



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

*Alan Connor*

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**A journalist and word aficionado salutes the 100-year history and pleasures of crossword puzzles**

Since its debut in *The New York World* on December 21, 1913, the crossword puzzle has enjoyed a rich and surprisingly lively existence. Alan Connor, a comic writer known for his exploration of all things crossword in *The Guardian*, covers every twist and turn: from the 1920s, when crosswords were considered a menace to productive society; to World War II, when they were used to recruit code breakers; to their starring role in a 2008 episode of *The Simpsons*.

He also profiles the colorful characters who make up the interesting and bizarre subculture of crossword constructors and competitive solvers, including Will Shortz, the iconic *New York Times* puzzle editor who created a crafty crossword that appeared to predict the outcome of a presidential election, and the legions of competitive puzzle solvers who descend on a Connecticut hotel each year in an attempt to be crowned the American puzzle-solving champion.

At a time when the printed word is in decline, Connor marvels at the crossword's seamless transition onto Kindles and iPads, keeping the puzzle one of America's favorite pastimes. He also explores the way the human brain processes crosswords versus computers that are largely stumped by clues that require wordplay or a simple grasp of humor.

A fascinating examination of our most beloved linguistic amusement—and filled with tantalizing crosswords and clues embedded in the text—*The Crossword Century* is sure to attract the attention of the readers who made *Word Freak* and *Just My Type* bestsellers.

## The Crossword Century: 100 Years of Witty Wordplay, Ingenious Puzzles, and Linguistic Mischief Details

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Author : Alan Connor

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**Puzzles, and Linguistic Mischief Alan Connor**

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## From Reader Review The Crossword Century: 100 Years of Witty Wordplay, Ingenious Puzzles, and Linguistic Mischief for online ebook

### Martin Wilson says

This book certainly would make a good present for a crossword-loving friend or family member. With its tasteful cover and erudite subject this is perfect for a coffee table. However, I also recommend reading it! It's good: well-written, fun and informative. It is also challenging - but it's up to you how challenging you want to make it. Some chapters I read quickly, others in detail - poring over sentences and not moving on until I understood them fully and had solved their clues. And there are lots of clues in this book. The table of contents is a crossword. Even the index contains clues! I was going to describe this as a 'concept' book, but that has a specific meaning in publishing, and this most certainly isn't a children's book.

The 'Preamble' says that the book is like solving a cryptic puzzle, and that you can read it in any order. This put me off at first as I am something of a traditionalist when it comes to reading a book - I like to start at the beginning and read each word in turn until I reach the end. In fact that's what I did, and I don't think I missed out by doing that. However I can see how some readers might want to pick-and-choose from the chapters- in particular, if you already know how to tackle cryptic clues then you might find some of the earlier chapters a bit suck-eggs-ish.

Which brings me on to a question I pondered while reading this book: is it aimed at a dabbler like me (think P.G. Wodehouse rather than M.R James) or a crossword aficionado? I think it is trying for both, and in my (dabbler's) opinion it succeeds. It is packed full of facts and anecdotes, told in a chatty, entertaining style. It seems meticulously researched - I doubt there's a crossword fact, or reference in history, politics or popular culture that Connor has missed.

Some sections are undoubtedly challenging for a dabbler, but then so are cryptic crosswords and if you don't like those you wouldn't be here.

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### Kathryn says

Full of fascinating historical information about the Crossword I never would have learned otherwise! Which is pretty much precisely why I bought it. I loved the gimmick of the chapter titles as well.

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### Darren says

A fascinating insight into the world of crosswords.

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### Heather says

What a great and interesting read. Thanks for the giveaway!

## Spencer says

This was a quick, fun book to read about crossword puzzles. I enjoy doing crossword puzzles when I have a chance, and this book shared the history of crosswords as well as many interesting facts/curiosities about them. This is a short book that can be read in a few minutes. Enjoyable and easy read.

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## Page Wench says

\*\*I won this book through the GoodReads First Reads program.\*\*

You don't need to be an avid crossword solver to enjoy this book. All you need is a healthy interest in wordplay and history. I have solved crossword puzzles off and on over the years but never caught the fever. I wanted to read this book because of my father's interest in this pastime. I thoroughly enjoyed learning the intricate quirks beyond the face value of filling in the squares as well as the history of the constructors and puzzle itself. Very well written with a lighthearted humor throughout. Very enjoyable!

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## Schopflin says

Lovely, funny and informative look at crosswords. Of interest to anyone who is interested in how games or wordplay work.

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## Antonomasia says

[3.5] A nice little collection of [mostly cryptic] crossword trivia. Whilst the book's name looks even dodgier if you've got a browser tab open with only the first three words showing, the US title is the considerably more sober *The Crossword Century*. Which, the author would point out, reflects differences between setters on respective sides of the pond: *The language of wordplay can be suggestive, even though the setter may with a straightish face insist that any lewdness is all in the solver's mind. The British setters, that is. American puzzles maintain an air of respectability and so eschew clues that fail the 'Sunday-morning-breakfast test'...Definitions can themselves evoke imagery loucher than the answer.* I wonder if they left out the paragraphs about the *Viz* crossword for the Yanks.

Given the repetition of the info about these national differences in early and final chapters, and a few other recurrences, I suspect the book is compiled from columns or blog posts. (The author writes the *Guardian's* crossword blog - I don't read it regularly.) It's less repetitive than some column-based books, so they've at least made some effort with the editing.

It's maybe ten years since I'd read other books on the history of crosswords, so I didn't mind hearing some points again, but there was sufficient new material to make *Two Girls* an interesting light non-fiction read. Connor has a more modern gossipy tone than older aficionados, so even when it comes to the old stuff, we learn things that previously went unsaid. Sadly Ximenes, the former *Observer* setter who helped establish

many of the rules of British crosswords, rather lived up to his pseudonym in his role as a schoolmaster, being "known for his keenness on corporal chastisement".

British newspaper crosswords tend to be, well, rather British, with something Wodehousian, sun setting on the Empire, a dash of *Carry On* about them. Whilst various changes have been made over the years to make them a touch more contemporary, chuck out some obsolete references that were only familiar to the 80+ age group, Connor is one of the people who, like me, likes the 'vintage' feel and doesn't want to revamp everything. It would still have been interesting - and a slightly weightier book - if he had given more space to debates about potentially alienating (slightly un-PC) language. Another *Guardian* setter, Arachne, has written about these matters online, although you couldn't call her a prude: one of her clues, which swears at George W. Bush, is included in this book.

There is a sort of cryptic crossword how-to near the beginning, but unless you are an absolute natural (or someone who used to be consistently good and is just in need of a brief refresher) it isn't enough to learn from, and there are very few easy examples.

If you read this, for goodness' sake get a paper copy, not an ebook. With the possible exception of crossword geniuses like my friend Matthew (perhaps there are others in my friends list I'm unaware of) you will want to flip back and forth all the time and be able to see more than one page at once. Extra clues to a puzzle at the beginning appear at points throughout the text, and sets of older or tricky clues are given at various junctures as examples, with answers in the back after the endnotes.

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## **Matt says**

If you're hoping for a deep exploration of any of its topics, this book will disappoint. It's very lightweight. But it's consistently, gently enjoyable. Connor flits easily from one topic to another (some examples: the history of the cryptic crossword; the world of competitive solving; PG Wodehouse's relationship with the crossword), only pursuing each for as long as it interests him and never asking much of the reader. That might sound like a backhanded compliment, but sometimes an easy read is exactly what you need. Indeed, I found myself happily sinking into a 'just one more chapter' state of mind.

Early on I was a bit nonplussed (in both senses) by one aspect of the author's voice: despite being an Englishman living in England, he seems to be writing not only for an American audience but from an American perspective, even to the point of adopting an 'oh those wacky Brits' tone in parts (for example, when discussing the origins of the cryptic crossword). I can't be bothered researching this properly, but I think this book is effectively the American edition of Connor's 'Two Girls, One on Each Knee'? If so, that probably explains it. In any case, the awkwardness seemed to fade away, or at least become entirely tolerable, by around the half-way mark.

I originally wanted to give this three stars, but I think that was based on some pseudo-objective idea of what it 'deserved', and probably simple pretentiousness on my part. I found it a pleasure to read, and so long as your expectations are properly calibrated I heartily recommend it.

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## **Turi says**

Fun stuff. Lots of good tips and history.

### **Alexandra says**

I received this book from Goodreads FirstReads.

Very clever!

This book showed the humour, skills, and tact for creating crosswords as well as their history without being boring or sounding borrowed.

I was able to pick it back up easily and it made a good 'few minutes of down time' read with the short chapters and condensed background of the craft and it's creators/contributors.

Most enjoyable and I shall appreciate the newspaper printings of crosswords that I see from now on, rest assured!

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### **Angela Lynn says**

When I first learned that I would be receiving a copy of this book through Goodreads Giveaways, I was concerned that it was going to be intellectual and boring. However, this book was smart, fun, and down to earth. In addition to learning all about crosswords in short, succinct chapters, I picked up some tips and tricks to solving along the way. A quick read that is perfect for the crossword enthusiast who doesn't quite finish the Sunday Times puzzle.

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### **Zach Freeman says**

As a huge crossword fan who has been doing the crossword in the New York Times - and more recently The Chicago Tribune - almost every day for 20 years I was excited to read this. And my excitement consistently dwindled chapter by chapter as I read this oddly disjointed and frequently repetitive book that feels slow and overlong at only 170-something pages.

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### **Amy Jo says**

Still consider myself a non-solver of crosswords, but this was a very interesting subject. The clues make me tilt my head like a foreign language, but I am glad I have the history of the development and rise of this type of puzzle.

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### **Colin says**

Utterly delightful, like a box of chocolates but with anagrams (Cloaca booth foxes cunningly show what life is like (1,3,2,10)?). Every chapter is full of marvels and miracles. This is sold in the UK as "Two Girls, One on Each Knee" which is a much better title than the one that shows on Goodreads' Phone App. Or at least I

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hope it is because if it isn't then I've just reviewed the wrong book.

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