

The clue factory

What's even more satisfying than solving a crossword puzzle? Constructing one

by PAUL ENGLEMAN

For about three years now, I've made it a Sunday morning habit to do the *New York Times* crossword puzzle. I rarely finish it, and never in one day, preferring instead to work it out over weekdays until Sunday returns, when I check the solution, scoff at my blunders, and pounce optimistically on the next one.

I've done the puzzle on and off for decades. I used to start on it only after reading the paper, but for the past year or so, I've gone directly for the crossword. Rediscovering it has become one of life's most reliable pleasures, but I'm a little puzzled as to why.

Perhaps nostalgia has something to do with it. I first started doing the *Times* crossword in 1973, when I had an internship there as a copy boy — a position that, like many jobs in the newspaper business, has become virtually extinct. It involved standing at the ready to run errands — mostly carrying typed pages and carbon copies — throughout the building for any desk editor who beckoned by calling, "Copy!"

The job itself seemed menial, but with the Watergate investigation going full throttle, the *Times* newsroom was an exciting place to be. I



was there when Vice President Spiro Agnew was forced to resign and when Gerald Ford was named to replace him. I was also there for the Saturday Night Massacre, when President Richard Nixon was busy ousting attorneys general. There were occasions when the newspaper had to be torn up at the 11th hour to add breaking stories to the later editions. But most nights, there was more than enough downtime to puzzle over the crossword.

I work in pen, mostly because of an aversion to pencils that dates back to elementary school. I read through all the clues, filling in only the answers that I feel sure about — which on a good

Sunday is only a half-dozen of the 100-plus clues. I scrawl possible answers to harder clues in the margins until I'm somewhat certain they're correct — or until I reach a desperation point where any guess is better than no guess. One wrong answer — especially to a long word — can spell D-O-O-M for the puzzle solver.

The process of solving the puzzle can be humbling, because it's a clear reminder of how much I've forgotten and how much I still don't know. But it's also an opportunity to learn new stuff. And when you do recall

something long forgotten, when the light bulb goes on in your head, there's a glow of satisfaction that can brighten your day or, in my case, the week. It's a series of moments of clarity, some almost immediate, some coming only after mulling over a clue for days.

Doing the crossword also reveals something about yourself, and it's not necessarily flattering. What does it say about me, for example, that I am more likely to know the cast members on a TV show I never watched than the characters in a Shakespeare play? True story: The clue was "Eleniak of 'Baywatch,'" and I knew the answer was ERIKA. (Actually, I thought it

might be Erica with a “c,” so I left the fourth square blank temporarily.) But I needed “d” and “w” before knowing that the “boy king in ‘Richard III’ ” was EDWARDV.

Despite my limited proficiency, I’m something of a crossword snob — I only do the one in the Sunday *New York Times*. That, according to Victor Fleming, “is the gold standard for crossword puzzles.” Fleming, a member of the Rotary Club of Little Rock, Arkansas, daylights as a district judge and moonlights as a crossword puzzle creator. If the name rings a bell, it could be because his byline has appeared in this magazine since July 2006, when the *Rotarian* crossword became a regular feature.

Fleming got interested in crossword puzzles as a kid, and around the time he turned 50, he decided to try designing them. In March 2005, he had his first daily crossword published in the *New York Times*; he attended the annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in Stamford, Connecticut, the same month. Fleming signed up for the tournament’s talent show and performed a song he had written: “If You Don’t Come Across (I’m Gonna Be Down).” It so happened that Christine O’Malley and Patrick Creadon, a husband-wife documentary team, were on hand filming *Wordplay*, their documentary profile of *Times* crossword editor Will Shortz. They licensed the song to run over the closing credits of the movie, and, as a result, says Fleming, “a version of my song has played to empty theaters everywhere.”

Self-deprecation aside, Fleming has had 46 crosswords published in the *New York Times*, including seven in the Sunday magazine. Half of those puzzles have been solo efforts, and half have been collaborations. Fleming explains that the *Times* daily puzzle is designed to be increasingly difficult each day starting with Monday. The Sunday crossword has a Wednesday or Thurs-

day difficulty level, though it is commonly perceived to be the hardest, most likely because it is larger than the daily puzzle (21 by 21 squares vs. 15 by 15). For the *Rotarian* puzzle, Fleming says, “I make the clueing consistent with the difficulty of the *New York Times* Tuesday crossword.”

In 2017, during the 75th anniversary year of the *Times* crossword, Fleming collaborated on a puzzle with fellow crossword enthusiast and Arkansan Bill Clinton. They had become friends when their daughters were little. Using three clues, they were able to thread the well-known refrain of the former president’s campaign theme song, Fleetwood Mac’s “Don’t Stop,” throughout the puzzle. Fleming also found space for ECONOMY with “It’s the _____, stupid!”

Standard procedure among the clue deceptions employed by puzzle constructors entails using words that can be nouns or verbs (WATER can signify something you drink or what you do to your plants) or that double as common and proper nouns (CAMEL can be the animal or the cigarette). And a question mark at the end of a clue signals a play on words or other deception (“Interrupted midsentence?” PAROLED).

People who design crossword puzzles are known in the trade as constructors, but Fleming thinks of himself as a crossword writer. “It’s a genre of writing that involves putting words in a grid,” he says. “There’s a logic and meaning and a set of rules to be followed.” Puzzles often carry bylines, but Fleming confirms that public recognition is not widespread. “When someone comments how much they enjoyed a particular clue, that lifts me,” he says. “Those are truly satisfying moments — and they’re rare.”

One obvious appeal of crossword puzzles for a 65-year-old like me is that doing them may slow the rate of age-related cognitive decline. A study published in 2011 in the *Journal of the*

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International Neuropsychological Society found that participation in cognitively stimulating activities such as crossword puzzles could delay the onset of accelerated memory decline by 2½ years. A study published in *JAMA Neurology* in May 2012 found that the more often people engaged in mentally stimulating activities, the less likely their brains had a buildup of beta-amyloid, a protein fragment associated with Alzheimer’s disease.

The Alzheimer’s Association website identifies doing word puzzles as one of the activities that can contribute to brain health among the senior citizenry. But that list also includes exercise, a healthy diet, and social engagement, so if you spend the day alone in a recliner eating snacks while you do the crosswords, you’re more likely to gain weight than brain cells.

Doing the *Times* puzzle makes me think of my workaholic father, who, when he finally retired, took to crossword puzzles with the greedy enthusiasm of a kid who has just discovered ice cream. For his 75th birthday in 1986, I constructed a personalized puzzle for him, making use of this newfangled product called computer software. After he finished solving it — I had to help him with one clue — he bought a plastic frame and mounted it on the wall of his office, my childhood bedroom. When he died 26 years ago, I kept it.

Some Sunday soon, I’m going to search through our house and find it. I’m sure it’s here. But I don’t have a clue where it is. ■

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