

Whenever I encounter an article or book on crosswords, I expect the holy trinity: clichéd writing, clueless author, and factual errors. So when I started Adrienne Raphel's "Thinking Inside the Box," I didn't have high hopes. But right away I was surprised. On just the third page of the introduction, Lollapuzzoola is mentioned in reference to the "Downs Only" solving category. And after two chapters, I had learned some cool stuff: Margaret Farrar's father owned a licorice factory!? The common practice of publishers allowing returns (that is, that a bookstore can return unsold copies of books to publishers for a full refund) started with the crossword books. I was in crossword book publishing for 23 years and didn't know that.

And the book is well-written. This may be the first time I've read a description of Will Shortz that doesn't use the word "mustachioed" somewhere in it. Raphel writes: "He carries himself with the formal politeness of a foreign affairs diplomat and the wholesomeness of a Midwestern tennis coach." That's a nice description. And, of course, she mentions the 'stache: "He has a ... trimmed mustache that defies trendiness."

But then when I got to the chapter on how to make a crossword, the book started to lose its way. The author tries to make a puzzle for the Times, and decides to do a WOOD rebus. The two longest answers are [WOOD]ROWWILSON and ... POLYHEDRIC. The revealer is simply WOOD. The grid has STOR and the partials EATA, ADRAW, SEEA, AHOLE, and AREI. It's a mess, and is rightfully rejected. Why would she not interview a constructor who could teach her the ins and outs or co-construct with one and then write about it?

And then the errors started. Helene Hovanec is called Helene Horovec at least four times in the "Notes" section. Quotes from New York Times articles from decades ago have slight changes. Nothing that changes the meaning, but wrong nonetheless. For example, she quotes a letter to the editor from "Friday, February 1, 1930." But February 1, 1930 was a Saturday, and while the letter was dated February 1, it didn't run in the paper until February 4, so the reference date in the "Notes" section is wrong. A simple check by a fact-checker could have found all of these errors. In fact, I found them easily. Does Penguin Press not fact-check their books? It makes you wonder how often the stuff I didn't check was wrong.

I get mentioned once for my puzzle rhyming puzzle with OODLES OF NOODLES, ABBY CADABBY, EVEL KNIEVEL, IN IT TO WIN IT. What's weird is that the theme answers are given with spaces, but the last one is given as INIT TO WINIT. Why? And the author says I used left-right symmetry "to echo the mirroring trick in the clues." That's completely false. I used left-right symmetry because with lengths of 15, 11, 11, 11, left-right symmetry is the only way it works. (She clearly doesn't understand how symmetry works, since she suggests a quote that breaks up as 15/12/12 would work well.)

My rainbow puzzle from 1993 is also mentioned (the first one edited by Will Shortz), and to show how it featured pop culture references, she cites AL GREEN. Seems like a weird choice given that INDIGO GIRLS, a much more recent reference at the time, was also in the puzzle.

And my TRIGGER WARNING puzzle includes "various puns on SHOOT and RIFLE"? No. Just phrases with guns: RIDES SHOTGUN, RIFLE THROUGH, BAZOOKA BUBBLEGUM.

Some errors were so basic that anyone could have spotted them. The author writes: "Shortz edited the puzzle solo for over a decade. In 2000, he began hiring an intern each summer to work for him." He started at the Times in 1993, so how is that over a decade?

The chapter on cryptics never really explains how they work or what the main types of clues are. There's a whole chapter on Magritte's pipe painting that has little to do with crosswords. A quip from "Sex and the City" is analyzed for more than three pages, which is at least 2.5 pages too many. (And the quip is misquoted--see

attached and "p. 182" below.) And the section about Nabokov doesn't have much to do with crosswords. I also would have liked a better description of the crossword-themed ocean crossing on the Queen Mary 2.

But Baader-Meinhof is mentioned on page 82, so Ryan will like that.

So while the writing is good, there are too many errors and too many off-topic chapters, and it could have used the help of someone who knew about crosswords to help with some chapters (or at least give it a read before publication).

--Peter Gordon

There's no room to include all the errors I found in this review, but I'm including them below since I figure someone who's a listener has the author's email, and can get these corrections to her for the next printing.

p. 37: Sunday puzzles in NYT: it is not the case that "there's a regular stable of freelance constructors who make these."

p. 37: "All rights revert to the Times upon publication." is a weird way to say they buy all rights. No rights "revert."

p. 44: Quote puzzle 15/12/12 (mentioned above)

P. 60 "Arts & Leisure section": hasn't been called that in years.

p. 67: "Shortz edited the puzzle solo for over a decade. In 2000, he began hiring an intern each summer to work for him." Puzzle started in 1993, so how is that over a decade? (mentioned above)

p. 95, line 11: "the letter of which" should be "the letters of which."

p. 95, line 17: ""the question of whether" should be "the question whether."

p. 95, line 19: "will be forgotten" should be "will have been forgotten."

p. 95, line 20: "it seems" should be "it would seem."

p. 96: "Friday, February 1, 1930": February 1, 1930 was a Saturday. And the letter, while dated February 1, appeared in the paper on February 4, so the note on page 262 has the wrong date. (mentioned above)

p. 98: "Native Hindu in a British Army" for SEPOY should be "Native Hindu in British Army"; even xwordinfo.com has it right, so how does an error like this even happen?

p. 102: Missing question mark in the clue "Optometrist's cherished alma mater."

p. 107: "Mount: Comb. form" for OREO is also an exception.

p. 109: ILLEGAL: "One caught by the border patrol" should not have "the" in the clue.

p. 115: "'Marie Kelly' hides 'Mike' inside"? No. It's an anagram of "REALLY MIKE."

p. 129: Georges Perec's lipogrammatic novel is "La Disparition," not "La Disparation."

p. 136: Nancy Schuster misspelled as Shuster.

p. 144: describing Dan Feyer speed-solving a puzzle on YouTube: "he begins with a long Across clue in each key quadrant, then flips and solves all the Downs rapid-fire." No he doesn't. Watch it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvXUORrQoZ8>

p. 147: Book is "Sex, Drugs & Rock 'n' Roll Crosswords," not "Sex, Drugs & Rock & Roll Crosswords."

p. 152: "Use a q not followed by a or u" in the palindrome exception is likely supposed to be "Use a q not followed by a u." Why would q followed by an a be disallowed?

p. 163: "tenth-place Midwestern"? No. Just the top 2.

p. 182: It's not "tricky, complicated, and you're never quite sure if you've gotten the right answer." The correct quote is "tricky, complicated, and you're never really sure you got the right answer."