

Puzzled

Secrets and Clues from a Life in Words

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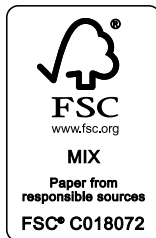
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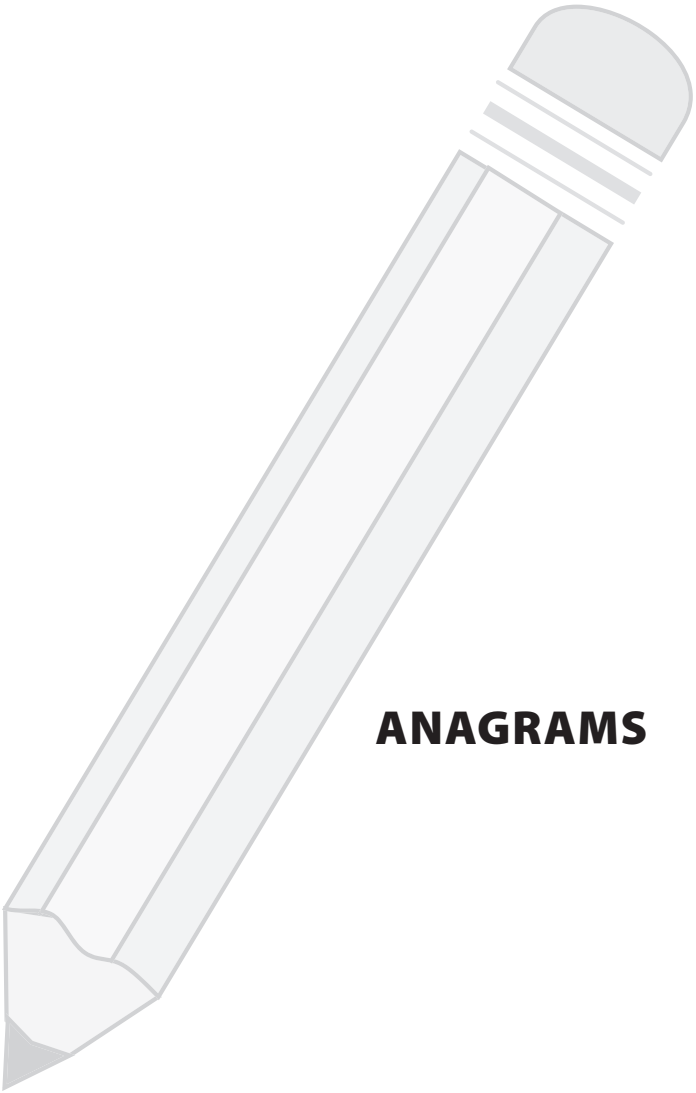
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ANAGRAMS

CHAPTER 1

Expose Russ, Ned, Hector (7)

Last year a nephew tugged my sleeve at a barbecue and asked, 'What is God?'

I took a deep breath, stalling for time, wondering how agnostic I felt that week. In the end I dished out some sloppy view of the cosmos only for Simon to interrupt. 'Wrong,' he said. 'It's a mixed-up dog.'

A bright kid, Simon loves *SpongeBob* and *Doctor Who* – but he's yet to discover the pleasure of cryptic crosswords. (I'll give him time – he's nine.) My point being, most of us nurse a knack of juggling language. The day we misspell RECEIVE on paper, switching the middle vowels, or call someone Amy instead of May, or gaze at a STOP sign and see words like POTS or POST – we know how anagrams work. We order and disorder by nature. To see the message ELVIS LIVES scribbled on the subway wall is to get the verbal joke.

To prove the instinct, try reading this: *Tnrinug rdnaom ltteers itno amgnraas ceoms eislay buaesce haunms nluralaty ajusdt cohas itno oderr.* (Or said more plainly: *Turning random letters into anagrams comes easily because humans naturally adjust chaos into order.*) Even if you didn't pounce straight away, I'm sure you grasped plenty. The brain is trained to do so.

Bart Simpson's brain included. Stuck at ten years old, Bart spotted the mix-up potential of The Rusty Barnacle's menu.

Lethally the letters were magnetised, allowing the brat to switch the words with ease. Thanks to one quick shuffle COD PLATTER turned into COLD PET RAT.

Aged nine, I wasn't any better. My dad was an old sea captain who thought our home needed a better communication system. So he put a batch of fluorescent letters on the family fridge, a means for all of us to leave messages or make shopping lists. Imagine his rage when he saw BREAD MILK EGGS turn into guff like MILD GEEK BRAGS or KGB RAIDS ME LEG.

Even now I can't pass a MOBIL sign without LIMBO looming in my head, or pour a glass of PEPSI and not think PIPES. Crazy, I know. A benign affliction in many ways, and one I failed to stifle when dating in my early twenties.

Tragically, her name was Melissa, a psychiatric nurse from Gordon in Sydney's north. She may have laughed, driving to the restaurant, when I said her suburb held the word DRONGO. Perhaps she risked a smile when I noted her birth name could be rendered into AIMLESS. Yet by the time we'd passed a mattress showroom called Capt'n Snooze, and I somehow felt the urge to report that SNOOZE is a blend of OZONES, we both sensed the night to be in trouble. If her grimace wasn't a clue, then the moment I caught her taking case-notes under the table certainly was.

Anyhow, most people, if not Melissa, have the anagram knack. The reflex is latent in our system. And that makes it time to meet three boys called Russ, Ned and Hector: our first clue of the Master Puzzle.

As you've suspected, we're talking anagrams – the oldest type of cryptic clue, and perhaps the most familiar to newcomers. Back in the late 1920s, when cryptic crosswords first emerged in Britain, the anagram was the original trick in the setter's bag. Leonard Dawe, the science teacher who scored the maiden crossword gig in the *Daily Telegraph* in 1928, chose

a blend of plain vocab and trivia for his clues. *Incursion*, say, at 13-Across, was RAID. *Visionaries* led to SEERS. *A river in France?* LOIRE. Drawing a steady audience, the puzzle carried a touch of Greek myths and Oliver Cromwell, plus a smattering of new concepts in XRAYs and TNT. But no anagrams. Not yet.

That tack was taken three years later, in league with several other papers across the land, when suddenly Dawe and other setters ignored the obvious definition of a word like OVERLAP, opting instead for *A plover* (*anag.*) (7).

Gradually a game was hatched. While the people of America – where the crossword puzzle began in 1913 – still wrangled with clinical synonyms, reading a clue like ‘glut’ to help reveal SURFEIT, the Brits had other ideas. Dawe, in fact, clued the same word as *Fur ties* (*anag.*). Fittingly, in the same puzzle on 7 May 1928, the science teacher added one more anagram clue: *Cheer it* (*anag.*), namely HERETIC, as that is how the whole cryptic deviation must have seemed to the US purist.

We’ll be talking more about the American Revolution (and British Evolution) of crosswords in time to come, but for now, it’s important to see how anagrams and cryptic puzzles go hand in hand. Soon every British offering was marbled with anagram clusters, with no other defining element aside from an order to rearrange.

Yet every good thing has its day, and soon the solving public required a bit more subtlety. Anyone can see that PLUM is a mix of LUMP, so what real joy is lurking in such a pallid morsel as *Lump* (*anag.*)? Answer – not much. Leonard Dawe and Co could no more depend on the bald and the blatant to satisfy their solvers. Instead compilers had to *disguise* their anagram clues, which leads us back to Russ, Ned and Hector.

For many readers this book’s first clue – *Expose Russ*,

Ned, Hector – will represent their first cryptic clue, full stop. In which case, to avoid too many false trails, let's take a step sideways and see how cryptic clues in general are put together.

RUMBA IN BURMA – quick versus cryptic clues

My two pinup poets as a teen were T. S. Eliot and W. H. Auden, those two enigmatic men with initials for names. The first, I knew, was an anagram of TOILETS, the second, I didn't realise, was a crossword nut.

One day, arguing with a pal across the Atlantic, Auden said that despite cryptics seeming more complex than their US cousins, they also happen to be more precise. In other words, while straight clues are more straightforward, cryptic clues can diminish any doubts about the eventual answer. The best way to illustrate the point is to go dancing ...

Imagine 1-Across in an orthodox puzzle reads '*Style of dance*'. Sounds easy, but there are dances galore. In the 1960s, for example, the floor was busy with the Watusi, the Yuletide Jerk and the Popeye Waddle. So where does that leave us? Letter count will throw more light on the subject. In this case, our missing dance has five letters, allowing us to cancel the camel walk, the stereo freeze and the doctor's boogie. But then we're stuck in limbo. Wait, is LIMBO the answer? What about WALTZ? POLKA? STOMP? RUMBA? The choices stack up.

Next step – check the grid. Do we have any cross-letters in our imagined crossword – other answers crossing our mystery dance? Let's say no. The grid is empty, with 1-Across awaiting our guesswork.

Fine, let's imagine the dance we need is WALTZ. If that hunch is right, then 3-Down (in a lattice-like grid) must begin with Z, the last letter of WALTZ. And if that's not likely, then

WALTZ must be wrong. (These are the theories you test to limit your answer pool.) So let's try WALTZ: how does 3-Down read, our supposed Z-answer? Let's imagine this next clue reads *African nation* (6).

Yay. This must be ZAMBIA. So now you enter both answers – WALTZ across and ZAMBIA down – convinced you're on the right track. But hang on. Say the correct dance is SWING, meaning the G works just as well for GAMBIA. Or why can't RUMBA bring ANGOLA into play? Or POLKA and SALSA do the same thing? And if CAPER is kosher as a dance, then RWANDA is up for the rumble too. Suddenly you're doing the Hippy Hippy Shake in a minefield, the words of Auden ringing true.

Despite their name, quick clues often ask for slow and cautious responses. Unless a clue is dead specific, like *young cat* for KITTEN or *Turkish hat* for FEZ, then a solver can never be sold on a single answer. Compare this to a cryptic's generosity, with each clue carrying two elements. Different schools call them different names, but in this book we'll know them as the definition and the wordplay.

Definition, of course, speaks for itself. *Magic stick* (4) is WAND. Orthodox puzzles give you nothing else. A cryptic clue on the other hand does the solver two favours, providing both a definition of your answer and a little word-game to help get you there. The trick is telling the two apart. So let's get back to that mystery dance, and check out these two cryptic clues:

Dance revolutionised Burma (5)

Burma-style dance (5)

As we know, *dance* in both clues is the definition. This leaves us with *Burma* in either case, plus a third word in the shape of *style* or *revolutionised*.

Notice anything in common with these last two? Think

about *style*, the verb. The word means to shape, to make over, in the same way revolutionise means to shake up, or change. Both are labelled anagram signposts in the crossword trade, sometimes called anaginds (or anagram indicators), but I prefer signposts. They're telling you to agitate the adjacent set of letters, in this case BURMA, to reach your answer.

Signposts are vital in anagram clues. A setter needs to plant a word suggesting upheaval or renovation, a word like stir or shock. Seasoned solvers look for these indicators on impulse, mixing the adjacent clues to satisfy the definition. Which here we know is *dance*.

Mind you, *dance* can also be a signpost, as can any word embodying motion, making both sample clues a bit more slippery.

Trickier still, both the likely signposts (*revolutionised* and *style*) occupy the clues' midpoints. Placed there, a solver has to decide which end needs mixing to give up the answer. Ten times easier if the signpost opens or finishes a clue, confining the definition to the opposite end. Let's take a second look at both examples.

In the first example – *Dance revolutionised Burma* – you know the middle word is the signpost as *revolutionised* is too long to be the fodder (or letters to scramble). So your eye then falls on *Burma* as the batch to 'revolt', giving you a kind of *dance* ...

In sample 2 – *Burma-style dance* – the chances of *style* holding a word that means *Burma* are next to zero. Besides, what else can *Burma* mean? It's a country, right? Aside from being the old name of Myanmar, what more can be said, word-wise? Making *style* your probable signpost, with *dance* the definition.

And bang, out jumps RUMBA. The jig is up.

Bear that in mind as we go. As opaque as a cryptic clue may seem at first, the opposite can apply. Where a quick setter

gives cold definitions, the darker cousin offers two roads to reach the one destination.

As you solve more clues over time, you'll separate the two key elements with greater confidence, recognising where the division falls. Jonathan Crowther, a long-time setter for *The Observer* in the UK, known to most of his fans as Azed, put it best. 'A good cryptic clue', he wrote, 'contains three elements:

a precise definition;
a fair subsidiary indication [or wordplay];
nothing else.'

In other words, every word counts. In the case of anagrams, you'll be facing a definition, plus a signpost and the fodder (which adds up to the wordplay). Though signposts, as you've gathered, may be tricky to isolate. Already in this section we've had a range of words standing in for signal duty: style, stir, dance. What next, you ask. Red, white and blue?

Well, *black and blue* could do the job, despite being a phrase, since those three words capture the sense of being battered. But I hear your uncertainty. Let's open the way to signposts.

SIGN HERE – anagram signposts and surface sense

Tangle
Snarl
Brew
Jolt

If Paul Simon knew 50 ways to leave his lover, the cryptic compiler knows 500 ways to mislead his solver.

Wreck
Wrench
Crazy
Kinky

The crunch is change. Even *crunch* is cool – or crush, or bash. As long as the word embodies an altered state. Yet change – the notion – is fickle in its own right. Words like odd or outlandish can also suggest a deviation. Thus a clue like *Exotic Burma dance* is a valid route to RUMBA.

Compatibility is the key. Setters look for signposts that chime with the other parts. Drafting a clue for CHAIN-SMOKER, say, a phrase that holds HEROIN and SMACK, I may retain the clue's druggy flavour this way:

Smack, heroin, crack, tobacco addict (5–6)

Then again, in composing a food-related clue, I might turn to kitchen words to act as that simpatico signpost. ORANGE, say, is a blend of GEAR ON, making one possible clue:

Fruit gear on bananas (6)

That's the game as setter or solver – to hide or find the signpost. If we stay in the pantry, the options are ample. If *bananas* doesn't work, what about nuts or fruitcake? (You look for terms that serve two masters – the clue's surface sense and the wordplay recipe.)

Cocktail is another option. Or *crackers*. Now we're cooking. Or maybe even *cook* can save the day – a verb meaning to prepare, or corrupt, as in cooking the books. To the same list you can add *stew* or *stir* or *fry* or most chef actions. (Think dice, beat, whip.) Solvers must be alert to that kind of camouflage. Take this gem, crafted by Simon Martin, alias Enigma of the *Independent*:

Response to Warne's spin (6)

A breeze once you know how the elements click, but what a fiendish means of hiding the answer, ANSWER. Much like a leg spinner, compilers rely on subtle variations and artful

deception, and this clue displays both: a low-key signpost beside low-key fodder, the whole combining to create a perfect delivery.

For RUMBA, I'd dabbled with other signposts. If BURMA, we agree, is the craftiest anagram (better than UM, BRA, or the dubious MR AUB), then how best to couch the clue? What's the least visible signpost? Perhaps a word like *rock* could fit – a music genre as well as a word meaning sway. Opening the way for:

Burma rock dance (5)

Another idea is *club*, a word that can sidle up to *dance* in its noun guise, as well as carrying its own nasty impact when treated as a verb. Giving rise to:

Burma Club dance (5)

Notice the capital C, a thicker smokescreen for the solver to see through, and not unfair in the grander etiquette of crosswords. Of course a neater RUMBA clue would read:

Burma dance club (5)

But that's a no-no. Can you see why? Because *dance*, your definition, is perched *between* the signpost and what needs clubbing. Signpost and fodder must always be side by side.

By contrast, *Dance in Burma Club* can pass muster as an anagram clue, but why use four words when three do just as well? The answer hinges on surface sense, or how smoothly the clue reads on the page, the same brand of elegance Shane Warne's clue achieves. At the drawing board I tested other maybes:

Improper Burma dance

Dance in Burma resort

Steps around Burma

Different house styles (we're talking papers now, not music) have a bias towards different signposts. One editor may be happy with 'slip' as an indicator to mix, while another might deem slip too sloppy. So what about 'wrong'? Is that all right? Or 'tight' – as in drunk? Too old-fashioned? Surely 'fashioned' is legit, and so on. That's how the arguments ricochet. As for ricochet – that's usable in my book. But now, let's move on from Burma and meet our three amigos occupying 5-Down.

RUSS, NED, HECTOR – Trojan horses and binary thinking

PETER and PAUL lie in PERPETUAL. Just as a tailored MACKINTOSH holds NICK and THOMAS. Or PAEDIATRICIAN nurses twin girls, ENID and PATRICIA. This name-game leads us back to RUSS and NED.

Wait, what happened to Hector? Let me tell you a quick story.

Troy is famous for many reasons, from Achilles' heel to Brad Pitt's six-pack. But the story's clearest image is the wooden horse, the perfect metaphor for a cryptic clue. Just because the creature stands like a horse, and looks like a horse, and casts a horse-like shadow, this doesn't mean it neighs.

Inside the belly, of course, was where the strife began. For the Trojans at least. The gift was a ruse, as Achilles and his mates hopped out of the belly and marauded the city. Yet Hector bravely resisted the Greeks, endowing his name to the English language as a word meaning to bluster, bully or badger. Some legacy, you may think, but a signpost ready-made for cryptic clues.

Some names – of both boys and girls – can deputise well as signposts. *Harry* is a regular starter, the name meaning to pester or ravage. *Pat* is possible, while *Dotty* is a tad dated. *Jimmy* is a candidate, thinking crowbars. *Dicky?* *Eddy?*