

CROSSWORD PUZZLES

If you think about it, working a crossword puzzle is another way to tell a story. A crossword is a veritable memoir of random life experiences, a shorthand of reading and learning that contributes to a gazillion random factoids stored in the private encyclopedia of a person's mind. That understanding crossed my mind one day as I penciled in T-R-E-K-S while doing the daily crossword.

15 DOWN. Hike. Five Letters. My knowledge of the word “trek” is vicarious at best but that single word conjures a wealth of storytelling and imagery. Our daughter trekked through Nepal for a month when in her late twenties, from the Annapurna mountain range to Kathmandu to Mount Everest in the Himalayas. At the base camp, she and a companion were resting from a touch of altitude sickness, aware of helicopters and people coming and going purposefully on what was to become an infamous day in May of 1997 when eight people died trying to reach the summit of Everest. The story was later

described by author Jon Krakauer in his book *Into Thin Air*.

One day I set about detailing a single crossword puzzle from our local paper on October 24, 2011, to illustrate my theory that crossword puzzles are built on life experiences. Many words, while condensed into a few blank squares, represent a much larger personal and unique memory bank to me, practically a personal journal entry, as it were, such as the story of our daughter's trek.

In an audited class on the short story at The College of Wooster, we discussed an episode in *The Babysitter* about a woman who drank too many cocktails at a house party, resulting in a visit to the guest bathroom. I had to chuckle to myself as the character struggled to pull up what was probably a rubbery Playtex. Given an intimate familiarity with the Fifties setting of the story, I was consequently gobsmacked when one of the young women in the front row of the class asked, "What's a girdle?"

The crossword puzzle is on its way out according to some. When crossword vocabulary draws on outdated knowledge, it's easy to understand how young people would lose interest with clues like G-I-R-D-L-E or K-E-P-I

for "military cap" or R-A-E for "Norma _ _ _" - clues that have no point of reference for young people. On the reverse cusp, I am stumped if the clue is about contemporary culture referring to a rock star or to sports, which is definitely *not* my expertise. Solving crosswords also takes a chunk of time out of a busy day. One blogger claims the accumulative time he spends on the daily crossword would calculate out to equal six years of his life!

8 Across: Poached edible. Three letters. It seemed a safe bet to pencil in E-G-G. Most weeks, our Saturday morning ritual is to meet friends at a local restaurant for breakfast. The Parlor is a fixture in our Midwestern downtown. They offer good food at low prices with speedy service. Mike runs the show, second generation taking over from his father who waited on my *husband's* father. There's always a line for a booth or a round vinyl-covered stool at the counter – retirees, young families with children, professors and students alike (especially when their families come to town), groups of women, groups of men... On any given day you might pick out the Judge, downtown business owners, an off-duty police officer, local farmers,

even your doctor or your child's teacher, war veterans... personalities in town from every social and professional strata. On a typical Saturday they might serve up to ninety *dozen* (or more) eggs!! That's more than a thousand. I asked. One of those eggs is mine. My standard order is a single poached egg on a single multigrain pancake, no syrup. Then I steal a single piece of crisp bacon from my husband's standard cheese omelet order.

16 Across: Mi. above sea level. Three letters. A-L-T. Since the clue involves an abbreviation, the answer will involve an abbreviation. Having grown up in New England, I had no idea about the effects of a change in altitude, just as it's hard to understand the actual feeling of jet lag without having traveled through different time zones. Friends at church had generously allowed us the use of their Snowmass condo one summer vacation. On the very first evening of our arrival in Colorado, we were delighted to come across a local rodeo. At some point, small calves were herded into the ring. Children from the audience were invited to grab one of the bright orange plastic bows loosely tied to the animal's tail. Our son

chased the feisty and fleet-of-foot little calves with determination, zigzagging in every direction to the amusement of the rest of us. At last, Ted successfully snatched a ribbon and victoriously waved it in the air to claim the prize of a dollar bill. As soon as he got to us in the bleachers, we realized he was really rather ill from all the activity at an altitude to which he had not yet adjusted. Apparently children are even more prone to breathing difficulties because their lungs are small. Someone nearby suggested ginger ale. We then opened the back end of the family station wagon like a field ambulance so he could lie down. Fortunately, the effects of A-L-T were quickly gone as was the hard-won dollar bill.

18 Across: Free tickets. 5 letters. C-O-M-P-S. When The Ohio Light Opera came to campus in our town in 1979, it started on a shoestring. I was more than happy to answer a call for volunteers. As soon as our young children went to bed with their dad as babysitter, I walked a few blocks to the theater where I joyfully worked into the late evening in the costume department. I volunteered for all the tedious finishing work such as buttons, bows,

sequins or ruffles which could be done while I sat through rehearsals. As a double-major in college, there was no time for the arts, so this was a privileged insight and an introductory education into performance. We volunteers enjoyed many productions for free. In fact, Doc Stuart, the director, called me his “claque,” a professional applauder, because I sat in the theater so often with my handiwork that I knew exactly when to clap in case the audience was shy.

In college, I *did* have time to take classes in French and have since audited language classes to keep up. The French call a crossword puzzle “*les mots croisés*,” literally, “crossed words”. After some eight years of studying the French language, at least I can put my French to daily use in a puzzle. When the hint requires “friend” for a guy friend, A-M-I, or for a friend who is a girl, A-M-I-E, I can feel smug for a split second knowing the spelling difference required of gender. “Pierre's summer” is E-T-E, I-S-L-E for “island” or E-A-U for “water” or for “word used on perfume label” are frequent French words that are used.

Learning cuisines from our international students at the college, and learning about their culture, has been my

pleasure and another source of crossword vocabulary.

K-E-B-A-B is an often used word in crosswords and always reminds me of feasting on grilled lamb kofte with yogurt and cucumber *caçik*, Shepherd's Salad of tomatoes and cucumbers with feta, zucchini fritters and milk pudding for dessert – new foods enjoyed on our trip to Turkey. Muka and her husband Alishan, whom we met at the local Farmer's Market, came to our house to cook together. Next thing we knew, Murat, our Turkish student, who was now working in New York City, booked a flight for himself and Anete when he heard we were cooking Turkish!

T-E-T is another oft-used crossword solution. My introduction to Vietnamese cuisine while visiting my son and his wife in Hanoi was a delicious gourmet adventure, as well as one of the most unique cultural experiences I'd ever had. Once home, we invited seven Vietnamese students at the college to cook for Tét, their New Year celebration. All gathered in our kitchen to cook a traditional feast that included Pork Nem. A local Vietnamese family sent along the traditional Bánh Tét as a gift to the students - a green log wrapped in glossy banana

leaves and tied with string, then cut into rounds to reveal a filling of glutinous rice and mung bean cake.

38 Across: Humped beast. 5 letters. B-I-S-O-N.

To be under the vastness of the Western sky was an incredible journey of discovery for me, who had never been west of the Hudson River until I was married. As a young woman who had grown up in the East with century old trees filling the view of the sky, the openness was awesome, in the truest sense of the word. In South Dakota, I saw real live buffalo other than in films or art. Lewis and Clark wrote in their journals of ten thousand buffalo at one sighting. They noted that they could not sleep at night for the thunderous sound of hoofs.

39 Across: “___ Miserables”. 3 letters. L-E-S

Our second daughter is blessed with acting and singing skill and has always had a love for the theatre. When she moved to Manhattan after college to work on a magazine, she shared that enthusiasm and treated me for my birthday to my first Broadway Play – *Phantom of the Opera*. In high school, her own first Broadway experience had been *Les Miserables* when the speech team took a three day trip

to New York City on Christmas break. My daughter's love of this play made L-E-S instant recognition as a wave of nostalgia made me smile for my daughter who now has a little Thespian of her own. Our granddaughter was in the chorus of an amazing high school production of *Les Mis*. Personally, this Grandma found it better than any professional production.

11 Across: Lyric poem. Three letters. O-D-E. I had a cursory introduction in high school to Keats and Wordsworth and Gray - daffodils and graveyards remembered. When my parents visited friends to play cards, I went along too. Left to entertain myself, I discovered a matching set of Shakespeare's plays bound in brown linen-like fabric neatly lined up in a book case. “In the day,” the Book-of-the-Month-Club was popular because you could receive entire collections sent directly to your home. It would be lovely to think I showed an intellectual leaning at this preteen stage. More likely it was just something to do, but it nonetheless introduced me to Shakespeare as I sat quietly in their den and read those plays at each visit. “Shall I compare thee to a summer's

day?” How many pieces and parts of William Shakespeare's works have become part of everyday speech? And how many Shakespearean clues appear in crossword puzzles. “All the world's a stage...”, “What's in a name....”, Et tu, Brute?” Years later, our high school English class took a school trip to The American Shakespeare Theatre in Stratford, Connecticut, not far from my hometown. The likes of Katherine Hepburn and Paul Newman performed there but sadly that theatre is no longer open.

Working a crossword is a weapon against Alzheimer's disease, we are told. Hercule Poirot would say it prods “the little grey cells.” Each day I do the crossword puzzle in our local paper, bringing every personal experience to bear towards the solution with, perhaps, an occasional peek at the dictionary. It definitely is not the New York Times, but filling in the puzzle in our local paper, equipped with a sharpened #2 Ticonderoga pencil, topped by a soft eraser that does not smear, is challenge enough while sipping my morning coffee.