No Loss for WORDS

IN THE DOCUMENTARY FILM WORDPLAY, CONTESTANTS in the 2005 American Crossword Puzzle Tournament are midway through the eight-puzzle ordeal that will determine the champion. Will Shortz, crossword editor for The New York Times and the tournament’s founder and director, introduces the fifth challenge—a puzzle by David J. Kahn ’63. At the mention of Kahn’s name, contestants groan, and Shortz gives voice to their worst fears: “This is a puzzle that’s gonna rip your heart out,” he announces cheerfully. And the fun begins.

For Kahn, life is just one puzzle after another. He’s been solving crosswords since he was 11 and constructing them for the past 12 years. His puzzles have appeared in the Times and other newspapers, and he serves as a judge for Shortz’s annual tournament. Kahn credits Shortz, who rejected his first few submissions, with helping him develop his puzzle-making skills. And his “quirky, creative” style suits the Times, which favors challenging puzzle-within-a-puzzle crosswords over the conventional brain teasers of the past. “Before Will came to the Times, you would see words you would never use in conversation—real esoteric stuff that you might find in Webster’s third-edition dictionary, but nowhere else,” Kahn says. Today’s top puzzle makers, he says, rely on common words and phrases for answers. The difficult part is interpreting the clues. Take, for example, “Technophobe’s Delight,” a puzzle based on an idea that struck him during a lecture by former TV anchor Tom Brokaw. “He was talking about how some people are technologically challenged,” Kahn recalls, “and he said, ‘Some people think ‘hard drive’ means a difficult commute into Manhattan.’ Everyone laughed. And I turned to my wife and said, ‘Bull’s-eye. That’s a puzzle right there.’” A few months later, “Technophobe’s Delight” appeared in the Times. The themed clues were computer terms, and the answers were common words or phrases. Among the clues: hard drive (answer: Tiger’s tee shot); floppy disk (Frisbee); and digital monitor (manicurist). The puzzle was such a hit that then-President Clinton, a crossword fan, read excerpts during a technology conference. “That was really a kick,” Kahn says.

Coming up with a good theme is the hardest part of creating a puzzle, Kahn says, and inspiration can come from anywhere—billboards, TV, random conversation. Of his 100-plus Times puzzles, favorites include “Green Eggs and Hamlet,” a bit of Shakespearean silliness à la Dr. Seuss; and “Drawing Power,” a crossword tribute to the late caricaturist Al Hirschfeld. In a bonus feature on the Wordplay DVD, “Drawing Power” is included in “Five Unforgettable Puzzles,” and Shortz talks about its creator. “What I love about David’s work is, first of all, the brilliance of his themes. He takes these clever, unusual ideas, and he carries them to their extreme. He comes up with things you don’t think could possibly be done, and then he pulls it off with panache.”

In recent years, Kahn, a consulting actuary who majored in math at the College of Arts and Sciences, has expanded his hobby into new directions, creating a puzzle for the opening of the Clinton Presidential Library and two for Disneyland’s 50th anniversary. His third book, Sit and Solve Movie Crosswords, is due out this fall.

What’s behind this fascination with crosswords? “I like math,” he says. “I like words. I like letters. I like putting things together. And I like the fact that you can solve the puzzle and, once you’re done, know definitely that it’s correct.”

David J. Kahn ’63 creates quirky crosswords known to exasperate even the best puzzle solvers

By Carol Boll

Want to take a stab at one of David J. Kahn’s challenging crosswords? Pick up your pencil and give “Summer Crossword” on the facing page a try. He created the puzzle with an SU theme exclusively for Syracuse University Magazine.

Photo by Joe Lawton
Summer Crossword
By David J. Kahn ’63

ACROSS
1 Zodiac sign
6 SU students, by year
11 "Wheel of Fortune" request
14 "__ Mia!"
19 Zodiac sign
20 Singer Mann
21 Place for discussions at SU
23 Big sports venue at SU
25 What the SU men’s basketball team won in 2003
26 Had as its result
27 Creation from a French noodle?
29 Expands, as eye
30
33 Ben Cartwright, on TV
35 SU’s
38 Longwinded
39 Long Answer
40 Tournament ranking
41 Obligation
42 Noise
44 What many SU scholarships are based on
46 Bench with a back
48 Aquarium attraction
49 Split
50 Split
51 Crowns wearer
54 Third-party account
56 Captivate
58 Rang
59 Patronizes, as a restaurant
60 Mets shortstop José __
61 Designer of SU’s Newhouse I building
62 de plume
63 Bagel alternative
64 SU’s mission, articulated by 37-Down
65 Was sick
66 Didn’t give way
67 After taxes
70 Jiffy
71 X
72 Investor-philanthropist George
73 Native-born Israeli
74 Madison’s successor
75 Ready to go
77 Candidate’s goal
78 Cape
80 Cold War initials
81 South and Main, at SU
84 Brunch drink
85 Designations for some retired SU professors
87 Souvenir from Hawaii
88 Apollo spacecraft feature
89 Hearsay and not scientific, as evidence
90 “The Girl From Ipanema” singer Gilberto
92 Conversation fillers, in 78-Across
93 Sirens
95 Authority
97 “__ takers?”
98 Advantage
99 Italian currency, once
100 Longoria and others
101 Sign away
103 Taunt
104 “Horton Hears ___” (Dr. Seuss)
106 Actress Hatcher
107 First place?
108 Partial darkness
110 Newman Koppel ’60, H’82, educated at SU
112 Pale
113 Eccentric

DOWN
1 Frilly material
2 Mashad’s country
3 SU’s main library
4 Double-checks copy
5 Comments from the stage
6 Noted SU donor of the past
7 Cover
8 Latin 101 word
9 Big rig
10 Tournament ranking
11 Actor with seven Emmys
12 Where SU’s Lubin House is: Abbr.
13 Best Picture of 1984
14 Rock’s __ Crue
15 Home of some SU students
16 Catcher’s glove
17 Symbol of stubbornness
18 Iowa State U. site
20 Works on canvas
21 “Ich bin __ Berliner” (JFK)
22 Works on canvas
23 One of the three actors in "The Parent Trap"
24 “Jekyll & Hyde” star Linda __
25 37-Down’s partner, Abbr.
26 “The Girl From Ipanema” singer Gilberto
27 Some sa v ings
28 Some sa v ings
29 Frilly material
31 Common batteries
32 The Concorde was one: Abbr.
33 Where a mouse rests?
34 Omelette ingredient
35 Common batteries
36 Famous van Gogh oil
37 SU’s 11th Chancellor
38 Longwinded
39 When repeated, an island near Tahiti
40 They keep you connected to SU
42 SU publication since 1903 (with "The")
43 About, on a memo
44 What many SU scholarships are based on
46 Bench with a back
47 House pest
48 Aquarium attraction
50 Split off from the band
52 Skating maneuver
53 Takes on again
54 Some sa v ings
55 Takes on again
56 Suffixed with auction
57 Altimas and Sentras, for two
58 Photo
59 Patronizes, as a restaurant
61 Where a mouse rests?
62 Didn’t give way
67 After taxes
68 Polite refusal
69 Was sick
70 Jiffy
71 X
72 Investor-philanthropist George
73 Native-born Israeli
74 Madison’s successor
75 Ready to go
77 Candidate’s goal
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See page 62 for the answers.