



43 Down. Go for a wok? (7 letters)

People find all kinds of ways to spend time these days. At least they certainly do look busy. Consider all those travelers with their cell phones in the airport. They are on the phone from the moment they have checked in until the cabin door closes and the flight attendant informs them they have to shut down. At the other end of the flight the plane becomes, as one writer put it, “one large tubular telephone lounge.”

I don’t have a cell phone and, for me at least, it is very liberating. I am not instantaneously available to anyone, so that should give me all kinds of free time. To a point, it does. But it really depends on the day of the week. You see, I do crossword puzzles. Or to be more precise, I do the *New York Times* crossword puzzle.

Most crossword puzzles found in local papers are no different from any others. They may be a bit harder or easier, but they present no sense of an interested author behind the grid. To me, the worst puzzle that I solve on a regular basis is the one in *USA Today*. (This is done only in desperation, when I cannot get to the *Times* that day!) Despite the fact that each puzzle has a theme, clues, and answers, the *USA Today* offerings feel like an elementary English teacher constructs them.

Why the distinction? For one thing, the *Times* publishes crossword puzzles progressively more difficult through the week. The Monday puzzle is relatively easy, whereas the Saturday puzzle is very difficult, but not impossible. On Sunday, the puzzle published in the *New York Times Magazine* is moderately difficult, but it is nearly twice as large as the others. In addition to the increasing difficulty throughout the week, the puzzles contain a measure of personality given them by their authors and the editor of the *Times* puzzles, Will Shortz. It wouldn’t seem that a 15×15 grid of black and white squares with 80-odd clues (definitions) could possess anything in the way of character, but they do. There is in the clues, in the answers, in the approach to the way the answers are laid out a sense of humor, earnestness, and challenge missing from almost any other crossword puzzle you can find.

Although not true for all puzzles, most puzzles have a theme or thread. It can be anything from the motion pic-

tures of Marlon Brando on his birthday to a number of answers that are connected by some rhyme or reason. Sometimes, it will be a quotation spread out over several clues. In all cases, there is a playfulness that goes beyond the puns and multiple meanings.

Why do I do it? What makes me spend anywhere from 6 minutes to 2 hours a day working to solve a puzzle, whose answers will be available the next day? The key is the infinitive, “to solve.” A crossword puzzle is one of the very few situations in this world where you are given a problem to analyze, organize, theorize (“Hmm, that can’t be right to have three vowels together!”), and solve. It is, for the most part, manageable compared to the optical engineering problems we face. The puzzle is finite in size and definite in resolution. In addition, the puzzle is overdetermined. That is, theoretically you could solve the puzzle by solving all of the Across clues without reference to the Down clues. But it is the interplay of the two-dimensional arrangement of clues and answers that provides a sense of engagement.

Although the *Times* is distributed widely in the United States, it is still not an item that is easily obtained unless you subscribe to the *Times* or pass a newsstand every day. Outside the U.S., the puzzle appears in the *International Herald-Tribune*. But the easiest way to obtain the puzzle is on the Web. For the grand sum of \$19.95 you can get the puzzles for a year. Until recently it only cost half that much. But, considering that my daily fix now costs me about 6 cents a day instead of 3 cents, I can live with the 100% inflation. The puzzle can be done on the computer or printed out and done at your leisure with a morning cup of coffee at hand.

When I started to do the *Times* puzzles on the Web several years ago, I used to use my browser and a search engine to find a few answers. Some would consider that cheating, but my philosophy was that if you didn’t know the answer, you might as well look it up. Recently my use of Web search engines has dropped. I find that because the puzzle is overdetermined, many of the answers that I looked up in the past can be figured out from the perpendicular answers without recourse to Google.com or Yahoo.com.

When I tell someone about my passion for crossword puzzles, they tend to think that I do it to build my vocabu-

lary. At my age, not really. The selection of many words is constrained by the need to fit them together in the grid, so a lot of odd words show up on a regular basis. (Antique car: REO; Nabisco snack: OREO; Sicilian volcano: ETNA; Poetic muse: ERATO). So, what good is it? Well, besides being a lot of fun, it is a form of mental exercise. It asks me to stretch my mind; to think differently; to consider things I might never otherwise think about—

such as rap music, Greek mythology, geography, foreign languages, and all the alternative definitions and puns for a word or phrase.

Oh, yes. The clue that serves as the title for this piece: Go for a wok? STIRFRY.

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