

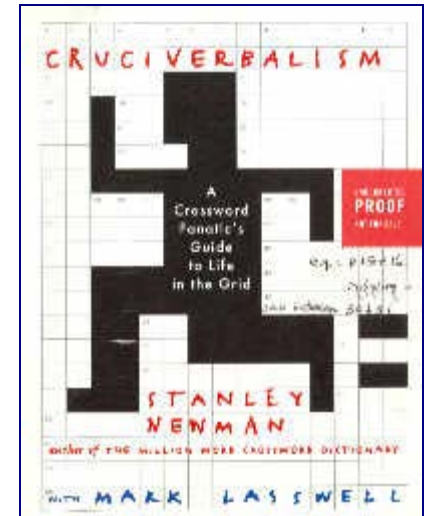
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A READER'S JOURNAL

Cruciverbalism Crossword Fanatics Guide to Life in the Grid by Stanley Newman

ARJ2 Chapter: Reading for Enjoyment
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A Book Review by Bobby Matherne
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This is the book I wished that I had read

about 14 years ago when I became a writer full-time and worked on filling out crosswords each morning as a tool to get my brain honed for writing and publication activities. Why? Because lacking this book, I had to discover the principles which went into creating crossword puzzles on my own, without which filling in crossword puzzles are the mental equivalent of re-decorating a room in the pitch dark. Stanley Newman gives clues and principles which take off the blinders and shed light upon filling out crossword puzzles. Note how I have used the verb "fill" several times already in this paragraph — fill is what puzzle creators and fanatics call the blank spaces in crossword puzzles. You can do an infinite number of them and never learn that word from any puzzle. Okay, let me admit that the clue "What you have to put here" might appear in a Saturday Stumper for a four-letter fill, which would be admirably self-referent and please the Stanley Newmans of the world, among others.

But I prefer shedding my own light into dark spaces (or white fill), so I never strove to read about crossword puzzles, just do them, until this past Father's Day, when this book arrived in snail mail from my daughter Yvette. Thanks, Yvette! Now I can use "fill" in a way I've never used it before. Another idiosyncrasy of my crossword puzzle solving is that I refuse as a matter of practice to look up words I don't know and that I can't get from the clues or the crossing words. No dictionary, especially not a crossword puzzle dictionary, no Google, no encyclopedia, or other reference but whatever exists in my head. This protocol can seem like sheer torture to some and may hint at a masochistic streak in me to some of my Good Readers, but I assure you that it is a calculated strategy that works for me. I have several places in our home where I keep partially completed crossword puzzles which naturally accrue as the result of my strategy of not looking up words I don't know. Each time I revisit that spot I may, time permitting, fetch up the unfinished crossword puzzle and work on it again, even though I may have been completely stumped and unable to create any new fill last time I worked on it. There are those pesky blank spaces staring up at me, mocking me, taunting me, "Still can't figure me out, can you?" My mental reply, "Oh, yeah? Watch me." And over the course of days and sometimes weeks, the obscure and oblique references begin to take shape in my head and in the fill and the taunting ceases as the last letter is filled in. Then a new crossword puzzle takes its place.

What is it that is happening inside of me during those week-long attacks on the blank spaces? Connections are being made, new dendritic spines are going out and meeting other dendritic spines and those new synaptic connections greet me when next I pick up the crossword puzzle and receive the taunts from the empty fill and I reply by adding the exact right letter to match the crossing word and both sets of Across and Down clues! AH! Silence! And silence is golden when it comes from the completed crossword puzzle. I know that the silence came from my internal reference source, not from tracking down the clue in some

external source. I am in training to do crossword puzzles without any external source available.

Now this handicaps me severely when some crossword puzzle creator plunks down names of sitcom stars, especially if the names cross each other. The last situation comedy I watched assiduously was The Bob Newhart show with Suzanne Pleshette in the 1970s. So any reference to a name from Seinfeld or Becker or MASH will require me to do double-duty and get the fill from crossing words and guesstimates. A challenge I readily accept over the alternative which is watching puerile sitcoms whose content is often more offensive to me than the commercials which interrupt their continuity. So if some crossword puzzle creator dares to cross two such obscure sitcom or other names, I take the action which Voltaire did with a letter he didn't like. He wrote back, "Dear Sir, I am seated in the smallest room in the house. Your letter is before me. Soon it will be behind me." I know that no amount of holding that crossword puzzle around will allow me to finish it — it has in effect finished itself unfinished. Sounded its own death knell. You will be delighted to find that the crossing of two obscure names or words is something that Stanley Newman abhors and he will not publish such submissions in his job as Crossword Editor for Newsday.

Speaking of Newsday, my wife was in New York City for a week, and I asked her to get me a copy of Newsday so that I might compare its crossword with the one in my daily newspaper The Times-Picayune. In particular, I wish to see the author's name, the editor's name, and the theme of the puzzle, none of which the TP deigns to publish, but all of which Newman considers it necessary to include with each puzzle. So, until our daily rag, appropriately carrying the same initials as Toilet Paper, includes these three items, I will be left to discover the daily puzzle's theme on my own by filling in at least two of the long fills and deducing the theme on my own. More work for an intrepid crossword puzzle solver often brings more enjoyment, so the missing-theme for me is a mixed blessing.

Stanley Newman was pro-active about getting rid of obscure references and his target of opportunity was Eugene Maleska the editor of the New York Times crossword puzzle. Looking for "a fresh way of cluing LOA", Maleska had come up with "Seat of Wayne County Utah" — an easy fill for the 364 residents of the county, but beyond the pale for rest of the quarter-billion residents of this land! I was stumped for several times after I learned the fill for "French battle site" was STLO. — How could a place have such a name? I wondered and held as an unanswered question as I continued to use my new-found fill however it was clued. Eventually it came to me: STLO was short for Saint Lo, and Lo, and Behold! there was such a city at which a famous WWII battle took place shortly after D-Day. My unanswered-question-sharpened senses picked it up when I next watched "The Longest Day". But STLO was a gimme compared to LOA. Stanley was duly pissed and set out to hang Maleska's head on the wall of his Trophy Room!

[page 10] I thought the situation was intolerable. In religion, they say, there's no zealot like the convert. The same must be true in crossword puzzlers. I was a convert. A lot of the constructors and competitors I met at the tournaments had become infatuated with crossword puzzles as teenagers or even earlier, but I was a newcomer to the scene. I was flabbergasted that a pastime with so much fun and intellectual stimulation to offer could be reduced, in its most public showcase, to such an uninspired form of rote work. Many in the puzzle world seemed resigned to waiting Maleska out in the hope that this benighted era would pass. I didn't see any point in waiting. Then came the Wayne County/LOA atrocity. I decided then to start my crusade against the *Times*. I certainly wasn't going to change Maleska's hidebound way of thinking, and there wasn't much chance of convincing his newspaper bosses to reassign him to, oh, the obituary department. But at the very least I wanted to get the word out to the average puzzle solver: There was a new generation of puzzle constructors on the scene who shared a lot of the same ideas about fresh approaches to crosswords, but whose sensibility you'd never find reflected in what amounted to the country's crossword puzzle of record.

What's a guy to do? Newman started a Newsletter devoted to crosswords and criticized Maleska whenever a chance arose, which was apparently often. Here's one example where he hoisted him on his own petard (from *pedere* meaning *to break wind*).

[page 11] Sometimes I used Maleska's own book about crossword puzzling, *Across and Down*, as a cudgel against him. In the book, he very sensibly prescribed: "When an Across word is abstruse, the pro makes sure that its vertical crossers are all easy words with relatively simple clues." Exactly right. Figure out where the abstruseness and easiness are in these intersections taken from *Times* puzzles in December 1984:

*** "Commune in Tuscany" (PRATO) crossing "Island at head of Baffin Bay" (DEVON)**

*** "Spiny acacias" (BABULS) crossing "Philippine native" (BATAN)**

But Maleska bulldozed on till his death in 1993 while the new wave was growing up around him, led by Newman and others. Stanley Newman became the crossword editor at *Newsday* and the New York Times had the good sense to hire Will Shortz, another leader in crossword new wave at *Games* magazine until then.

Since my local newspaper had gone through a crossword change, dropping the Tribune Syndicate for the Newsday crossword, I can say Amen! to this next statement. About the only time, the editor comes out of the worm-eaten cypress woodwork of the Times-Picayune to make a personal appearance outside of the Editorial Page is when the comics or crosswords are altered.

[page 21] As any newspaper editor knows, if you change White House correspondents, you'll never hear a peep from readers, but if you alter the crossword or change the comics page, take the phone off the hook because it's not going to stop ringing for a couple of weeks — or until the old reader favorite is restored.

As Stanley geared up for his first crossword puzzle competition, he spent a lot of time learning new words, putting them on index cards, looking them up in dictionaries, reviewing carefully the etymology of the words as he did. This was similar to what I did as I became a full-time writer. Words were my profession, and I scarcely let a new word get by me. Instead of index cards, I depend upon marginalia, writing out the word in the margins of the book I'm reading for later lookup when I'm reviewing it. At that time I look it up in the dictionary and mark the definition in the book next to the word's appearance. While in the dictionary, I pay careful attention to its origin, like I did with *petard*, which I used above. The phrase "hoisted on one's petard" means "caught in one's own trap" but after combining the origin of the word as "flatulence" with petard as a firecracker or gate bomb, I couldn't hear the expression thereafter without thinking of the victim being blown up on his own stinking effluence. The funnier the image you create of the word's etymology, the better it will stick in your memory.

[page 33] Once most of us get out of high school and college, we too easily slip into thinking that our mental abilities are pretty well fixed. Oh, you might acquire new skills on various jobs over the course of your life, and you might pick up odds and ends of additional learning about history and language from television or books or magazines, but the general assumption is that the capacities we've developed in school are the intellectual cards we're dealt and the ones we'll be playing for the rest of our lives. If anything, it seems, our vocabulary atrophies over time, and all those historic dates and places that were branded on our brains the night before the 12th-grade history final gradually fade away. There was something hugely satisfying, then, about finding out that, with a little diligence and direction, I had been able not only to vastly expand my vocabulary and build a mental store of facts that I was able to tap readily, but also to make myself a better *thinker*. I saw nuances in language I'd never appreciated before, I savored witticisms that I might not have even understood in the past, and I became adept at considering information from a multitude of angles, identifying possibilities and patterns with an ease that I'd never previously sensed in myself. It was exciting, because this meant that anyone could learn these skills, that everyone has the potential to

sharpen his or her mind without needing to take out a student loan and go back to college.

Later in his career Stanley Newman would get a chance to avenge his treatment by the magisterial [\(1\)](#) Mr. Eugene Maleska. Ah, revenge can be sweet. Even if the offending party, who called Stanley a "pipsqueak" is dead.

[page 46] One of the ironies of my working as Random House's crossword editor-in-chief and publisher: I was now in charge of *New York Times* crossword collections edited by one Eugene T. Maleska. He had passed away the same year that I started at the company, so Maleska didn't have to endure the indignity of taking calls from the pipsqueak. But his *Times* puzzle books were still in print, and when new editions came out, I was in effect editing Maleska's work in the form in which they would be seen for years to come. The phrase "spinning in his grave" was invented for situations like that.

It was a breath of fresh air to hear a writer praising the pun as Stanley does in this next passage. Puns are fun, they show a lively wit, and only overused ones deserve to be groaned at, but few people understand this distinction and bemoan any appearance of a pun, groaning as if it were obligatory, as if it were required by Robert's Rules of Order, or Emily Post's Rules of Etiquette. Such people live in a drab world, no doubt, as, to my way of thinking, eschewing a delightful pun its applause is the handiwork of mean-spirited pundits. Anyone who catches themselves saying "Aw" to a pun in a crossword puzzle should know that they're paying homage to the originator of the puzzle form, Arthur Wynne. Thanks to Arthur, thanks to all crossword creators who love puns. And my thanks to Stanley for having as little respect for so-called "conventional wisdom" as I do.

[page 46, 47] I know, I know, puns get a bad press in many quarters, but in the crossword world we love' em. The more outrageous the better. Besides, are puns really so terrible as a genre of humor? They mean no harm, they're intended purely to amuse, and they reflect the pun-maker's affection for the language. I sometimes get the feeling that puns have been unfairly maligned by people *who simply don't get them*, and that this anti-pun faction has complained so publicly for so long that it has become conventional wisdom to believe that all puns are bad puns, and that all pun-makers are unfunny bores. To admit that you like puns is to risk having the world think that you, too, are an unfunny bore. I suspect that many people harbor a secret shame, feeling constrained to groan about "bad" puns when they're around others, even though, deep down, they're tickled to death. To them I say: Don't be ashamed, don't be a sheep — the crossword world will accept ewe.

In his List of 100 Essential Words every crossworder needs to know, I found several which I was unfamiliar with (thanks, Stanley!), and a couple of clues to which I had something to add:

[page 76] ETTA — Kett of comics; Sundance Kid's girlfriend [ADD: Etta James, noted blues singer]

[page 78] REO — Classic Car; ___ Speedwagon [ADD: Auto pioneer Ransom E. Olds who gave his initials to the REO and later to the Oldsmobile]

What better news could Stanley give crossworders than to reveal that the practice of their fun and challenging craft could lengthen the number of years they would have available of clear thinking and doing crosswords? Was Stanley delighted to find this out?

[page 93] Actually, I was beyond delighted; I was ecstatic, because the studies were conducted with a very particular purpose in mind: To see if exercising the mind diminishes the likelihood of developing Alzheimer's disease or senile dementia. The

answer was an emphatic yes.

Have just finished reading and reviewing Ellen Langer's fine book, [Counterclockwise](#), which shows how thinking and striving as one did in one's youth helps keep a person healthy, I was certainly amenable to the idea that working crosswords, or playing other games or puzzles, could keep one's mind in fine shape, but here are some statistics from actual studies:

[page 93, 94] Two studies were particularly striking. One, from researchers at Case Western University and published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* in 2001, showed that adults who pursued intellectually stimulating games and hobbies were 2.5 times less likely to develop Alzheimer's than those who didn't. In 2003, researchers at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine of Yeshiva University in New York reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* on a 21-year study of 469 men and women, with similar results. Participants in the upper third of the cognitive-activity scale (doing crossword puzzles regularly, reading, playing a musical instrument, etc.) were 63 percent less likely to develop dementia than those in the lowest third. And the more crossword-solving the better: Working on the puzzles four days a week instead of once a week decreased the dementia risk by 47 percent. (Subsequent studies have confirmed these sorts of findings.)

Chapter Five, "Pulling Back the Curtain: The Hidden Rules of the Grid" was one of my favorite parts of the book. I wanted to rename it, in Shakespearean fashion, "Quick — Behind the Arras!" — the arras being a heavy curtain often hiding an alcove behind which folks could hide to eavesdrop or spring out unexpectedly to surprise someone. Like the surprise when one discovers the theme of the puzzle which might be a series of phrases like HIT THE BALL, RUN THE BASES, and CATCH A FLY. Solving the first one makes one think of baseball phrases and the second and third phrases quickly fall into place in the fill.

[page 97, 98] It's essential to understand how constructors arrive at themes for their puzzles, because once you've discovered a puzzle's theme and are madly scribbling down the answers, it starts a cascade of solutions throughout the puzzle. For many solvers, the moment when a puzzle's theme reveals itself is a minor miracle, like a bit of magic where a thoroughly scissored dollar bill suddenly comes together into a whole. It can seem as if constructors tap almost any source for themes, but a fairly strict set of rules governs their selection. Knowing these rules in advance can save you from taking a stab at solving theme answers using an approach that, by definition, is fated not to work. For starters, a good crossword puzzle is not going to use theme answers that involve repetition of the same word (SEARS TOWER, EIFFEL TOWER, LEANING TOWER). Some editors allow this duplication — but like I said, a good puzzle won't use it, and I'm the arbiter of what's good in my little fiefdom. Filling in answers of the TOWER - TOWER - TOWER variety starts to feel like rote work instead of fun.

Good advice, and it brings up another aspect of crossword solving, time-binding. A crossword puzzle is bound into the world at the time of its creation. For example, the well-known Sears Tower has been renamed the Willis Tower and yet puzzles may exist for years out there which call for Sears Tower as a fill. The date of a crossword puzzle is a key element in its solution in many cases.

This next example, in which Stanley shows how the use of repetition is encouraged, might be called "Stanley finds ANTS in the pen."

[page 98, 99] That's not to say that I ban any use of the same word more than once in a puzzle theme. But it's gotta show some spark. I recently received a puzzle submission that uses the word ANT over and over again in its theme and is going to be a terrific crossword. What, you might ask, is so interesting about using a humble three-letter word? In this case, the three letters are buried in each answer-and not only that, each answer is a city: MORGANTOWN, SAN ANTONIO, etc. It reminds me of a recent puzzle that has become a favorite of mine. It was entitled "Split Pea," but the theme had nothing to do with soup. The beginning and endings of the theme answers were. . . well, you figure it out: PICNIC AREA, PETER FONDA, PERESTROIKA. I particularly liked this because the PEA was split in different ways, sometimes the P at the start, and the EA at the end, or a PE and then the A.

The "Split Pea" puzzle was made by Fred Piscop, the friend from my word-game group who went on to become the editor of the Washington Post's Sunday puzzle. The other one, with the hidden ANTs, was made by a constructor who's not going anywhere, as far as I know: He's an inmate of the Florida state penitentiary system. I can't put a number on it, but a healthy portion of crossword puzzles published in America are created by constructors who are "guests of the state," as the saying goes. It's not surprising, when you think about it. These guys have plenty of time on their hands, obviously, plus convicts are perhaps the only people around to whom the fifty bucks or so that they'd receive for their hours of labor actually looks like a handsome reward. When you're making eight cents an hour working in the prison machine shop, or whatever it is prisoners are paid, a double-digit check is a godsend.

The idea that the crossword puzzle you'll be working on tomorrow morning may have been written by a convict may give you PAWS, but should not deter you unless you've already had your FILL of crosswords. If so, peace be with you. Silence. The rest of us are working on our latest SPLIT PEA SOUP.

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----- *Footnotes* -----

Footnote 1. Another practice I use assiduously is to look up words which I pull out of some unknown origin that I feel I know the meaning of but am not sure exactly what the definition is. This is especially important because, although I have a competent copy-editor, I have no editor who reviews my work. Here's what I found in my Cassel's Concise Dictionary for *magisterial* — *authoritative, commanding, of or relating to a magistrate or a master, dictatorial, domineering*. Could there be a better one-word adjective to pin Maleska to the Crossword Hall of Infamy?

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