



Fill 'er Up!

One of the (small) regrets that I feel recently is that I am no longer doing the weekly Sunday crossword puzzle published by the New York Times newspaper. For some reason, they stopped including it in the weekly supplement they distribute here in Japan, and rather than hunt around for another way to access it each week, I simply let it go. It's not as though I don't have enough to keep me busy ...

Thinking about that puzzle reminds me of an event that happened during the time that I was living here alone with my two girls. In those days I was doing the Times puzzle religiously - never missing a week - and they were well used to seeing me with folded newspaper in hand, scribbling the answers in with a ball point pen. (No pencils permitted!)

On one particular occasion, after I tossed aside the completed puzzle, they asked me some questions about why I was doing crosswords. I don't remember exactly what I replied; it was presumably something about the enjoyment of the challenge, the educational aspect (learning new words), and the overall benefit of the mental exercise - training one's memory, etc. Hearing this, one of them picked up the finished puzzle and decided to challenge me a bit. She tossed out a couple of the clues, to see if I could remember the word I had filled in. Of course I could do this easily - I had finished the puzzle only a few minutes before. "Can you remember *all* of these words?" she then asked. My answer was "Of course!"

So the two of them decided to give me a more serious test. Grabbing a sheet of paper, they quickly sketched a blank grid - matching the puzzle in size but omitting the black squares which bounded all the words. Passing this to me, they challenged me to fill it in - from memory, without seeing any of the clues. I accepted the challenge, and we even made a little bet on the result, something connected to their weekly allowance - probably 'double or nothing' I think.

Now nobody who knows me would ever say anything like "Wow, Dave has such a great memory!" I'm as absent-minded as the next man, frequently forgetting this and that in my daily routines. But filling in this blank sheet was a different story. Each word in a crossword puzzle of course holds the 'clues' to many of the others (because of the criss-cross nature of the puzzle) so it was no more than a couple of minutes work to fill in the blank grid and pass it back for checking. It was of course done correctly. (It would have been much more difficult to fill it in with different words!)

They were suitably impressed, although their pleasure at their father's achievement must have been mitigated by losing the bet. (Again, I don't remember the particular detail, but I am sure that I found a way to make sure that they didn't 'lose' all their allowance that week ...)

Their interest in crosswords was piqued a bit by this episode, and from then on, we spent time working together on some of the simpler puzzles that appeared in my local paper. They didn't have the experience to fill these in by themselves, but when I found clues to which I thought they probably knew the target word, I would toss out hints and questions to guide them to it. Unfortunately, this enjoyable - and extremely educational - activity came to an end when they left to live in Canada (at middle school age), and I don't think they have any interest in word puzzles at all these days.

Well, it can't be helped. I can at least take some consolation in the fact that although their *verbal* fluency may not be the match of mine, they have plenty of other skills to make up for that lack. They are both in the fashion business, and it's a very good thing that they didn't get any training from me in *that* field!

David Bull
Seseragi Studio
Nagabuchi 8-4-5 Ome City
Tokyo Japan 198-0052
<http://astoryaweek.com>