

Good Times Home

# Four-Letter Words

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WEDNESDAY, 11 APRIL 2007 00:00 LISA JENSEN [COLUMNS - OPINION](#)



Emerging freshly scrubbed from the bathroom one recent morning, I found Art Boy with a more devilish smile than usual. "You're going to be in Hog Heaven," he promised, flourishing a paper bearing arcane markings and the implement with which to indulge. I know an enabler when I see one.

It's an old addiction, one I carry in my genetic make-up. Everyone in my family shares it. Somehow I managed to put it all behind me, get a grip, start a new life in Santa Cruz. Or so I thought. Now it turns out the urge is dormant, lying in wait like Sleeping Beauty for the catalyst to come along and spark it to life again, that all-consuming rush into mania. I should have realized I was bound to backslide, accepted that I can never really be clean. But I never meant to drag Art Boy down

with me.

Yet there he stood, pencil in one hand, the Sunday Chronicle Magazine in the other. "It's about pirates!" he enthused, handing me the weekly Merl Reagle crossword puzzle.

My name is Lisa, and I'm a solver.

In our house, my mom always had a puzzle in progress on a side table. Her two older brothers, both university professors from the Midwest who visited us during their summer vacations, were inveterate solvers too. Uncle Bobby and Uncle Ernie came to California to lounge around in shorts and white T-shirts, eat the green grapes my mom always had on the coffee table, and work crossword puzzles, an interactive sport in those days: someone would sing out a troublesome clue and what, if anything, they'd managed to write in so far, and we'd all try to fill in the blanks. Bobby (who liked to cap a hard day's puzzling with a little "martooni") was beguiled and infuriated by someone named Margaret, the editor whose name appeared on sophisticated puzzles found in The Saturday Review. "Oh, Margaret, you devil!" he'd chortle, scribbling merrily away when he finally cracked some obscure clue.

But I outgrew the habit in later life. Nobody does puzzles in Art Boy's family, and as our lives together became increasingly busy and booked, I couldn't imagine wasting precious time on a puzzle. (Except for an occasional hilarious hour spent with my mom over one of hers.) Until last year at about this time, when the movie Wordplay came out.

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Back when us kids were lobbing words about like ping-pong balls, idling away those summer afternoons, I never realized what a voracious cult the puzzle world is. People like me are the solvers, and our name is legion. We're in thrall to our gods, the puzzlers, writers like Reagle, and Will Shortz (heir to Margaret Farrar, Uncle Bobby's nemesis), current editor of the New York Times Crossword Puzzle. Like any cult, there are strict rules. Words rude or scatological are verboten, or anything that might cause a genteel solver to go off his poached egg, like "enema." The top and bottom halves of the puzzle must be mirror images in the arrangement of black and white squares.

Not only did Wordplay remind me how addicting it is to fill in those little squares, it had an unexpected aftershock; a week later, Art Boy started doing crosswords in the paper. He started out with the daily "Commuter" in the Chron; now we generally polish off "The Commuter" and the puzzle in the Datebook section by the end of breakfast. We've discovered that Monday puzzles are the easiest, building daily in difficulty to the damn near incomprehensible (to journeyman solvers like us) Saturday puzzles. It's not the answer words that get harder, it's the clues. A humble word like "rice" might answer the clue "\_\_ a-Roni" on Monday, "Wedding shower" on Thursday, and "Food in a bed" on Saturday.

Words of four letters are a puzzle's worker bees. If you can't identify "emir" as a Middle Eastern leader, "ecru" as a shade of beige, or "etui" as an antique sewing case, you better switch to Sudoku. A smattering of French, Spanish, Latin, and German helps too, along with celebrity names from showbiz, literature, and pop culture.

Precious time is still at a premium around here. But it can't be called wasted when puzzles give Art Boy and me something new to laugh over every day—and I don't just mean his unique spelling. (When he wrote "mirth" for the clue "Magi gift," he was obviously confusing the Three Wise Men with the Three Stooges.) Clue-mongering is an art form in the hands of a clever jokester like Reagle (his clue for "Karl" is "Unfunny Marx"), whose Sunday theme puzzles always crack us up. And once when we were delayed in an airport, we seized a USA Today discarded by some suit and worked the puzzle—saving the puzzles we'd packed for the long flight to Chicago. (There's nowhere to run on a plane, and I'd rather flex my brain figuring out a 5-letter word for "Art able to," than abuse it with an in-flight rerun of Tallegheda Nights.) Crosswords, like dark chocolate, are said to be good for the memory, and while my relationship to the latter is best concealed from the light of day, puzzling is something Art Boy and I can do together.

After all, addiction loves company.

*(Send four-letter words to [lisajensen@sbcglobal.net](mailto:lisajensen@sbcglobal.net) )*

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