

LETTERS TO A YOUNG PUZZLER

How Margaret Farrar, the first New York Times puzzle editor, became my mentor. By Will Shortz

As the fourth crossword editor for The New York Times, I am lucky to have known all of my predecessors, including the first one, the brilliant Margaret Farrar, who oversaw The Times's puzzles from 1942 to 1969.

We began corresponding in 1976, when Margaret accepted a puzzle of mine for her Simon & Schuster crossword series. I was 24. Margaret was 79. I followed up with more submissions, and soon we were exchanging letters regularly.

We first met in person in April 1977, and for three hours we discussed the history and craft of crosswords. "Our long conversational lunch was a treat for me, too," she wrote afterward. "I guess I love to talk shop."

A closer association began in 1978 when I invited Margaret to the first American Crossword Puzzle Tournament to present the prizes. She accepted and returned each year thereafter, until her death in 1984.

Over the eight years of our friendship, Margaret wrote dozens of times, from short notes to lengthy letters. The following excerpts show the style and substance of her writing.

Every budding crossword constructor needs a mentor. Margaret was mine. Her letters taught me a great deal, and I still admire the classic elegance of the puzzles she edited. After all these years she remains my idol.

up with this paragraph: "If any challenge delights Maleska more than a puzzle, it is this prospect of passing on to a second generation the secrets of his obscure, painstaking trade. Yet there may be no second generation. Apparently the ranks of apprenticeship are growing smaller. Suddenly Maleska pauses, and puts on a more thoughtful expression. "You know, that's something that never occurred to me before. You were asking what kinds of people make puzzles. Do you realize that so very few of them are young:"

I disagree completely with this point of view. I see young people on buses and subways solving puzzles, and I see them buying the books, and I have a number of youthful constructors, perhaps not many as young as you are, but it is certainly a skill well spread out over the generations. I would like to have your viewpoint on this important matter.

Eugene was factually right. In the 1970s most Times crossword constructors were older. I would estimate the average age then was 55 and up. Nowadays the average is closer to 40, with many teenagers and twentysomethings making puzzles. So Margaret's optimism about the future of crosswords was well placed.

I sent Margaret sample pages of my first book, "Brain Games," as well as the accompanying letter I sent to publishers with the manuscript.

first crack at it for the next regular Series, which is 129, now in the works. It is indeed a very clever puzzle, but as you say, it's not strictly a crossword, and in my memory, it was experimented with way back in the 1930s, but this is no reason why you should not go forth with a new version, very ingeniously done.

Again, my problem with it is the old one — we didn't persevere with the circular pattern because it must be dizzy-making to

'I MAY WELL BE COVERED IN BARNACLES, BUT I DO BELIEVE THAT THE CROSSWORD SERIES IS NOT REALLY THE PLACE TO EXPERIMENT WITH NEW TYPES OF WORD PUZZLES.'

9/26/77

Thank you for the very welcome 17x17 puzzle, which will give Series 115 a lively start. ...

Your POISON definition seemed too obvious, and your CAIRO definition could go out of date. These are my only comments on that handsome puzzle!

These were both good points. Today I generally avoid time-sensitive clues in Times crosswords, so the puzzles don't go out of date too quickly.

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12/26/77

I have a special interest in groups of puzzlers. If you read the Village Voice interview with Eugene Maleska [May 9, 1977], you may remember that it ended

4/10/78

Very much interested to have the sample pages of your book. ...

Parenthetically, and for your eye alone, your letter to a potential publisher sounds somewhat naïve, and makes one wonder if you have any sense of humor. There is, I'm sure, a better way to write such a letter. Lead off with a couple of cliffhangers chosen carefully from your book so that the editor's interest is aroused, and he will get a fair idea of what he's going to see. Then a paragraph saying these are samples from a collection, and describe the book briefly. Then, in the body of the letter, say, "My accreditations are:" and then list them. In this manner you avoid a lot of pompous-sounding sentences beginning with "I." Then give the information that you're enclosing sample sets. ...

P.S. I seem to be doling out too much good advice. Forgive me.

Of course I took all this wise counsel. Based partly on Margaret's recommendation, Simon & Schuster published the first of my three "Brain Games" volumes in 1979.

11/2/78

You are interested rightly in the birth of the thematic puzzle. I do believe it was pioneered by Harold T. Bers. He was a first-rate crossword maker, a top advertising man and full of bright ideas. He died prematurely, at far too young an age, in 1961. ... He did initiate the surprise theme, such as inserting all the names of cigarettes in the daily Times puzzles, or all the names of automobiles, and that sort of thing. The definitions, of course, were straight, and the solver slowly caught onto the fact he was discovering Luckies and Camels and Chesterfields in the same puzzle.

3/2/82

It's really thoughtful of you to send me the newfangled circular puzzle, giving me a

some proportion of the solvers. It also seems a good deal of work to come up with 31 words, which is the count I arrive at.

I may well be covered in barnacles, but I do believe that the crossword Series is not really the place to experiment with new types of word puzzles. These very definitely fit into the Games Magazine, which is very definitely experimental, so I wish you a very happy time with it and its progeny.

The puzzle Margaret was referring to was a Spiral (like the one on the cover), which remains one of the most popular types of puzzles I make. But she was right. The Spiral was better suited to Games magazine, where I was an editor, than a crossword puzzle collection. Incidentally, I apply this same philosophy to The Times crossword today. As playful, experimental and even rule-breaking as The Times puzzle sometimes is, it must feel and look like a crossword.

This was Margaret's last letter to me, written the day she died.

6/11/84

You may not have seen this odd [puzzle] clipping from a London paper sent me by my daughter who had spent a sabbatical year in Cambridge. It looks like something that might be very useful to you at some stage of this game of ours. ...

There seems to be no specific date on this clipping, but there are many clues. ...

I hope it may come in handy for you some fine day. It's certainly a mystery story, and I commend it to you.

Yours as ever,
Margaret Farrar