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# THE PUZZLER

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One Man's Quest  
to Solve the Most  
Baffling Puzzles Ever,  
from Crosswords  
to Jigsaws to  
the Meaning of Life

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**A.J. JACOBS**

Bestselling author of  
*The Year of Living  
Biblically*

WITH ORIGINAL PUZZLES  
BY GREG PLISKA

## ***Introduction***

One winter morning several years ago, I got an email with some ridiculously exciting news. Or so I thought.

The email was from a friend who informed me that the answer to 1-Down in that day's *New York Times* crossword puzzle was . . . me.

The clue was "A.J. \_\_\_\_\_, author of *The Know-It-All*."

My first reaction was *This is the greatest moment of my life*. My marriage and the births of my kids, yes, those were pretty good. But this! As a word nerd since childhood, this was the holy grail!

And then, a couple of hours later, I got another email that changed everything. It came from my brother-in-law. He congratulated me but went out of his way to point out that my name was featured in the Saturday edition of the *New York Times* puzzle. As crossword fans know, Saturday is the hardest puzzle of the week. Monday's is the easiest, with each day's grid getting more and more difficult until Saturday, when the puzzle reaches peak impenetrability.

Saturday is the killer, the one with the most obscure clues, harder than Sunday. We're talking clues like Francisco Goya's ethnic heritage (Aragonese). Or the voice of the car in the sitcom *My Mother the Car* (Ann Sothern). Stuff no normal person knows.

So my brother-in-law's implication—or at least my interpretation—was that my Saturday appearance was the *opposite* of a compliment. Unlike a Monday or Tuesday mention, it's actually proof that I'm totally obscure, the very embodiment of irrelevance.

Dammit. I could see his point. No doubt this wasn't the most charitable interpretation, and my rational side knew I shouldn't let it tarnish my elation. But I couldn't help it. I'm a master of focusing on the negative once it's shown to me. It's like the arrow in the FedEx logo. I can't unsee it. My life's highlight now had a galling asterisk.

Then, a couple of years later, my crossword adventure took another twist. I was on a podcast, and I told the tale of my emotional roller coaster.

Well, it turns out one of the people listening to the podcast was a *New York Times* crossword creator. God bless him, he decided to take pity on me and save me from my end-of-the-week shadows. He wrote a puzzle with me as the answer to 1-Across, and submitted it to run on a Tuesday. Legendary crossword editor Will Shortz let it through.

And *that* became the true greatest moment of my life. I know full well I don't belong in a Tuesday puzzle. It's where truly famous names like Biden and Gaga make their home. I was thrilled to sneak in as an interloper. I mean, it's not Monday, but it's more than I could have hoped.

I emailed the crossword creator, who has since become a friend, and thanked him. He said it was no problem. Though he admitted that, to compensate, he had to make the corresponding down clues super-easy, like *TV Guide*-crossword-puzzle easy. I'm okay with that.

As I hinted, there's a reason my crossword cameos made me ecstatic beyond what is appropriate. Namely, I've been crazy for puzzles all my life.

Partly I inherited this passion from my family. When my dad was in the army in Korea and my mom was stateside, they'd keep in touch by sending a puzzle back and forth, each filling out a clue or two per turn. Not the most efficient method but certainly romantic.

So I was introduced to crosswords early. But I wasn't monogamous when it came to puzzles. I embraced all kinds: mazes, secret codes, riddles, logic puzzles. As a kid who was not in danger of being recruited to varsity teams, nor burdened with a time-consuming dating schedule, I spent my spare time on puzzles. My bookshelf was filled with titles like "Brain-busters" or "Brain-twisters" or "Brain-teasers"—anything involving mental sadism. I programmed mazes on my school's Radio Shack computer. I did hundreds of mix-and-matches in *Games* magazine. Puzzles were my solace.

My enthusiasm didn't wane as I grew older. Like my parents, I married a fellow puzzle lover. It's her job, in fact. My wife, Julie, works at a company that puts on scavenger hunts for corporations, as well as

private events. Our weekends often involve escape rooms or games of Mastermind with our three sons. For my birthday a couple of years ago, my son Zane created an elaborate mental obstacle course that included Sudoku, Rubik's Cubes, and anagrams. It took me two weeks to crack, which didn't impress him. I've even tried to recruit our dog, Stella, into the puzzle cult. I buy her these "doggie puzzles" where she has to flip open a latch to get her doggie treat. The manufacturer claims it will keep her canine brain stimulated, though I'm guessing Stella's brain is mostly thinking "Next time, asshole, just give me the peanut butter on a spoon."

After my appearance as 1-Down a few years back, I went from being an occasional crossword solver to a frequent one, perhaps unconsciously hoping I'd reappear. I did the *Times* crossword every day. At first, I only solved a smattering of words in the harder puzzles. But eventually, after years of practice, I could reliably finish Saturday's puzzles.

My addiction became a problem. One day, I decided I wasn't getting enough accomplished in my life and I should quit all puzzles. I figured it would free up several hours every week. Who knows what I could get done? Maybe I'd start a podcast or run a triathlon or build a barn!

The experiment was a failure. After two months, I relapsed, and I relapsed hard. Puzzles once again began to mark the start and end of my day. Now, as soon as I wake up, I check my iPhone for the *New York Times* Spelling Bee, a find-a-word game that is both compelling and maddening (What?! You're telling me "ottomen" isn't a word? Then what's the plural of "ottoman"?!). Before going to sleep, I do Wordle and the *Times* crossword puzzle.

Since my relapse, I've come to two important realizations about puzzles.

1) I'm not a great puzzler.

I mean, I'm okay. But as I started to meet real puzzlers, I got an insight into a whole other league. I realized I'm like the guy who plays decent intramural basketball, but is no match for the LeBron Jameses and Kevin Durants.

2) Puzzles can make us better people.

Okay, there's a pretty good chance this is more of a rationalization than a realization—a way to justify all the mental energy I spend on puzzles. But rationalization or not, I believe it deeply: puzzles are not a waste of time. Doing puzzles can make us better thinkers, more creative, more incisive, more persistent.

I'm not just talking about staving off dementia and keeping our minds sharp. Yes, there's some mild evidence that doing crossword puzzles might help delay cognitive decline (it's probably not just puzzles that help—any mental challenge might delay dementia, whether it's puzzles or learning a new language).

I'm talking about something more global. It's been my experience that puzzles can shift our worldview. They can nudge us to adopt the puzzle mindset—a mindset of ceaseless curiosity about everything in the world, from politics to science to human relationships—and a desire to find solutions.

These insights sparked the idea for the book you are holding now. I decided to embrace my passion and do a deep dive into the puzzle world. I pledged to embed myself with the world's greatest puzzle solvers, creators, and collectors and learn their secrets. I'd try to crack the hardest puzzles in each genre, from jigsaws to crosswords to Sudoku.

My hope is that the adventures and revelations I had will be entertaining and useful, whether you are a puzzle fanatic, a puzzle skeptic, or a full-on puzzlephobe.

I can tell you that when I started, I wouldn't have predicted the fascinating trip to come. I certainly didn't know that I'd be researching part of my book during the Covid crisis. With all of us stuck inside, puzzles had a spike in popularity not seen since the Great Depression. As Ross Trudeau, a *New York Times* crossword creator, wrote during the depths of the pandemic, puzzles and the puzzle community provided him a “balm against anxiety, anger, depression.” He added, “I love y'all. We'll get through this.”

When I was able to travel, I went anywhere great puzzles took me. My family and I competed in the World Jigsaw Puzzle Championship in Spain. I visited the artists at the base of Mount Fuji in Japan

who make intricate wooden puzzle boxes that sell for thousands of dollars.

I learned the surprising history of puzzles, perhaps the oldest form of entertainment. I learned how they've played a part in religion, love, and war. How the British secret service used a crossword puzzle in *The Daily Telegraph* to recruit codebreakers against the Nazis. How Benedict Arnold sent secret messages encoded in publicly available books (a method that is still used today, with slight variations).

I met the man who holds a record for solving the Rubik's Cube with his feet. I got a lesson on solving chess puzzles from Garry Kasparov and visited the CIA to see the infamous unsolved Kryptos sculpture. I grappled with a puzzle that has 641,453,134,591,872,261,694,522,936,731,324,693 possible arrangements, but only one solution.

I've seen the dark side of puzzles, how they can overlap with paranoia and obsession. And I grew to love types of puzzles that never appealed to me before. I talked to scientists about why we're so drawn to puzzles, why an estimated 50 million people do crosswords every day and more than 450 million Rubik's Cubes have been sold.

In the end, I've come to a conclusion that may seem overly bold, but I'm going to try to convince you of it by the time you finish this book. The conclusion is that puzzles can save the world. Or at least help save the world.

Puzzles can teach us lessons about fresh perspectives, compassion, and cooperation. If we see the world as a series of puzzles instead of a series of battles, we will come up with more and better solutions, and we need solutions more than ever.

But this isn't just a book *about* puzzles. It's also a book *of* puzzles. Within these pages, I have included my favorite puzzles from history. Why just read about the first-ever crossword puzzle from 1913, when you can solve it? The book contains dozens of historical puzzles spanning all genres.

Since puzzles are all about ingenuity, I also wanted some new puzzles. I considered creating them myself, but I soon realized that making great brainteasers is an art that requires years to master. So I teamed up with Greg Pliska, one of the most talented puzzlemakers

in the world and founder of the delightfully named Exaltation of Larks puzzle company. He created twenty puzzles, each one related to a different chapter of the book, which can be found starting on page 253.

And one final but important point: In this introduction you are reading now, Greg and I have hidden a secret puzzle. Or more precisely, a secret passcode that will give you access to a series of puzzles on the website [thepuzzlerbook.com](http://thepuzzlerbook.com). The first reader to find and solve the puzzles on the website will get a prize of \$10,000.\*

I figured I couldn't write a book on puzzles that didn't contain a secret one itself. As a kid, one of my favorite books was *Masquerade*, published in 1979 by a British artist named Kit Williams. The gorgeous illustrations contained clues to a golden rabbit sculpture buried somewhere in England. The book kicked off a frenzy—and not in an entirely good way. Thousands of treasure hunters dug up yards and gardens all over the United Kingdom. Williams received death threats and unwelcome 3 A.M. visits from desperate solvers.

I'm hoping to avoid these pitfalls. The prize is not buried, for starters, so please don't tear up any lawns. And whether or not you claim the prize, I hope you enjoy the rest of the book—except for some of the harder puzzles, which I hope cause you just the right amount of anguish, followed by well-deserved aha moments.

\* NO PURCHASE NECESSARY. The contest begins May 3, 2022, and ends when the first correct answer is submitted or May 3, 2023, whichever comes first. Open to U.S. residents 18 and older. Void where prohibited or restricted by law. See official rules and more details at [thepuzzlerbook.com](http://thepuzzlerbook.com).