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# Puzzling

**MERL****REAGLE****LIVES****TO****TEASE****YOUR****BRAIN.**

By John Grossmann

Long before I first shake hands with master crossword constructor Merl Reagle, he's already tossed a word puzzle my way. Exchanging e-mails in advance of my flight to Tampa, Florida, he jumbles the name of my hotel and challenges me: What famous person is an anagram of A RADISSON?

IRA, DON, SARA . . . I start tugging out some first names. RON, RONA . . . I don't know it yet, but I'll have a chance to get even. (I finally realize the answer is Diana Ross.)

Like many fans of Reagle's playful, oddly observant and often outrageously pun-filled Sunday crosswords, I've always wanted to meet the prolific genius who constructs such great grids they often wow even his peers. "Merl's on just about everyone's list of favorite crossword constructors—including mine," says puzzeldom's current eminence, Will Shortz, editor of *The New York Times* crossword puzzle. "Taken as a whole, his themes are consistently fresher and funnier than anyone else's. And he's one of the greatest puzzlemakers at interlocking words in intricate, wide-open patterns. He doesn't use computer assistance, either." Reagle's puzzle "Gridlock," which can be downloaded as a pdf by [clicking here](#) (the solution can be downloaded by [clicking here](#)), is widely hailed by puzzle aficionados as a masterwork, a dazzlingly difficult, thematically elegant intersection of three vertical 21s with three horizontal 21s. In puzzling parlance, a great grid.

Moreover, the 53-year-old Reagle has successfully solved the big puzzle. He's one of a handful of constructors, at best, able to make a living solely by creating and cluing crosswords. No small challenge, considering that the prestigious New York Times pays \$100 for a 15-by-15 square daily

crossword and \$350 for a 21-by-21 Sunday grid. Most crossword gigs pay a good bit less.

With the assistance of his wife, Marie, Reagle has successfully branded his distinctive puzzles by self-syndicating them. In addition to *The San Francisco Chronicle* (his puzzles have been published in a San Francisco newspaper every Sunday since October 1985), Reagle's puzzles, many of them laugh-out-loud funny, now also appear in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* and *The Hartford (Connecticut) Courant*—12 papers in all. Some years back, he clued readers to pencil in the bunched words AVONTWOBUY and CHOREKNACK. In the middle of the grid he clued for DRACULA. (Say aloud the first two word combinations with a thick Transylvanian accent and you'll begin to appreciate Reagle's ransacking of the English language.) He makes the bulk of his money, a handsome six-figure income, by leveraging his name and, nearly alone in the industry, retaining the rights to his puzzles, which he resells in book form under his own imprint, PuzzleWorks.

But a cleverly themed Sunday puzzle every week—how does he do it? For one thing, his puzzling pilot light is always on, his lightning-quick, weirdly wired mind constantly registering and assessing the playful and comedic possibilities in popular culture and everyday objects. Even the blackberry jam I spread on my morning muffin is fair game, I learn in the wake of meeting Reagle for breakfast at his normal haunt, where he often begins a puzzle in a pencil-drawn 21-by-21 grid on a sheet of graph paper.

## MERL'S PEARLS

Signed copies of Merl Reagle's Sunday crossword anthologies, Volumes 1–9 (excluding No. 7) are available online at [www.sundaycrosswords.com](http://www.sundaycrosswords.com), or by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to Crosswords, Box 15066-D, Tampa, Florida 33684.

Test your crossword skills! Download "**Gridlock**" by Merl Reagle.  
[Puzzle pdf](#)  
[Solution pdf](#)

He arrives dressed in a navy blue polo shirt, blue slacks and sneakers, carrying his traveling office: a couple of spiral notebooks and a boxy leather bag chock-full of his tools of the trade. He has a full head of dark brown hair and a full beard, and flashes a perpetually reappearing smile. He orders "the usual"—written by the waiter as Merl's Fetish, a feta cheese omelet with egg whites, tomatoes instead of potatoes, cantaloupe in place of toast. And hot water—to pour atop a tea bag brought from home, as today he prefers his own strawberry-kiwi to the restaurant's selection.

aren't skinny-dipping anymore in the backyard?" until he can write them in his notebook of choice, a pocket-sized annual diary, the first three months of which have captured potential sparks of puzzle themes. Perhaps a growing list of celebrity spoonerisms—DICK CLARK to CLICK DARK, as in turning off a light switch; and THELONIOUS MONK to MELONIOUS THUNK, the sound a cantaloupe makes when you hit it. Or perhaps famous people's favorite Chinese dishes—home run slugger Mark McGwire's being BATCRACKSOONDUCK.

Reagle's bag contains a tape recorder for saving his wry, behind-the-wheel observations (maybe a street sign, NEIGHBORHOOD WATCH, which rattles around in his mind and emerges, "So, Tarzan, how come you and Jane

Merl Reagle was 6 when he constructed his first crossword puzzle—interlacing the names of several of his classmates. "I thought I invented the crossword," he laughs. A bookish kid who read the dictionary for fun, he easily traces the roots of his puzzling prowess. "If I'd gotten my dad's brains and my mother's sense of humor I'd be nowhere," he says.

At the urging of a seventh-grade teacher in Tucson, Arizona, Reagle started submitting crosswords to *The New York Times*, and his first puzzle was published in the Times in 1966 when he was 16. Until just recently, when nudged aside by a 15-year-old constructor, Reagle held the distinction of being the youngest crossword constructor ever published in the Times. Approaching 1,000 Sunday grids later, this three-time TV-game-show writer has matured into perhaps the nation's most prolific puzzle constructor, a one-man crossword factory.

"I've always felt that if you take the gags out of my puzzles they still have to work as humor," says Reagle, explaining in part why many of his puzzles remain so firmly in his mind that even years later he can call up examples of his themed answers. For instance, THATSASTEWPOTIDEA and FANNYFIRMER, which appeared in a puzzle called "Cookbooks I'd Like to See." "It's very similar to *Mad Magazine* or David Letterman's Top 10 List, only I have to keep it clean and it has to obey certain rules," he says.

Wry observations ("jumbo shrimp" and "military intelligence") that comedian George Carlin might stitch into stand-up, Reagle lays flat but still effervescent on the page. "PALM SPRINGS. 'Slinkies,' right?" he says, chuckling at his peculiar perception. "Or GLADALLOVER. 'What happens when a storage bag

factory explodes?" Maybe he was, as he likes to say, born to fit words into grids. For his 50th birthday, he hid his vowel-filled name in crossword answers like HAMMERLOCK and FETZER EAGLE PEAK MERLOT.

On the way out of the restaurant, Reagle spies the word OCEANS on the eatery's daily blackboard trivia question. Without breaking stride, he asks, "What kind of watercraft is an anagram of OCEAN?" (Canoe.)

He's become so adept at anagrams that he offers me a bar bet that has padded his wallet plenty over the years. "Give me six common six-letter words, each one scrambled up, like the Daily Jumble. If I can't unscramble them all in 10 seconds, I'll give you 20 bucks. If I can, you give me 10 bucks."

"You're on," I say, and when I rejoin him later to watch him construct a puzzle, I hand him the following list: SUCMOU, SEHECE, DSIARP, MOAGBL, MRIPEE, ESHRAE. I eye my watch as he gets the first word (mucous) and the second (cheese) in two ticks of the second hand. Tick. Tick. Tick. He jumps to word number four. Gets it quickly (gambol)—and five (empire) and six (hearse) equally fast. By the time he *finally* says the third word (rapids), 17 seconds have elapsed. Reagle fishes a 20 out of his wallet and hands it to me. Somehow, I feel better about "Diana Ross." Knowing that late this year he and Marie will announce a nationwide crossword contest to benefit efforts to beat Alzheimer's disease, I return the bill, telling him to add the \$20 to the money they'll raise from entry fees.

Reagle generally does the bulk of his puzzle construction behind closed blinds in a bedroom-turned-office in his Tampa ranch house on Lake Butler. On his computer screen, he has begun by entering the theme words of his next puzzle in likely locations. Running the entire width of the puzzle in the third row of spaces, he's typed in BLACKBERRIESCORNSYRUP. Three lines down, he's entered the following 21 letters: HIGHFRUCTOSECORNSYRUP. Three spaces up from the bottom, this familiar horizontal string appears: SEEDLESSBLACKBERRYJAM.

Gadzooks! (Now I'm thinking in crosswordese, where as a rule, the higher the Scrabble letter point count, the better the word.) Reagle has turned my little plastic tub of restaurant fruit preserve into a puzzle called "How Sweet It Is." I spot this combination of phrases on three separate lines in the center of the grid:

WITHANAMELIKE  
YOUKNOWWHAT  
ITHASTOBEGOOD

Many crossword constructors rely heavily on a computer program, called Crossword Compiler, to help them fill their grids. Reagle does so only rarely, so trained is his mind to perceive words and phrases in snippets of letters and hold many possible fills in mind while he logically works a small section of a puzzle in his head. Such as the spaces under the last four letters of SYRUP (see Grid 1).

"The easiest thing to do is to use lots of S's, especially at the ends of the words," Reagle says. "Thus, it's very tempting to use that lower P as the first letter of POSSESS, allowing three of the four Down words to end in S [see Grid 2]. But S's can be crutches, and while that fill is certainly acceptable, it lacks *oomph*.

"The two critical areas in this corner are the two Down words starting with HY and U, simply because there are so few possibilities.

"The most interesting four-letter U word I know is UTAH, because there are so many colorful ways to clue it. That would put an H as the sixth letter of the P word going across, and ordinarily that would be a tough go—there aren't too many P\_ \_ \_H\_ words—but since my head is sort of an instant word-cruncher, I can see almost immediately that PIRANHA will work, and that HYDRA will fall right in with it [see Grid 3], and size up rather quickly that this corner is doable with those words as

anchors.

"Then it's just a matter of filling in what's left. Not a single S in sight, and lots of vibrant, colorful words to boot."

After completing the entire grid, in about an hour and a quarter, Reagle spots a problem. Below the first W in his theme phrase, YOUKNOWWHAT, he has written HAT, meaning that the word WHAT is repeated, overlapping, in the puzzle. A crossword no-no. He begins this particular fix by altering the second WHAT to WHAP, in the middle of the grid, which creates a cascade of changes all the way down to the far left corner. Just another day at the office.

Generally, Reagle takes a break after filling a grid, but for my benefit, he starts cluing his puzzle immediately, invoking Alfred Hitchcock. "Hitchcock loved to plot his movies but actually hated to shoot them," he says. "Cluing for me is fun, up to a point, if it's going well." He begins with the first of his theme answers, 23 Across: "Ingredients No. 1 and No. 2."

Soon it's on to the rest of the clues, starting in the upper left-hand corner of the grid with 1 Across (WISER). "More like Merlin," he says aloud as he types. CROC he clues as "Capt. Hook nemesis." Explains Reagle, "That's why he had the hook, and 'captain' abbreviated implies the shortened form of 'crocodile.'" The fill for 20 Across is NEAT. "Um . . . 'Apple-pie order.'" VOILA. "Let's see . . . 'Lid remover's exclamation.'" AID he clues as "First follower?" Having already embellished his clues with alliteration, literary allusion and metaphor, Reagle employs a riddle—"It may ring or have a ring"—to dial up the difficulty in coming up with the common word EAR.

Crossword puzzles, it seems, are Merl Reagle's way of emptying his mind of its incessant drumbeat of words and letters and the humor and linguistic happenstance he divines all around him like a pop-culture savant. It's clear why the medium appeals to him. But why do so many of us like to solve them? Reagle has obviously puzzled over this question himself.

"There are several reasons," he says. "One: The people who like to do crossword puzzles like to get their brains started in the morning, and they often say that a crossword puzzle, with coffee, kick-starts their brain. That's why the daily puzzles are smaller, so you can do them and go. Two: There's something, I think, about empty squares that you have to fill in that has some sort of irresistible draw to the human mind.

"Another reason," he continues. "The American taste and the worldwide taste for mystery stories, anything with a surprise ending. A crossword puzzle is a little mystery. You're trying to figure out little clues, it's going someplace, there's often some little fillip, some little surprise at the end. Finally, people say crosswords help them exercise their mind in the same [health-promoting] way they exercise their body—they think they're keeping Alzheimer's away."

If that's indeed the case, in the year 2050 Merl Reagle will probably be burying his name in a 100th-birthday puzzle. 📌

*Before he moved to Mountain Lakes, New Jersey, John Grossmann regularly curled up with Merl Reagle's crossword courtesy of the Sunday Philadelphia Inquirer.*

PHOTO BY BURK UZZLE



Grid 1



Grid 2



Grid 3