of the nervous soul who had to make sure that a phrase—let's say "*Senatus Populusque Romanum*," SPQR, "The Senate and People of Rome"—would fit onto the pediment of a building erected in the City of Seven Hills a millennium and a half later. He's being asked to provide what a crossword constructor would call a "fill," or in other words the letters that fit perfectly into the spaces left for the answers; the only real difference is that he'll lose his livelihood—and perhaps his life—if he doesn't do it correctly. I suspect the maker of the Phaistos Disk, like the person who had to chisel "*Senatus Populusque Romanum*" onto a Roman temple face, was someone who sweated a lot until the task was satisfactorily completed. (As long as I'm pulling theories about the disk out of thin air, I might as well add that it looks a lot like those spiral puzzles that occasional

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