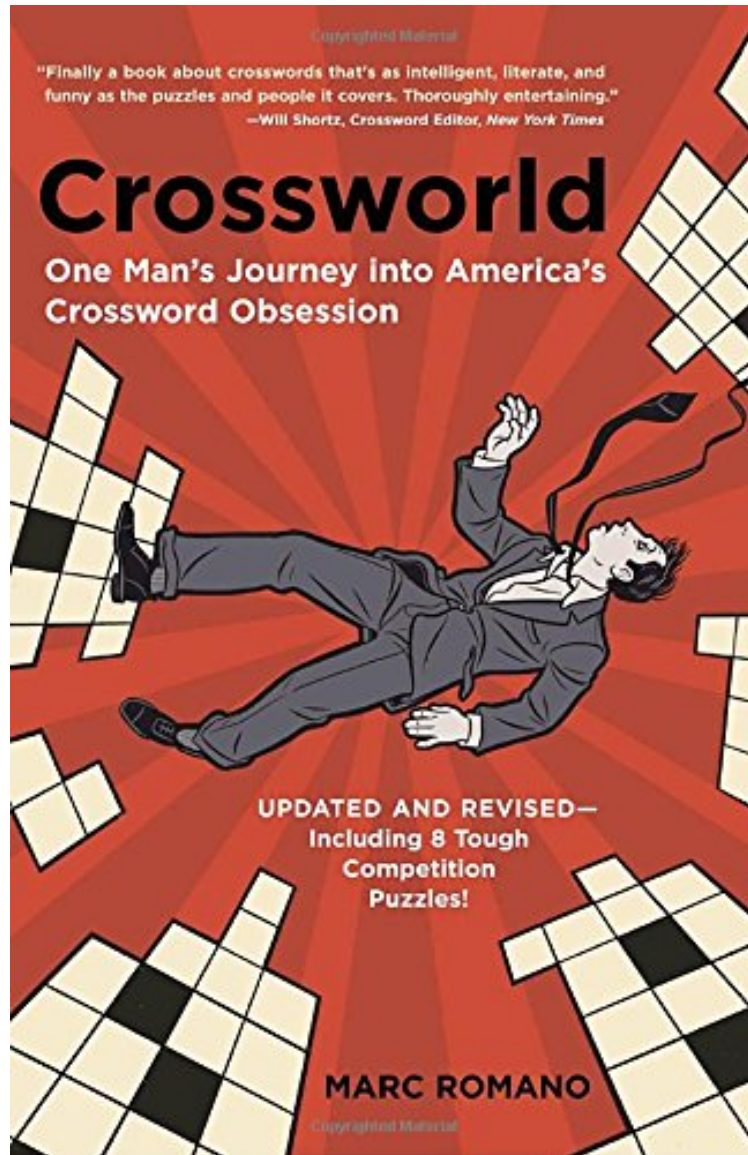


(Download pdf) Crossworld: One Man's Journey into America's Crossword Obsession

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Marc Romano

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Marc Romano : Crossworld: One Man's Journey into America's Crossword Obsession before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Crossworld: One Man's Journey into America's Crossword Obsession:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. It won't leave you cross-eyed!

By James R. Michaels Those who don't do crossword puzzles might think this book has a limited audience. But, as the author quickly points out, these diversions significantly increase the sales of newspapers, and collections regularly outsell almost every other type of book. The author's style is a bit obtuse. He often substitutes unusual words for more common ones, and makes liberal use of interjections and parenthetical comments. However, he makes clear his love of the puzzle, and traces its history and the passions it evokes among its devotees. Along the way, the reader learns a lot about cultural differences in different countries where crosswords are regularly published. If you're the least bit intrigued why your next-door neighbor would sooner surrender his life than his puzzle page, you'll enjoy this book.

10 of 10 people found the following review helpful. Interesting but the false modesty and arrogance overwhelm.

By Kelly Hawkins I really want to rate this 2.5 stars. Do you have a friend who says things like, "Yes, I may have gotten 800 on the math SAT but I only got an embarrassing 690 verbal?" If so, then you might be able to tolerate Romano's prose. If not, be forewarned: unless you can complete the Saturday New York Times puzzle in 10 minutes, you will be put in your place over and over by his false modesty. He says things along the lines of "It once took me a humiliating 20 minutes to do a Saturday NYT puzzle." If it's humiliating for him, what's that mean to the rest of us? He goes further to make fun of and outright condemn anyone who doesn't follow his own code of crossword conduct. If you look a word up, you're cheating and he can't imagine why you would do that. (Perhaps so you can learn words you don't know? Maybe to fill in a tough spot in the puzzle so you can continue to finish the rest of it and still have fun?) He implies that this is akin to just copying the answers from the next day's paper. There are also "facts" that I really have to question. He says he can finish a Monday puzzle in something like 60 seconds. It would take longer than that just to write the answers down if someone were reading the clues to you. Add in the time to flick your eyes from the clues to the grid and it becomes absurd. I can speed read but your comprehension decreases when you do. In a crossword puzzle, there's no context to help you when you misread a word. One letter difference changes the meaning entirely. In addition, even the easiest puzzles have clues that have more than one answer that is commonly used (genetic material can be RNA or DNA; mid-east leader can be EMIR or AMIR or any of a number of different spellings; there are several five letter "GREEK LETTER"s.) It takes time to go back. Even doing a "World's Easiest Crossword"-level puzzle that uses a 6th grade vocabulary and no words over 5 letters and reading only the across clues (not needing to read the down clues) would take me more than 60 seconds to fill out if my writing were to actually be remotely legible and in the correct little boxes. (But then, I'm a moron-- I'm only a Wednesday/Thursday-level solver.) I guess Romano is some freaky genius who not only can read and write in tiny boxes elsewhere on the page at the same time but he has ESP and always knows exactly what the puzzle author was thinking when composing the crossword. Given that, there is a lot of interesting information about the history of the New York Times Crossword puzzle in general and Will Shortz, its current editor, in particular. I came to respect, admire and actually like Shortz, who comes off as a nice, reasonable, easy-going fellow. There's information about who creates these teasers, the difference in puzzles across the Atlantic, and the anatomy of a puzzle. I also found the description of what a crossword puzzle tournament is like and the quirky people who attend to be entertaining. I found myself over and over wishing this had been written by someone else who couldn't possibly compete in the tournament (or would come in last) or that Romano had left his own role out of it and was more objective. While personal anecdotes and opinions can add to a story, make it more human, his arrogance and randomness (he is constantly on the prowl) are not just distracting, they're offensive. Instead of being appropriately impressed by and interested in all the contestants who compete (I think even the person who comes in last place is probably pretty darn good) I could only focus on him. By the time I finished the book I almost gave up solving puzzles because I felt like any reasonable person would realize I am too stupid and ignorant for real crossword puzzles and would be better off sticking to E-Z word searches and connect-the-dots. There's no doubt Romano is extremely intelligent-- he is this expert solver and he implies English isn't even his native language. But does he have to rub it in every other sentence? Last thoughts: the book was a little longer than it needed to be but it does include almost all of the puzzles from the competition, which was fabulous. I would have liked to see a few more puzzles, perhaps a sample from the New York Times for each day of the week and puzzles from some of the other publications (very briefly) mentioned like the Washington Post. While I certainly didn't buy the book for the puzzles, it would be very interesting to compare methodologies. I would have liked Romano to spend a little more time discussing puzzles in other papers. Also, acknowledging that people have to start somewhere and encouraging people to improve their skills with recommendations on how to do so would have been much more appropriate than his constant bragging. Then he might help people discover just how fun it is to do this pastime, recruiting people to the game rather than making people feel like outsiders who shouldn't even try. One more thing: He denigrates Sudoku as being just a "math puzzle" (what's wrong with math puzzles?) but Sudoku has absolutely nothing to do with math. There is no math involved at all. Any 9 characters or shapes would do. I've seen some using letters. Numbers are just easiest for us to recognize and pattern quickly, not to mention that it crosses language barriers by using Anglo-Saxon numerals which are more commonly used than the English alphabet. Sudoku is first and foremost a logic puzzle and could appeal to even a word smith who hasn't completed 3rd grade math. So, to sum up, I don't recommend this book. Watch the movie "Wordplay" Wordplay about the tournament. Or better yet, Will Shortz wrote a companion book to the movie Wordplay: The

Official Companion Book which I haven't read but might be a better insight into the tourney. I can't believe it could be worse. 43 of 44 people found the following review helpful. Far Less Interesting Than It Should Have Been By Steve Koss It seems that the wonderfully touching and insightful National Spelling Bee documentary SPELLBOUND has opened the floodgates for literary variants: COUNTDOWN (about young math whizzes), WORD FREAKS (about Scrabble), and Marc Romano's CROSSWORLD (about crossword puzzling). Exploring these peculiar talents and (occasionally) obsessions, and the personalities of those who partake of them, is a meritorious notion, prospectively opening windows into small but almost savant-like niches of human behavior. One might pick up any of these books expecting to be introduced to some of the people who exhibit these extraordinary talents. In the case of CROSSWORLD, however, Romano tells us far more about himself than we care to know and far less than we want to know about the world's best cruciverbalists, or crossword puzzle solvers. CROSSWORLD centers on author Romano's first-time participation in March, 2004 in the annual American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, held every year in Stamford, CT. Along with the requisite history lesson in crosswording and discussion about the differences between American style crosswords and British style cryptics, the author describes how he prepared himself as a contestant. Romano is fairly successful at the event itself, but he focuses far more on the people who construct and edit puzzles (Eugene Maleska, Will Shortz, Brendan Quigley, Michael Shteyman) than on the collection of people who bothered traveling to Stamford and giving up an entire weekend to solve crosswords against the clock and each other. We learn something about Shortz and Quigley, but that's about as far as Romano takes us. As for the 500-odd participants in the contest, the author blithely assures us that they are mostly introverts, mostly white, scrupulously honest, unhealthily consumed by puzzling, and just all-around nice people. As human insights go, these are remarkably trite. Romano apparently decided he was far more interesting than anyone else at the contest. We learn about his dating habits, his drinking habits, his use of Ativan to calm himself into a semi-hallucinatory state, and an off-base story about how his puzzling skills helped him acquire "a new bedmate." What should have been a fascinating account of crosswording aficionados ends up being mostly the author's stargazing at New York Times puzzle editor Will Shortz and navel-gazing over his own skills. One other aspect of CROSSWORLD bears comment: Romano writes like someone with ADD. Every page is filled with three or four parenthetical asides, some of them full paragraph length, that are both distracting and annoying. Any writer who needs twin parentheses that often either lacks focus or is simply forcing too much extraneous information into the text. Additionally, the author seems so unsure of his own effectiveness as a writer, he constantly places explicit reminders of things he said earlier in his story. He also presents a weakly speculative, pop evolutionary psychology analysis of puzzling and problem solving that involves cavemen, tigers, and being able to spot a tiger lurking at "the sun-dappled forest edge." Curiously, for a subject matter as precise and nit-picking as crosswords, Romano seems a bit loose with his facts. He attributes the notion of England and America being two nations divided by a common language to Winston Churchill rather than either Oscar Wilde or George Bernard Shaw (both of whom predated Churchill on this notion, Wilde by 50 years). He also mentions taking the #5 line in New York to Canal Street (New Yorkers know that only the #6 IRT line stops at Chinatown) and comments that Susan Lucci failed "something like a dozen times" to win a daytime Emmy (the actual number was eighteen before she finally won in 1999). By the end of CROSSWORLD, Romano has clearly gotten carried away with his subject matter, trying to inflate it into much more than it is. If only we taught crosswording to university students, he argues, the world would have no more wars. "The more your mind is filled with real facts about the real world,...the less room there will be in your heart for hatred." He obviously ignored Brendan Quigley's admonition earlier in the book: "...you're talking about crossword puzzles. It's really not that complicated. They're just games." About the kindest thing one can say about CROSSWORLD is that it manages to be modestly interesting despite its author's persistent intrusions into his own material.

Sixty-four million people do it at least once a week. Nabokov wrote about it. Bill Clinton even did it in the White House. The crossword puzzle has arguably been our national obsession since its birth almost a century ago. Now, in Crossworld, writer, translator, and lifelong puzzler Marc Romano goes where no Number 2 pencil has gone before, as he delves into the minds of the world's cleverest crossword creators and puzzlers, and sets out on his own quest to join their ranks. While covering the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament for the Boston Globe, Romano was amazed by the skill of the competitors and astonished by the cast of characters he came across like Will Shortz, beloved editor of the New York Times puzzle and the only academically accredited enigmatologist (puzzle scholar); Stanley Newman, Newsdays puzzle editor and the fastest solver in the world; and Brendan Emmett Quigley, the wickedly gifted puzzle constructor and the Virgil to Marc's Dante in his travels through the crossword inferno. Chronicling his own journey into the world of puzzling even providing tips on how to improve crosswording skills Romano tells the story of crosswords and word puzzles themselves, and of the colorful people who make them, solve them, and occasionally become consumed by them. But saying this is a book about puzzles is to tell only half the story. It is also an explanation into what crosswords tell us about ourselves about the world we live in, the cultures that nurture us, and the different ways we think and learn. If you're a puzzler, Crossworld will enthrall you. If you have no idea why your spouse sends so much time filling letters into little white squares, Crossworld will tell you and with luck, save your

marriage.CROSSWORD | by Marc RomanoACROSS1. I am hopelessly addicted to the New York Times crossword puzzle.2. Like many addicts, I was reluctant to admit I have a problem.3. The hints I was heading for trouble came, at first, only occasionally.4. The moments of panic when I realized that I might not get my fix on a given day.5. The toll on relationships.6. The strained friendships.7. The lost hours I could have used to do something more productive.8. It gets worse, too.DOWN1. You're not just playing a game.2. You're constantly broadening your intellectual horizons.3. You spend a lot of time looking at and learning about the world around you.4. You have to if you want to develop the accumulated store of factual information you'll need to get through a crossword puzzle.5. Puzzle people are nice because they have to be.6. The more you know about the world, the more you tend to give all things in it the benefit of the doubt before deciding if you like them or not.7. I'm not saying that all crossword lovers are honest folk dripping with goodness. 8. I would say, though, that if I had to toss my keys and wallet to someone before jumping off a pier to save a drowning girl, I'd look for the fellow in the crowd with the daily crossword in his hand.

From Publishers WeeklyWith wit and verve, puzzle devotee Romano offers a bird's-eye view of the arena of crossword addicts, combining basic information with engaging anecdotes about those who populate this intense, competitive corner of the universe. Today it's the New York Times puzzle that poses the ultimate challenge (or frustration) for many. But, Romano relates, the first crossword appeared in the New York World in 1913, sparking a craze that swept across the nation during the 1920s. The author provides a detailed history of this American sensation (as well as a comparison with the British counterpart, cryptics). Once a year, Will Shortz, the New York Times's crossword editor, responsible for elevating the difficulty of the papers' puzzles, hosts the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament in Stamford, Conn. Romano competed there and provides a consistently entertaining account of several extremely skillful and quirky puzzle solvers; he interviews Shortz and Brendan Emmett Quigley, an outstanding puzzle constructor against whom the author pitted his skill. Clearly infatuated with his hobby, Romano claims, not entirely tongue-in-cheek, that solving crosswords can help make you into a "better, more informed, fairer, and more tolerant person." Agent, Jim Auth at the Wylie Agency.(On sale June 1)From The New YorkerSixty-four million people do at least one crossword a week. This book, a memoir chronicling Romano's yearlong immersion in the world of competitive crossword puzzles, is written for those who do them religiously. Sketching the history of crosswords, Romano explains that this kind of wordplay has been around since the ancient Greeks created word squares, but the game itself was invented by an American newspaperman in 1913. Romano enters the subculture of the game's hardcore enthusiasts and attends the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament. He provides tips for puzzlers and insights into a crossword's construction. Ultimately, the book is a celebration of an addiction. For Romano, a crossword puzzle isn't just a game: "Solving puzzles is an active step you can take to make yourself a better, more informed, fairer, and more tolerant person." Copyright 2005 The New YorkerFrom Bookmarks MagazineSome critics saw Romano, who frequently injects himself into his narrative, as irritating and biased. ("I am hopelessly addicted to The New York Times crossword puzzle," he writes, thereby never distancing himself from his subject.) Small factual mistakes will annoy attentive readers; after all, crossword puzzles are about the details. Romano's writing style also irked some critics, who viewed it as clunky and at times elliptical. Yet despite Romano's focus and style problems, Crossworlds' subject matter is unique and engaging. We wish better luck to him at the next crossword tournament. Copyright 2004 Phillips Nelson Media, Inc.