

THE CROSS WORD CENTURY



100 YEARS OF
WITTY WORDPLAY,
INGENIOUS PUZZLES,
AND LINGUISTIC MISCHIEF

ALAN CONNOR

THE CROSSWORD CENTURY

100 YEARS OF WITTY WORDPLAY,
INGENIOUS PUZZLES, AND
LINGUISTIC MISCHIEF

ALAN CONNOR



G O T H A M B O O K S

GOTHAM BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) LLC
375 Hudson Street
New York, New York 10014



USA | Canada | UK | Ireland | Australia | New Zealand | India | South Africa | China

penguin.com

A Penguin Random House Company

Copyright © 2014 by Alan Connor

Photograph Credits

Page 54, top: Reprinted with permission from Editions Fayard

Page 54, bottom: Reprinted with permission from David R. Godine

Page 66: Courtesy of Jeremiah Farrell

Page 110: © ITV Global/The Kobal Collection

Page 170: Courtesy of Calendar Puzzles

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Gotham Books and the skyscraper logo are trademarks of Penguin Group (USA) LLC.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOGING-IN-PUBLICATION DATA

Connor, Alan.

The crossword century : 100 years of witty wordplay, ingenious puzzles, and linguistic mischief / Alan Connor.

pages cm

Includes index.

eBook ISBN 978-0-698-15701-9

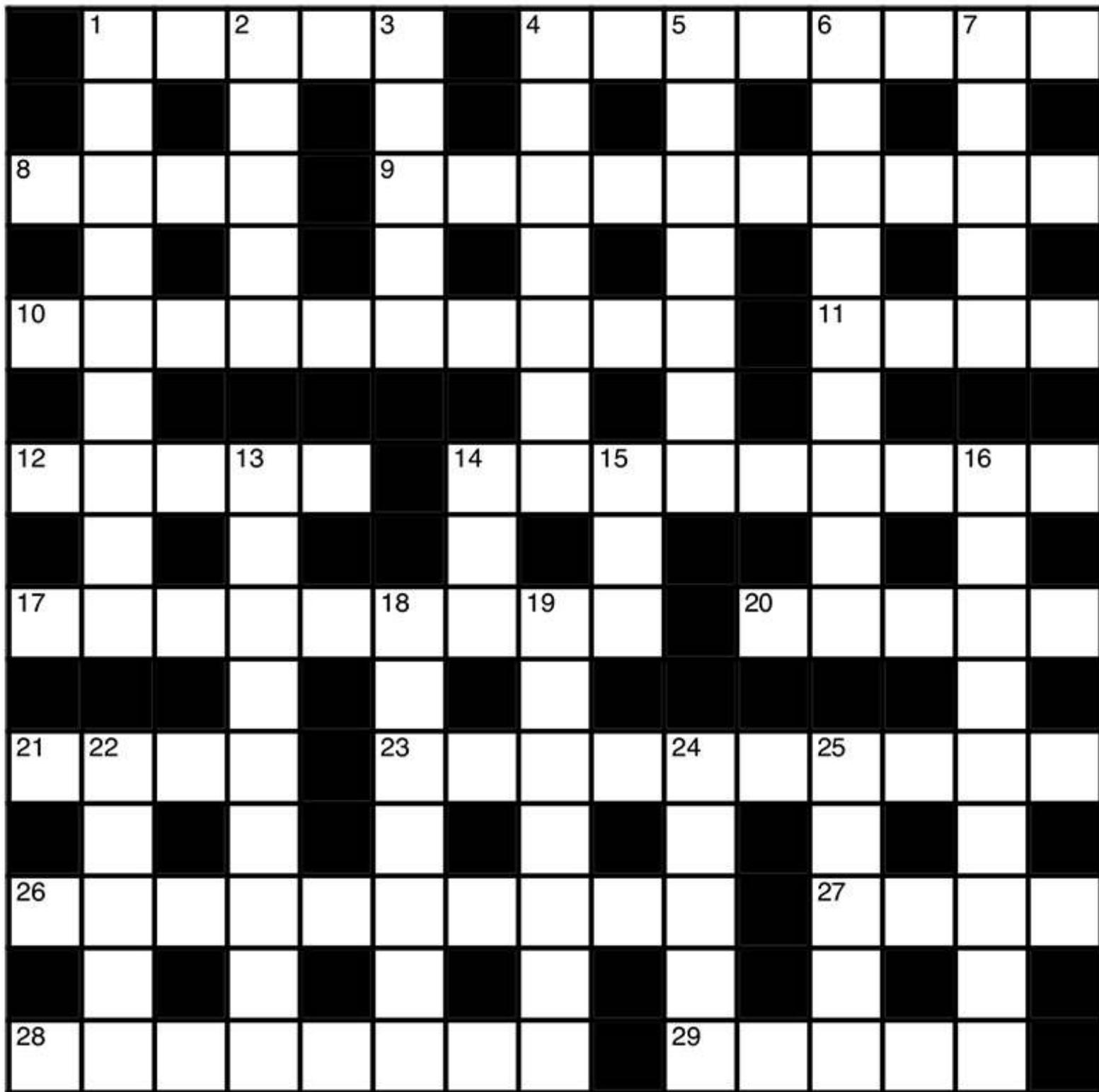
1. Crossword puzzles—History. I. Title.

GV1507.C7C544 2014

793.73'2—dc23 2014002612

While the author has made every effort to provide accurate telephone numbers, Internet addresses, and other contact information at the time of publication, neither the publisher nor the author assumes any responsibility for errors or for changes that occur after publication. Further, the publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

Version_1



Puzzle by Brendan Emmett Quigg

ACROSS

- 1 Rewrite items in New York newspaper (5)
- 4 Crossword dictionary rooms (8)
- 8 Cycles back to video game company (4)
- 9 Revolutionary force almost mad at infamous Spanish torturer (10)

- 10 West of Italy's capital, politico Sarah (Democrat) with mom or dad (10)
-
- 11 Name in the middle of caricatures! (4)
- 12 Get up around noon and gargle (5)
- 14 British dirty old man by the French yard where the Enigma code was broken (9)
- 17 Swung a fist (missing the head) getting a wallop in and split (9)
- 20 Crossword inventor's success in speech (5)
- 21 Yours truly and an alien come face-to-face (4)
- 23 Puzzle dragged on, enveloping confused Republican squad (4, 6)
- 26 Puzzle editor to be paid to sell imperfections to the Reverend (4, 6)
- 27 Excellent shot goes out (4)
- 28 Mandator meandering without rhyme or reason (2, 6)
- 29 Highly polished Southern rock guitar line (5)

DOWN

- 1 First off, NPR venue covers brooding one for left-leaning magazine (3, 6)
- 2 Note a Michigan city for snowbirds (5)
- 3 Overstuffed engagements after switching first and last (5)
- 4 Lewis who wrote Christmas song for audition (7)
- 5 Most intense Western Indians appear in part of play (7)
- 6 Every nine weeks: BLT, hominy, bananas (9)
- 7 "Way cool, using deadly gas!" (5)
- 13 Tiny amount of interest in Lily-like flower (9)
- 14 Pedestrian left out nuts (3)
- 15 After the face off, bow to pressure and then stop (3)
- 16 Hungarian puzzle maker and I broke urn, sadly (4, 5)
- 18 Mob lacking resistance around her bovine abode (7)
- 19 Accidentally murder a contributor to the *Listener*? (7)
- 22 Cited wrong statute (5)
- 24 Takes a direction from forces for kings and queens, say (5)
- 25 Selection of charcuterie for child development centers? (5)

**** Solution to this puzzle can be found after the Index at the end of this text.**

FOR LUCY

CONTENTS

[Title Page](#)
[Copyright](#)
[Puzzle](#)
[Dedication](#)
[INTRODUCTION](#)

PART ONE [ACROSS](#)

[GENESIS](#)
[FAD](#)
[JARGON](#)
[ANCESTORS](#)
[NINA](#)
[FAIR](#)
[WICKED](#)
[ALAMO](#)
[AUTHORSHIP](#)
[TRANSLATION](#)
[CANT](#)
[NEWS](#)
[SPOONER](#)
[SONDHEIM](#)
[CRYPTIC](#)

PART TWO [DOWN](#)

[DOUBLE-CROSSING](#)

[GAGA](#)

[FAST](#)

[ADDICTION](#)

[DUAL](#)

[PROGRAM](#)

[INTELLIGENCE](#)

[GUMSHOE](#)

[SIMPSON](#)

[BUG](#)

[PLUM](#)

[A-LIST](#)

[FUTURE](#)

[IMPLEMENT](#)

[RESOURCES](#)

[ACKNOWLEDGMENTS](#)

[INDEX](#)

[PUZZLE SOLUTION](#)

INTRODUCTION

This is a book about having FUN with words. And if you're wondering why that word is in capital letters, all will become clear.

And it's a very particular form of fun with words: one that involves jumbling and tumbling them into eye-pleasingly symmetrical patterns and making riddles, jokes, and poetry in the form of crossword clues. A love of crosswords is also a love of language—albeit a love that enjoys seeing the object of its affections toyed with, tickled, and flipped upside down.

Crossword puzzles are a silly, playful way of taking English and making it into a game. They have been doing so since December 21, 1913, when the world's first crossword appeared—although lovers of language had been deriving pleasure from wordplay long before then, of course. However, it was the crossword that came to supersede all other puzzles. It has become a cornerstone of almost all newspapers and, for many, a fondly anticipated daily appointment.

The crossword today looks quite different than that first puzzle—or that should perhaps read “crosswords today” so as to encompass the baroque creations seen in Sunday papers, the strange mutant British form known as the cryptic, and all of the themed and jokey variants on offer on any given day.

What they have in common is the pleasure of identifying what the constructor is asking for and seeing the answers mesh with one another until the puzzle is finished. For a century, the worker has whiled away journeys and parents have passed on tips and tricks in the hope that each grid tackled will be correctly filled.

In *The Crossword Century*, we'll be looking at the playfulness, the humor, and the frustration of the crossword in all its forms, and how the world of the puzzle has overlapped with espionage and humor, current affairs and literature. We'll see fictional crossword encounters, from *The West Wing* to *The Simpsons*, and we'll see crosswords from the real world: the one that seemed to predict the outcome of a presidential election and the ones that appeared to be giving away the secrets of the Second World War.

We'll look at how clues tantalize those who are addicted to puzzles by sending the solver on wild goose chases, by being sweetly silly and soberly serious, and by stubbornly withholding their real meanings until the penny drops.

And we ask questions about the experience of solving: Why do some people try to finish crosswords as quickly as possible? Can computers crack clues? And does puzzling really stave off dementia?

As for how to read this book, please feel free to treat it like a puzzle. That is to say, you can start at 1 across and work sequentially, or you can dive in and out and follow your instincts. The chapters

are in two sections: The ACROSS entries look at the creation of puzzles and the strange things that can go on within clues and grids, while the DOWNS describe what happens to the crossword once it escapes into the world and meets its solvers.

Like the British man who created the first crossword in New York, we'll be crossing the Atlantic Ocean—a few times, in fact—and I humbly hope that along the way I might persuade you that the baffling-looking British cryptic is a lot more enjoyable than legend has it.

Are you ready for FUN?

PART ONE

ACROSS

GENESIS

How the crossword first appeared in 1913 and became an overnight sensation in 1924

Newsday's crossword editor puts it best. "Liverpool's two greatest gifts to the world of popular culture," writes Stanley Newman, "are the Beatles and Arthur Wynne."

The comparison with the Beatles is on the money—or, to use a more British locution, spot-on. Like the music of the Fab Four, the crossword is a global phenomenon that is at once American and British. But while the Beatles are known wherever recorded music is played, Arthur Wynne's name remains unspoken by almost all. Who was he?

Well, he wasn't the Lennon or the McCartney of crosswords; we'll meet them soon enough. He was perhaps crosswords' Fats Domino: a pioneer who would see his innovation taken by others to strange, often baroque mutant forms and variants.

Not that this was how Wynne saw his career playing out when he became one of the forty million people who emigrated from Europe between 1830 and 1930, and one of the nine million heading from Liverpool for the New World during that same period.

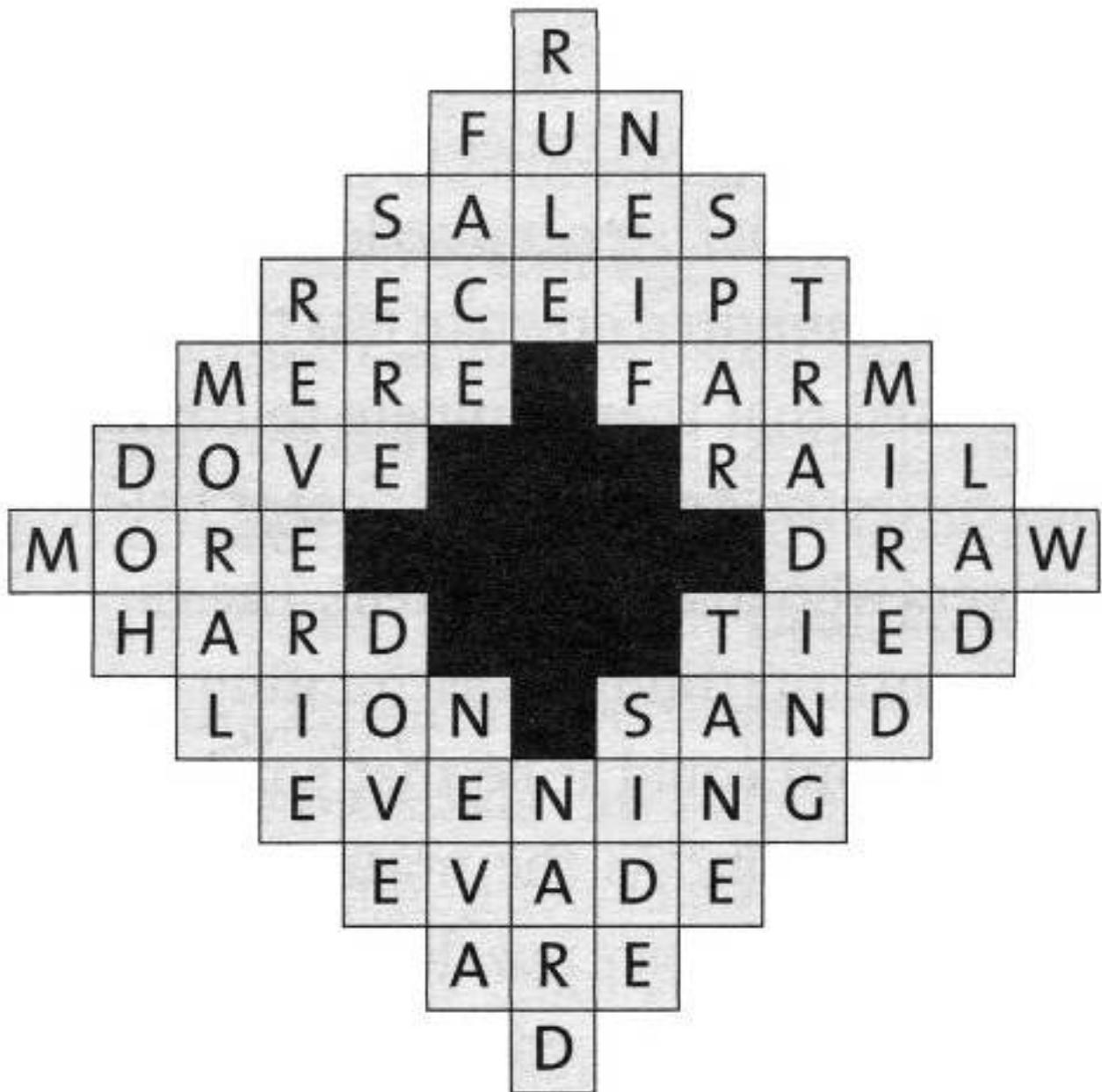
The son of the editor of *The Liverpool Mercury*, Wynne was—at least initially, and in his own mind—a journalist. He spent most of his newspaper career working for the empire of print mogul William Randolph Hearst. His legacy, though, was not a piece of reporting, and it appeared in the *New York World*, a Democrat-supporting daily published by Hearst's rival, Joseph Pulitzer.

As a kind of precursor to the *New York Post*, *The World* mixed sensation with investigation, and it was Wynne's job to add puzzles to the jokes and cartoons for "Fun," the Sunday magazine section. He had messed around with tried-and-tested formats: word searches, mazes, anagrams, rebuses.

Another available template was something called the word square, which we will look at in more detail in a later chapter. It takes up space, a very desirable property if you're in charge of "Fun." It asks the reader to think of answers. But it's very limited. Imagine a crossword in which each answer appears twice in the grid: once as an across and again as a down. Very pleasing in terms of visual symmetry—whether foursquare square or tilted, as word squares often were, to make a diamond—but there are only so many words that fit with one another in this way.

It's also a less demanding challenge for the solver: In a four-by-four word square, say, as soon as the first four-letter word goes in, once across and once down, the grid is 44 percent filled.

For the Christmas edition of the *New York World* on Sunday, December 21, 1913, Wynne tried something new. What if the entries read differently across and down? And so, without fanfare, this:



Fill in the small squares with words which agree with the following definitions.

- | | |
|--------|-----------------------------|
| 2-3. | What bargain hunters enjoy. |
| 6-22. | What we all should be. |
| 4-5. | A written acknowledgment. |
| 4-26. | A day dream. |
| 6-7. | Such and nothing more. |
| 2-11. | A talon. |
| 10-11. | A bird. |
| 19-28. | A pigeon. |
| 14-15. | Opposed to less. |
| F-7. | Part of your head. |
| 18-19. | What this puzzle is. |
| 23-30. | A river in Russia. |
| 22-23. | An animal of prey. |
| 1-32. | To govern. |
| 26-27. | The close of a day. |

33-34.	An aromatic plant.
28-29.	To elude.
N-8.	A fist.
30-31.	The plural of is.
24-31.	To agree with.
8-9.	To cultivate.
3-12.	Part of a ship.
12-13.	A bar of wood or iron.
20-29.	One.
16-17.	What artists learn to do.
5-27.	Exchanging.
20-21.	Fastened.
9-25.	To sink in mud.
24-25.	Found on the seashore.
13-21.	A boy.
10-18.	The fiber of the gomuti palm.

The answers are in the Resources section at the end of this book. Puzzles nowadays don't come with an instruction to "fill in the small squares" and would be more likely to clue DOH with a reference to Homer Simpson than by "Fiber of the gomuti palm," but it's recognizably a crossword. Or, rather, a "Word-Cross." Wynne's name is just as good a way of describing the pastime as the more familiar version, but a typographical anomaly two weeks later offered the alternative "Find the Missing Cross Words." The following week's heading announced a "Cross-Word Puzzle," and that's the version that stuck. It was to be some decades later that the name decisively shed its fussy capitals and sporadic hyphen.

It includes one answer twice (DOVE), and the clue for MIREN is—what's a polite word here?—misleading, but there it is: a new thing in the world. The most important thing about the first puzzle is that big "FUN" across the second row. It might have been there because it was the name of the Sunday supplement, but it also served as a manifesto for crosswording. Individual puzzles may or may not be edifying, challenging, or distracting, but they must always be fun. After all, nobody is forcing solvers to look at them.

The second most important thing is the squares. The crossword's antecedent, the double acrostic (again, see below), tended to offer only the clues: The solver put the answers together in his or her head, or found somewhere to write the letters. But twentieth-century printing technology made it easier to offer a grid depiction of the problem that was both clearer and more enticing, the little boxes staring up from the newsprint, begging to be filled.

The prewar period was one of linguistic innovation and reinvention. We will look at spoonerisms below. This was also a world that saw innovations with language: entirely new creations, such as the artificial languages Esperanto and Ido, and different means of conveying words, such as developments in stenography. And then there was the crossword, which broke up language into abstract units for reassembly: Rising newspaper sales and the age of mechanical reproduction helped to make the puzzle the most widely disseminated way of messing around with words. Even with the reader-compiled puzzles that occasionally took the place of Wynne's in *The World*, though, it remained only a weekly phenomenon, and for the first ten years of its life it existed exclusively as an American phenomenon—indeed, it existed solely within the pages of that one newspaper. The puzzle had its devotees, but nobody spotted its potential until the faddish twenties arrived.

It became known to millions more in that decade when it started appearing outside *The World*—and not in other papers but in books. On January 2, 1924, the aspiring publisher Dick Simon went for supper with his aunt Wixie, who asked him where she could get a book of Cross-Words for a niece who had become addicted to the puzzles in *The World*. Simon mentioned the query to his would-be business partner, Lincoln Schuster, and they discovered that no such book existed.

On the one hand, this was good news: They had formed a publishing company but so far had no manuscripts to publish. On the other, their aspirations for Simon & Schuster were considerably higher than a collection of trivia(1) puzzles. The compromise was a corporate alias named after their telephone exchange: Plaza Publishing.

The next difficulty was getting the puzzles. As a first step Simon and Schuster approached not Wynne but one of his subordinates. Margaret Petherbridge had been appointed as a subeditor by *The World* in 1920; being both young and a woman, she was assigned the suitably lowly task of fact-checking the crosswords to try to reduce the volume of letters of complaint (of which more later), and now found her intended career in journalism permanently on hold.

Petherbridge was offered an advance of \$25 to assemble enough puzzles for a book. Simon and Schuster decided to attach a sharpened pencil to every copy, priced it at \$1.35, and spent their remaining prelaunch money on a one-inch ad in the *New York World*. Their campaign pushed the idea that the crossword was the Next Big Thing:

1921—*Coué*

1922—*Mah Jong*

1923—*Bananas*

1924—*THE CROSS WORD PUZZLE BOOK*

Long-shot business ventures rarely end well—the typical results are penury and shame. But the stories of failure are not often told, and this is not one of them. This is one of those familiar but wholly anomalous stories of unlikely triumph—where a bookseller friend of Simon buys twenty-five copies as a gesture of friendship but has to order thousands more; where *The World*'s top columnist, Franklin P. Adams, had predicted that Simon and Schuster would “lose their shirts,” only to start a piece four months later with the announcement: “Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! Hooray! *The Cross-Word Puzzle Book* is out today.”

It is also a story where:

- each of the four collections published that year topped the nonfiction bestseller list
- the second edition, priced at a more modest 25¢, received from the keenest of the distributors an order for 250,000 copies—then unprecedented in book publishing
- Simon & Schuster's crossword compilations became the longest continuously published book series

It was the making of one of the major world publishers, and as rival firms produced their own puzzle series, it was excellent news for publishing in general—especially as, unlike pesky authors producing books of fiction or non-, crossword constructors would work for little or even no pay. The

only downside for publishers was a side effect of the fierce competition: In case of low sales, Simon & Schuster offered to take back unsold crossword collections from bookshops, thereby instigating the practice of “returns,” very beneficial to megachains but increasing the element of risk for publishers ever since.

It was also the making of the crossword. The most intense interest in crosswords ever was in midtwenties America, and was largely centered on books of puzzles. It was only later that the newspaper reclaimed its status as the default home of the crossword. However, perhaps even more important than the number of solvers solving was the way the form matured. In 1926 Margaret Petherbridge had taken the name Farrar following her marriage to John C. Farrar, founder of another publishing giant, Farrar, Straus and Giroux. As Margaret Farrar, she tidied up the messy conventions of crosswording: She may have become involved with puzzling by chance, but she thought deeply and effectively about what made one crossword better than another.

Modern-day solvers (or “solutionists,” as they were sometimes described in the twenties) baffled by Wynne’s system for numbering clues have Farrar to thank for the cleaner “1 across” format, saving them, across a lifetime of solving, hours lost to tracing and connecting “F,” say, to “7.” Her preference for answers of at least three letters makes for a more satisfying experience, and the aesthetics she proposed for the grid are now characteristic of all puzzles (with the exception of some of the more willfully experimental examples we will meet along the way in this book).

Margaret Farrar’s parameters for an aesthetically pleasing grid are symmetry, a minimum letter-count of three in answers, and “all-over interlock”—in layman’s speak, the grid does not have separate sections and the solver can travel from any part of it to another.

Farrar’s ingenuity was finally rewarded in 1942 when she became *The New York Times*’s first crossword editor. Wynne had quietly retired in 1918 and died in Clearwater, Florida, in 1945. When the first crosswords appeared, he had wished to patent the format. Lacking the necessary funds for the process, however, he asked *The World* to contribute and was told by business manager F. D. White and assistant manager F. D. Carruthers that “it was just one of those puzzle fads that people would get tired of within six months.” In 1925, he did, however, obtain a patent for “an improvement or variation of the well-known cross word puzzle” in which the cells formed a kind of rhombus. Sadly, for him, it never took off.

Yet we crossword lovers should be very glad that Wynne failed to “own” the crossword. Even if such a claim were enforceable, given the puzzle’s obvious debt to earlier diversions, it is precisely the freedom of the format and the deviations from its original structure that have made crosswords such a rich format and such a satisfying pastime. Had the crossword been patented, it would indeed have been quickly forgotten and filed under “obsolete wordplay,” between the cleriheh and the cryptarithm.

(The cleriheh, by the by, was a form of comic verse that contained the name of a well-known person. And the cryptarithm, also known as the alphametic, was a mathematical puzzle in which an arithmetical proposition has its numbers replaced by letters. Neither, so far as I know, ever achieved sufficient popularity to be rendered in the form of cookies, earrings, or novelty songs. Unlike . . .)

FAD

How Americans celebrated the crossword—but the British were not so sure

In 1920s America, fads were quite the vogue. Flappers had the Charleston, the stock market had dangerous overspeculation, and it seemed that everyone had the crossword. The very look of a crossword grid was, for a while, chic: Black-and-white squares adorned earrings, dresses, and collar pins, and it was reported that checked patterns in general had never been in such demand.

The most opulent manifestation of the craze was a Broadway revue, *Puzzles of 1925*, which features a scene in a crossword puzzle sanatorium filled with those driven to madness by clueing fever. Its lyrics echoed the papers' concern about home wrecking: "The house has gone to ruin / Since all that Mother's doin' / Is putting letters in the little squares." At the same time, various songwriters used crosswords as romantic analogy: "Cross Words Between My Sweetie and Me" by the Little Ramblers and "Crossword Mama You're Puzzling Me" by Papalia & His Orchestra, not to mention "Cross Word Papa (You Sure Puzzle Me)" by Josie Miles.

Crosswords began to appear in the most unlikely areas of public life: Puzzle competitions between Yale and Harvard were to be expected, perhaps less so those between New York's fire brigade and police department before packed houses at Wanamaker's Auditorium.

The church was not immune, as seen by witnesses of the celebrated incidence of the Reverend George McElveen of Pittsburgh, who rendered a sermon in the form of a puzzle and asked worshippers to solve the clues before the preaching began.

The British, too, caught on, though not without a fight from the nation's moral guardians. The first crossword in a British publication appeared quietly in February 1922, in *Pearson's Magazine*. More appeared over the next few years, but these tended to be found in books, not in newspapers. It was not just that the papers were slow to see the puzzle's appeal; they were actively hostile to the very notion of the crossword.

They warned nervous citizens of the damage this scourge was already doing to American citizens. In December 1924 an editorial in the *London Times* had the chilling headline AN ENSLAVED AMERICA. The crossword, it explained, "has grown from the pastime of a few ingenious idlers into a national institution: a menace because it is making devastating inroads on the working hours of every rank of society." Solvers could, it seemed, be seen "quite shamelessly" staring at their grids, morning, noon, and night . . .

...cudgeling their brains for a four-letter word meaning “molten rock” or a six-letter word meaning “idler,” or what not: in trains and trams, or omnibuses, in subways, in private offices and counting-rooms, in factories and homes, and even—although as yet rarely—with hymnals for camouflage, in church.

The choice of “idler” as an example of a clue is not, I suspect, an idle one. As with video games and recreational drugs, crosswords alarmed the self-appointed defenders of morality because people who are solving a crossword are simply enjoying themselves. Five million man-hours, warned the *London Times*’s New York correspondent, were being lost every day as workers forgot their duty to contribute to the gross national product, lost in the pure pleasure of finding synonyms.

And because of this, the *Tamworth Herald* reported in the same year, pernicious puzzles “have been known to break up homes.” This family wrecking comes about when husbands spend time solving a clue rather than earning a crust. The solution of one concerned policeman was to enforce on addicts a ration of three puzzles a day, with ten days’ imprisonment if a fourth was attempted.

In February 1925 the *London Times* announced that crosswords had, with “the speed of a meteorological depression,” crossed the Atlantic. “The nation still stands before the blast,” the paper thunders, “and no man can say it will stand erect again.” Prepare yourself for some mayhem.

“The damage caused to dictionaries in the library at Wimbledon by people doing cross-word puzzles,” we read later that year, “has been so great that the committee has withdrawn all the volumes.” Across the capital, in Willesden, it was the same sad story. Dulwich Library, meanwhile, started blacking out the white squares of crossword grids with a heavy pencil, “to prevent any one person from keeping a newspaper for more than a reasonable length of time.”

Those selfish paper-hogging solvers! Meanwhile, booksellers bemoaned falling sales of the novel—no longer itself considered a menace to society—in favor of “dictionaries, glossaries, dictionaries of synonyms, &c.” The *Nottingham Evening Post* went on:

The picture theaters are also complaining that cross-words keep people at home. They get immersed in a problem and forget all about Gloria Swanson, Lillian Gish, and the other stars of the film constellation.

And it gets worse. In another part of Nottingham—poor puzzle-blighted Nottingham—the zookeeper was swamped in correspondence. The reason? Crosswords, of course. He listed some of the inquiries that were keeping him from his animals:

What is a word of three letters meaning a female swan? What is a female kangaroo, or a fragile creature in six letters ending in TO?

(That would be PEN, DOE, and . . . I’m not sure. There’s a mackerel-like fish called the BONITO . . . ?) Meantime, across town at the theater, the stage was bare because one Mr. Matheson Lang, absorbed in a puzzle, had missed his entrance. “This caused him much chagrin,” reported the local press, “for he is extremely conscientious as regards his stage work.”

Who was safe from this funk? Surely the world of grocery was unblighted? Apparently not:

A girl asked a busy grocer to name the different brands of flour he kept. When he had

done so, expecting a sale, she said she didn't want to buy any. She just thought one of the names might fit into a cross-word puzzle she was doing.

Worrying stuff. Happily for society at large, the crossword was soon to find itself pursued by the law. Prizes had started appearing for puzzles—another symptom of the something-for-nothing culture tutted the *London Times*—along with a new variant on the crossword that would seem very unfamiliar to the solver of today.

By the end of 1926 the *News of the World*, *The People*, the *Daily Sketch*, and the *Sunday Graphic* were among the papers to print prize crosswords, which were not only “pay-to-play” but had multiple clues for which there was more than one correct answer.

The grids contained far more black squares than normal grids—the reason for which became clear when you reached a clue such as “You look forward to getting this when you are in hospital.” Solvers who hoped that their choice between BETTER and LETTER would be decided by a B or an L in another clue found that there was no such other clue. The crucial squares stood alone. If you did manage to complete the grid correctly, a prize was offered—but those ambiguities ensured that the number of “correct” entries for each puzzle would be tiny.

The immense popularity of these puzzles made them very lucrative for the syndicates and newspapers that created them, and court summons were issued by the police, who insisted that the puzzles were not crosswords at all but thinly disguised lotteries. A lawyer for the police argued at London’s top magistrates’ court that “the words are ridiculously easy, and a child of 12 should have no difficulty in solving them.” At times it seemed that the crossword itself was on trial: Thanks to the Betting and Lotteries Bill, it became literally as well as morally criminal.

However, the genuine crossword benefited in invidious comparison: As the judges shut down the lotteries, the puzzle survived. Indeed, the crossword was on the way to becoming respectable. The *London Telegraph* had started publishing one on July 30, 1925, and by the end of the decade, the *London Times* had started to wonder if these puzzles weren’t so bad after all. Or, in the words of BBC correspondent Martin Bell, whose father was the *London Times*’s first constructor, the paper “was losing circulation hand-over-fist to the *Telegraph* because the *Telegraph* had the new-fangled American fashion, the crossword, so the *Times* had to get one pretty sharpish.”

The motivation might have been financial and the about-face a tad hypocritical after all the scaremongering, but the appearance on February 1, 1930, of a puzzle in the paper with the slogan “To People take *The Times*” marked the crossword’s move to unambiguous respectability. Soon *The Spectator* and *The Listener* followed, and the British press began to rely on puzzles for a good, and indisputable, proportion of its newsstand sales, as some readers would buy a copy, have a bash at the crossword, then throw the paper away unread.

When that first constructor for the *London Times*, Adrian Bell, was told by his own father that he would be constructing puzzles, he replied, “But Father, I haven’t even solved a crossword puzzle,” only to be told, “Well, you’ve got just ten days to learn!” Bell learned fast and went on to write such well-loved clues as “Die of cold? (3,4)” and “Spoils of War (4).”

(Answers in the chapter FAIR. But first there is a whole new language to master . . .)

JARGON

The metaphors of the crossword puzzle

When the crossword first appeared, its mechanics were described in detail that is tediously verbose to today's solver. Indeed, Arthur Wynne did not speak of "grids" or even "clues" ("Fill in the small squares with words which agree with the following definitions") since the vocabulary of crosswording had yet to evolve.

Even "grid," in the sense of the lines on maps and diagrams, did not appear until the First World War, which means that it was not really available as a way of describing the layout of the first puzzle. And it's a grisly metaphor, too: The real-life gridiron was a lattice-shaped arrangement of metal bars useful for griddling food—or torturing people. But perhaps, if you're stuck on a Sunday afternoon with an especially tricky southeastern corner of your grid unfilled, the metaphor is apt.

There's another instrument of torture in the word "crossword" itself: the cross, from which we get the sense of going side to side denoted by "across." (Conversely, Old English speakers called a hill a "dúne" and used "of dúne" to refer to the direction you take when leaving the top of one; from this we got "down," a word still used to describe hills and slopes in some parts of the United Kingdom.)

Likewise analogous is "clue." In the fourteenth century, a clue was a ball of thread. Those balls are useful for finding your way out of mazes both literal (kudos, Theseus) and metaphorical: The Elizabethan poet Michael Drayton bemoaned "loosing the clew which led us safely in," leaving him "lost within this Labyrinth of lust." Later, you didn't need the maze as part of the metaphor, and might use the word in the context of detection: In Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone announces that "I have a clue to the identity of one, at least, of the men who broke my frames."

Finally, a crypt can be an underground hiding place or a vault in a church—or, if you're the subject of religious persecution, both simultaneously. Francis Bacon used "cryptic" as a noun to describe communication using secret methods; Agatha Christie used it as an adjective when the meaning of some words or behavior is not immediately apparent: a problem if you're trying to solve murder, but all part of the fun if the solving is of the puzzling kind.

(Before the crossword, there was another "cross"-sounding puzzle, though this one took its name from the Greek *ἄκρο*—meaning "extreme." Welcome to the crossword's forefather, the baffling double acrostic . . .)

ANCESTORS

The prehistory of wordplay

The double acrostic was a wholly respectable way of whiling away an evening in Victorian England—so respectable, and so Victorian, that those who were addicted to the puzzles claimed that Queen Victoria herself both solved and constructed them.

Here is one attributed to her majesty. It was supposedly a gift “for the royal children,” whose job as solvers was to give each clue an answer such that their first letters, read top to bottom, spelled out a place name, and the last letters, bottom to top, what that place was famous for:

- A city in Italy*
- A river in Germany*
- A town in the United States*
- A town in North America*
- A town in Holland*
- The Turkish name of Constantinople*
- A town in Bothnia*
- A city in Greece*
- A circle on the globe*

Got it yet?

- NapleS*
- ElbE*
- Washington*
- Cincinnati*
- AmsterdaM*
- StambouL*
- TorneA*
- LepantO*
- EcliptiC*

So, the first letters give us NEWCASTLE—not the city in Oklahoma, or any of the Newcastles in

Texas, Washington, and Wyoming, but the northern English city so famous for its COALMINES (to be found in the last letters) that the British expression “to carry coals to Newcastle” is shorthand for doing something unnecessary.

The apparent imprimatur of the sovereign may have helped to popularize the double acrostic, but her influence was as nothing compared to that of the age of mechanical reproduction. In the mid-nineteenth century, the puzzles began to appear in *The Illustrated London News*, constructed by the clergyman and humorist Cuthbert Bede, author of *The Adventures of Mr. Verdant Green*.

His double acrostics became a national craze. Marion Spielmann’s 1895 history of *Punch* tells how Bede received letters about his puzzles from all over the world, “forwarded to him in packets by rail.” In America, the convoluted acrostic was more of a poet’s game, as seen in the intricate creation of Edgar Allan Poe, but the puzzle variant would have been familiar to one Arthur Wynne when, in New York in 1913, he found himself in need of a new kind of puzzle.

The grip of the acrostic may be hard to credit today, when such wordplay appears seldom outside of the occasional British-style cryptic clue, but a story by Vladimir Nabokov hints at the revelatory power once possessed by this form of wordplay. In the final paragraph of 1951’s “The Vane Sisters,” the narrator unknowingly reveals that the two dead women of the title have been affecting his experiences, even leaving a message in acrostic form in his own writing. Nabokov wrote that this otherworldly device could “only be tried once in a thousand years of fiction,” but his choice of Sybil as the name for one of the Vanes makes a link that goes back to classical antiquity.

The first acrostics to bear the name were the prophecies of the Erythraean Sibyl, a prophetess who wrote verses on leaves that could be rearranged such that the initial letters conveyed some important message. They were, however, sometimes a little obscure. Acrostics create readability obstacles sometimes: troubles in comprehensibility.

The habit of leaving hidden messages in the first letters of verses can also be found in the Hebrew version of the Old Testament, Latin poems, and the runes of the Anglo-Saxon poet Cynewulf.

For none of these protopuzzlers was the acrostic merely a bit of fun. Leaving behind our everyday assumption that for any word or sentence there is a single, graspable sense involves accepting that there is an invisible sense—and before these were put there by other humans in the pursuit of entertainment, they were thought to be indicative of some more cosmic truths.

Take the simplest form of mucking about with words: the anagram. In the ancient world, if one word could be jumbled to make another, it was thought, there had to be a reason. Such was the thinking of many ancient prophets, who, writes the anthropologist Marcel Danesi, “were essentially anagrammatists who interpreted this heavenly form of language.” If anagrams were a means of obtaining information sent by a higher power, then being good at solving them made you a soothsayer.

If you could give the king a bunch of anagrams of the names of the members of his court, he might well think you’d found a way of revealing their innermost characters and intentions, and your prize for being good at jumbling letters would be gold.

What we think of nowadays as a “clue” was likewise a more potent challenge. When *The New York Times* uses “Big piece of crust?” to elicit CONTINENT, the intention is to describe the answer while appearing to depict something completely different. The legendary Sphinx did much the same when it demanded of its Greek victims: “Which creature walks on four legs in the morning, two legs in the afternoon, and three legs in the evening?”

The answer is MAN, who starts life crawling and ends up with a cane. The jeopardy was greater when the Sphinx asked you a question: You’d be strangled if you got it wrong, rather than leaving some gaps at 13 across; even Oedipus, who got it right, received as part of his prize marriage to a

woman who turned out to be his mother, so it was really a lose-lose proposition. But the sly humor is the same as that exhibited by today's constructors.

Those constructors need somewhere to put their clues, and for that, we need to look at the palindrome—the trick where a phrase reads the same backward as it does forward. Not easy to construct; so tricky, in fact, that it helped to be Lord of Evil Arts to manage it. Here's a pair of Satan's, cited by Étienne Tabourot in 1585:

*Signa, te Signa; temere me tangis et angis;
Roma tibi subito motibus ibit amor.*

This complaint is addressed to Saint Martin, who has ordered the devil to change into a donkey and carry him to Rome. It translates as “Cross, cross thyself; thou plaguest and vexest me without necessity; for, owing to my exertions, thou wilt soon reach Rome, the object of thy wishes.”

Terrifying. However, when they're not being hurled at you by the Prince of Darkness, multiword palindromes like the above can be giddily captivating.

And that urge to travel simultaneously in two directions predates Saint Martin. The same ROMA . . . AMOR palindrome has its most beautiful physical manifestation in Pompeii. There, those two words form part of a design that is the link between the palindrome and the crossword: the word square. Carved into the wall of the Domus Poppaeorum is:

<i>R</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>M</i>
<i>O</i>	<i>L</i>	<i>L</i>
<i>M</i>	<i>I</i>	<i>L</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>C</i>

What does it mean? Nobody knows. Perhaps the “Milo” lines are a tribute to the sixth-century-BCE athlete Milo of Croton, who could carry an adult ox on his shoulders. That's a guess. Whatever the significance of each component, there's no argument about the grace with which they fit together. Even more impressive is:

<i>S</i>	<i>A</i>	<i>T</i>
<i>A</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>T</i>	<i>E</i>	<i>N</i>
<i>O</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>E</i>
<i>R</i>	<i>O</i>	<i>T</i>

It's a palindrome all right, and this time it has a plausible meaning—“the sower, Arepo, skillfully guides the wheels”—that lends itself better than Roma, Milo, etc., to interpretation, particularly if you allow yourself a bit of wiggle room. If Arepo is God and the wheels are metaphorical, too, the square

would convey that the big guy upstairs has his eye on all of creation.

~~There are a few problems with this. One is that the God interpretation is wholly metaphorical and so equally valid would be any paraphrase where Someone skillfully does Something to Something Else. The second problem is that the canny Roman who devised the square may have invented the letter string AREPO to make the whole thing work, a compromise familiar to many constructors.~~

But to quibble is to miss the point. Like the anagram, the word square persisted as a source of fascination: If words could be made to fit together so well, the reason had to be a good one, and probably divine. Sure enough, if you stare at the Sator word square, truths reveal themselves: You can anagram the twenty-five letters into a plausible prayer, or find two instances of the first two words of the Lord's prayer, PATER NOSTER, crossing on the N.

And even if you don't see divine intervention, you have to marvel at the symmetry. Or, perhaps, see whether you can construct one yourself.

By the nineteenth and early twentieth century, various minds applied themselves to devising plausible squares of greater size. Word squares could be found in Victorian newspapers and magazines. Sometimes the letters were removed and readers provided with, effectively, a blank grid and clues for the words that ought to fill it. The word diamond was a popular variant, and it's not hard to see the tiny evolutionary leap from that type of puzzle to the first crossword, Arthur Wynne's "Word-Cross."

(Finding hidden messages, then, does not have to reveal the divine to be of value. Stripped of the metaphysics and rendered through Victorian mechanical reproduction, these devices still offer up the moment of revelation—but purely for fun. A little bit of magic, literally boxed up for daily consumption in the quotidian wrapping of newspaper. Though, of course, the secret messages are still there . . .)

sample content of The Crossword Century: 100 Years of Witty Wordplay, Ingenious Puzzles, and Linguistic Mischief

- [read Dyer Consequences \(Knitting Mystery, Book 5\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [Special Treatment in Auschwitz: Origin and Meaning of a Term \(Holocaust Handbooks\) pdf, azw \(kindle\)](#)
- [download online The Enneagram Made Easy: Discover the 9 Types of People](#)
- [read online The Practice of Soft Cheesemaking - A Guide to the Manufacture of Soft Cheese and the Preparation of Cream for the Market](#)
- [download online Apologize, Apologize!](#)
- [Essays on Immigration book](#)

- <http://omarnajmi.com/library/Dyer-Consequences--Knitting-Mystery--Book-5-.pdf>
- <http://omarnajmi.com/library/Improve-Your-Writing--6th-Edition-.pdf>
- <http://deltaphenomics.nl/?library/The-Enneagram-Made-Easy--Discover-the-9-Types-of-People.pdf>
- <http://nautickim.es/books/Theory-of-Prose.pdf>
- <http://reseauplatoparis.com/library/Frommer-s-France-2012--Frommer-s-Color-Complete-.pdf>
- <http://thewun.org/?library/Practical-Ruby-Gems.pdf>