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Crosswords

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Crosswords

William Schreiber-Stainthorp

Contention: crosswords are the shit. Acknowledgement: they might not *seem* to be. Rebuttal: if they don't "seem to be," you've either made a mistake or you haven't given them a chance or you're just kind of a drag. For those who don't yet *get* crosswords, though, this one's for you. And for those who *do* get crosswords, this one is for you as well. To get started, we have to dive into the crossword's contentious, feverish, one-hundred-percent-riveting past. To get meaningful, we have to surface to bathe in the glory of its present.

We start in New York. Some patriotic Italians would have you believe their countryman, Giuseppe Airoldi, came up with the crossword concept pre-1900. They are liars. The first crossword was born on the morning of December 21st, 1913, to a writer for the *New York World*: one Arthur Wynne. Was this the crossword we know and love today? The one that drives the masses to take the free ad-riddled newspaper they'd otherwise leave moldering in its vandalized box? The one that's inspired films, books, and regrettable fashion statements? The one that gives us a brief respite from the tedium of what we've settled for?

No. This is 1913, guys. They didn't even have TV. Google some pictures of a McDonald's menu from another country. That's how the first crosswords were: disconcertingly different. It wasn't even called a crossword—for all his smarts, Wynne settled on the far less tongue-delighting "Word-Cross Puzzle" as his game's title. Studious onomatologists will happily inform you that, owing to a type-setting error, the Word-Cross became the Cross-Word (a moment of accidental genius on par with the potato chip). After that, laziness kicked in and the term lost its majuscules, becoming known simply as the crossword.

So yeah—the twentieth century is going through puberty and the *New York World* has just knocked the socks off its readership with the greatest innovation in newspapers since objectivity. People are clamoring for their fix, ink is flying absolutely everywhere, horses and buggies run amok as their drivers are otherwise occupied. The president of the Amateur Athletic Union complains that his athletes are too busy with puzzles to properly train. A Princeton professor tries to use them in place of a textbook. A Knoxville reverend forces his congregants to complete a sermon-related crossword puzzle before he'll even begin preaching. Legal aid organizations in Cleveland

struggle to deal with an avalanche of divorce requests from neglected wives. An entrepreneurial optometrist develops new glasses meant to treat the strained eyes of puzzle devotees.

Look: I could go on. We're only up to 1924, archive-wise, and there's a daunting amount of clippings left to trawl through looking for goofy crosswordalia. Instead, we'll trust that this brief sampling has forged upon our brains an image of the absolute frenzy that surrounded the crossword. The whole *Twilight* derangement that's swept weaker minds the past few years? Crosswords were *exactly like that*, except their audience was composed less of 13-year-old girls and more of absolutely everyone.

Ironically, the above reports on the burgeoning mania all came from the one newspaper that was holding out: the *New York Times*. Under the stewardship of the paper's founder, Adolph Ochs, crosswords were called "primitive," "futile," and a "sinful waste." The *Times* has always been the friend who doesn't own a TV, though, so this was hardly a whack upside the head. It's likely that this stodginess would have persisted, were it not for World War II. Specifically, Pearl Harbor. After the attack, the publisher—Arthur Sulzburger, son-in-law of Adolph Ochs—decided that the public could use a pacifier of sorts. Thus, the *Times* Sunday crossword puzzle was born.

It's worth a pause here to consider the implications of that calculation. The first terrorist attack on U.S. soil, two point five *thousand* dead, and the crossword is employed as a pain-reliever. Nothing else could so strongly prove the crossword's ability to captivate and fascinate. Yeah, it's ink on paper. But—pretty flimsy analogy alert—so is the Bible, right? And okay, ultimately it's just a game. But who's going around calling Bobby Fisher frivolous? Say what you will about crosswords, but know that they've delivered the goods in times when the goods really needed to be delivered. If life's about the pursuit of happiness, and crosswords aid in that pursuit, then we owe them a debt.

After rescuing the country from wartime malaise, the crossword was rewarded by the *Times* with a daily presence in the paper. We'll hit the fast forward, though (and zoom through over 20,000 published puzzles), because history gets boring—even when it's about crosswords. Nowadays? The *Times* is pretty much the only crossword that matters, hence its dissection herein. There are garbage-bag-loads of other papers that publish their own, but there are also a lot of little league baseball teams: nobody cares.

Here's what you need to know about the only puzzle you need to know about. It's located in the *Arts* section, which I shouldn't belabor but really testifies to its gravity. The puzzles are progressively difficult, ascending in bitch-to-solvitude: Monday is easier than Tuesday is easier than Wednesday, until you reach Saturday, which is the day most folks just refuse to even open *up* the paper, let alone try to solve the puzzle. Sunday is the exception: it's about as hard as a Thursday, but bigger. You have the time. It's Sunday. Answers are published the day after the puzzle's printed, but that's really only

useful for people without internet connections. For the extremely impatient *and* technologically impotent, there's a 900 number that'll charge you \$1.50 a minute for answers. There is little data on how many people avail themselves of this option, but one expects that their lives are fairly depressing.

Now, you *could* do the crossword online. You could also be one of those guys who develops a nuanced, lasting relationship with a pillow. Either way, there are better options out there. True cruciverbalists yearn for a meticulously folded newspaper, a pen that glides but doesn't blot, and a hard surface. While an environment sans breathers, gabbers, and chewers would be nice, a lot of times you have to cope with distractions.

But a lot of times, you actually *don't*. See: the beauty of crosswords, and one of no more than ten reasons they're getting this whole beatification right now, is their ability to engross. Suddenly you'll look up and realize you just traveled from 2-down to 61-across without being aware of the journey. You don't lose consciousness, obviously. You just enter a plane of un-self-consciousness. You're allowed to forget that your pants look weird and your socks are uncomfortable and your throat's sore and your horizon's bare of any real excitement. Because in the moment, as you're seeing the clues and answering the clues and getting ready for the ensuing clues while reflecting on the clues you've skipped pending further research, the puzzle is the universe you inhabit. Worries, wants, needs, pressing biological functions: they cease to preoccupy. There's nothing more important than the puzzle, because there's nothing *else*. Why do you think crosswords were used to distract people from the most murderous war in the world's history? Why do you think they've had such longevity? Why do you think, when you try to talk to someone solving a crossword, you're met with a silence that testifies to your own stupidity? Crosswords allow for absolute investment: transporting you from an enigmatic world to somewhere simple, with finite bounds, known goals, and somewhere, an answer.

A formidably named psychologist, Mihály Csíkszentmihályi, calls this sort of mental state "flow." It's like burning ants with a magnifying glass and the sun, except the sun is you, the ant is whatever task the ass of which you're about to kick, and flow is evidently the magnifying glass in this increasingly strained metaphor. Time retreats to go do whatever it is dimensions of the universe do when they're not bugging us. By now the phrase "mind and body" has been co-opted by yogi juicers, but really, they start syncing up when you're in flow. You think *as* you act, not *before* you act.

The seeming irony is that just as you're acting most beautifully, you're unable to appreciate it. But ultimately, non-self-awareness is part of the reason *why* you're able to ascend to whatever pinnacle you're at. This bodes poorly for the self-diagnosed OCDs among us who compulsively analyze every minor interaction and fleeting thought for crumbs of meaning, avoiding the cake entirely.

There are some large-worded postulates about the conditions for entering flow, but what you need can really be reduced to passion and performance. You need to feel strongly about whatever it is you're doing and you need to be able to assess how well you're doing it. Most assuredly *not* coincidentally, crosswords satisfy the latter and make the former a piece of cake: nobody is casually acquainted with crosswords. You're in or you're out. You go from neophyte to snarling at loved ones for touching the *Arts* section in a matter of days, and it is glorious. Because however sublime or subpar the rest of your life is, more flow is always welcome. And if every day for ten, twenty, even thirty minutes—if you're slow—you could hop out of the world of responsibility and into the womb of crosswords, wouldn't you be grateful?

But maybe you're an ungrateful scamp, and a transcendent experience isn't enough to convince you. Perhaps you wonder: will crosswords teach me anything? Will my life dramatically improve with a newfound ability to spout Latin phrases, identify abbreviations, and Roman-numeralize any number you please? Look—probably not. Crosswords will teach you to be better at crosswords, just as drawing will make you better at drawing and shuffleboard will make you better at shuffleboard. But I tell you, fictional muckraker, I tell you that it's the *solving* of crosswords, not their solution, that offers meaning. Every day, immersion becomes marginally more difficult. So little is appreciable because so much is instantly rendered redundant. That's why we have to acknowledge the things that offer experience, not just the things that offer information. That's why we have to steadfastly respect, deliberately fold, and maniacally solve the crossword.