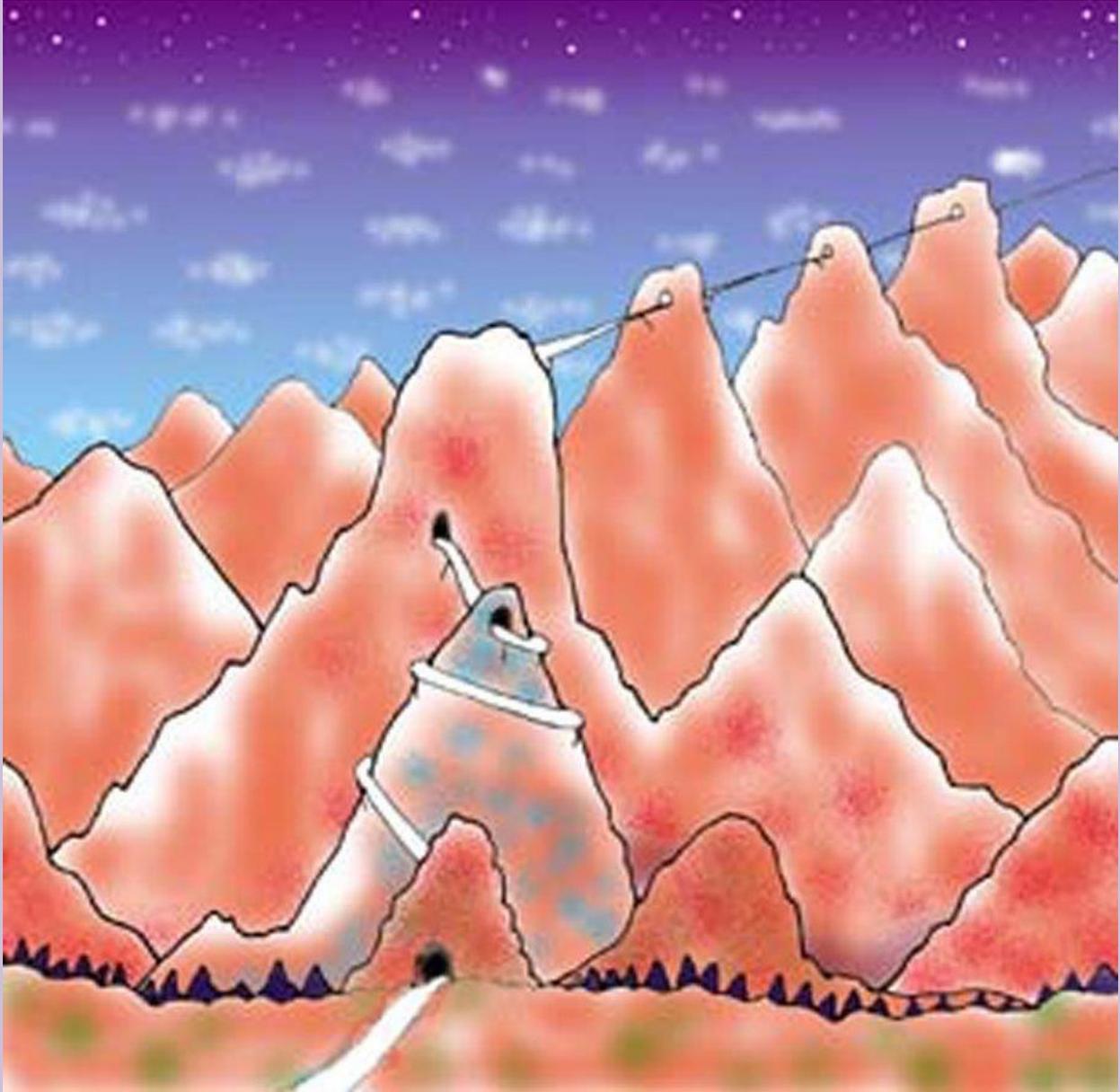


Still Crazy



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A literary magazine written by and about people over age 50
but designed to appeal to thoughtful people of all ages.

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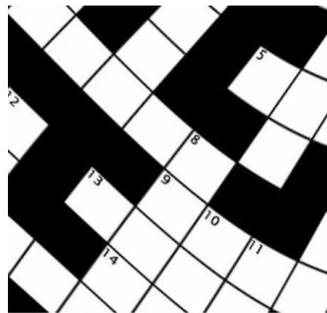
BACK TO THE FAMILY PUZZLE

Silvia E. Hines

Quirky is the six-letter word I think of when I set out, every spring, for a weekend at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament. I explain to friends that I don't really *do* puzzles; I go to hang out with my brother, my nephew, and a childhood friend, all avid competitors in the annual ACPT, brainchild of *New York Times* puzzle editor, Will Shortz.

But I also go to hang out with a beloved ghost—my father—who in 1935 took first prize in the *New York Herald Tribune's* "World's Cross Word Puzzle Championship" tournament, little-known predecessor of the current extravaganza. My brother and I grew up with the evidence of this feat: a silver loving cup with our dad's name engraved, always in its place of honor on a tall bookcase in the living room.

When my daughter asks why I didn't inherit the crossword gene, I say I did, but it didn't get turned on. I'd thought, in young adulthood, that if I immersed myself in the circumscribed, escapist territory of interlocking words, I wouldn't get well enough acquainted with the material world or with the world of ideas. I loved words too, but I wanted to arrange them, one after the other, in meaningful ways, in stories and articles. I was going to be a writer. So I'd close the newspaper before getting to the puzzle, confident there would be other ways to beat the scourge of dementia.



Each year, hundreds compete in the ACPT, now held in Connecticut at the Stamford Marriott. The ballroom, more commonly host to concerts, dances, and wedding receptions, is set up with endless rows of long tables, each seating separated from those adjacent by standing cardboard dividers. The room is so quiet during the competition you could hear a pencil drop, although that rarely happens, since dropping and retrieving pencils would waste precious time that might alter a player's standing. One year, less than a second separated the winner from the runner-up. During periods between puzzles, however, the lobby is alive with camaraderie, as contestants check rankings, compare solutions, and share angst over missed words. Each entrant must complete seven puzzles in two days, with the top three finishers facing off in a final puzzle, solved by filling in the grids printed on giant whiteboards at the front of the ballroom, while everyone watches.

The evenings bring entertainment, usually puzzle-related games, hilarious songs, or films. In 2015, there was a celebration of the tenth anniversary of *Wordplay*, the feature-length documentary film about the ACPT and its contestants that put Will Shortz and his unconventional tournament on the map. In a favorite clip, Bill Clinton compares working crosswords to solving complex problems: You find some aspect of the problem you can understand, he says, and you build on it, until you can unravel the mystery. With such a presidential endorsement, I may need to rethink the usefulness of this diversion.

My dad would have loved all this, especially the plethora of words. *Webster's Unabridged* always lay open and inviting on a table in our home, although we didn't have to go to the dictionary if dad was around. We could ask him what any word meant and he'd know the definition. Car trips brought word games, often ones he'd made up on the spot. In old age he took up writing limericks, scores of them, always rhyming multisyllabic, esoteric words and encompassing puns. He called himself a *paronomasaic*, which he said meant a "fanatical punster."

A feature of the tournament that would be foreign to dad is the annual update on the progress of Dr. Fill, a crossword-solving computer program. Dr. Fill finishes puzzles faster than any person could, but he makes mistakes. Last year the announcement of his rather pedestrian standing caused some exhilaration: "Humans rule!" Shortz shouted—as close to a shout as the mild-mannered puzzle guru gets—and the rest of us let out a raucous cheer. The program can't deal easily with puns, metaphors, or the incorporation of an overlying theme. Unlike the computer programs that have beaten the best of humans in chess and in the game show *Jeopardy*, Dr. Fill lags behind.

Although I'm not a competitor in the tournament, I sit in the back of the ballroom with other observers and attempt several of the puzzles. This means watching early finishers leave the room at a time when I have pathetically few squares filled. Some puzzles are so difficult I can barely get started. I consider how much more rewarding it would be to go to the hotel spa for a sauna. But I muster patience and stick with it a little longer, which I begin to see is an important aspect of this endeavor.

Despite my resistance, I come to appreciate the humor and ingenuity of those who construct the puzzles. I take issue with the words on a T-shirt that appeared at the tournament one year: "Crossword constructors think inside the box." Catchy, yes, but not at all true; these folks teeter way over the edge. For example, in crossword land, a "senior moment" can be *prom*; a "beat reporter" is *metronome*; and "pole star" is *Santa*. And if you think "down in the mouth" will translate to *sad*, *depressed*, or *bummed*, you need to think again, this time in a divergent way. The answer is *uvula*, that rarely appreciated anatomical structure attached to the soft palate that hangs above the tongue.

Dad also constructed crosswords. He would have loved to call himself a *cruciverbalist* had the word to denote those verbal artisans been around in his time. One of his puzzles, created before the age of 16, appears in the first printed crossword book, published in 1924 by The Plaza Publishing Company, later to become Simon & Schuster. It's titled simply *The Cross Word Puzzle Book*; perhaps the editors didn't anticipate the multiplicity of such books to

come. The front matter for the book contains detailed instructions on how to play this newfangled game, as well as a contemplation on the various ways crosswords can be enjoyed: “There is the pure esthetic stimulation of looking at the pattern with its neat black and white squares, like a floor in a cathedral or a hotel bathroom; there is the challenge of the definitions, titillating the combative ganglion that lurks in all of us. . .”¹

Dad jumped on the crossword bandwagon while the form was in its infancy. Although there were precursors to crosswords, the first to resemble the modern puzzle appeared in 1913 in the *New York World*. Along with its great popularity, the phenomenon had some tough critics in the early years. In 1924, *The New York Times* complained of the “. . . sinful waste in the utterly futile finding of words the letters of which will fit into a prearranged pattern, more or less complex. This is not a game at all, and it hardly can be called a sport . . . [solvers] get nothing out of it except a primitive form of mental exercise, and success or failure in any given attempt is equally irrelevant to mental development.”²

Similarly denigrating is this complaint by the New York Public Library from 1925: “. . . when prizes are offered for solutions, and the puzzle ‘fans’ swarm to the dictionaries and encyclopedias so as to drive away readers and students who need these books in their daily work, can there be any doubt of the Library’s duty to protect its legitimate readers?”³ Clearly, these harsh and whining pundits couldn’t have predicted that, only two decades later, a small group of British crossword enthusiasts would be responsible for breaking the German war code, Enigma.

This year when it’s time to leave, I think about my dad’s place in crossword history and I grab a packet of puzzles to try on the train. I aim to test my improved ability to fill in the squares, but I also want to better understand the appeal of the puzzle. As I close in on completing one of the easier ones within five or six Metro North station stops, I notice a kind of rush beginning. I’m high on a series of those *aha! moments* so aptly described by psychologists. One minute, I don’t know the answer; a few minutes later, I know it. It seems I know more than I think I know. As I fill in the final box, I admire how neatly it all falls into place. I feel satisfaction, closure, and the thrill of mastery.

Surely dopamine is flowing in my brain. I could get hooked on this! Perhaps someone has put a crossword fanatic in an fMRI machine to see what parts of the brain light up. Whatever loose ends characterize my life—untidy house, very long to-do list—here’s something that can be neat and complete. The world is an orderly place after all.■

¹*The Cross Word Puzzle Book*. The Plaza Publishing Co., New York, 1924, p. 3.

²“Topics of the Times.” *The New York Times*, November 17, 1924, p. 18.

³Report of the New York Public Library for 1924; published by The Library, 1925.
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