

# Enigmatology with David Kwong

## Ologies Podcast

### December 6, 2022

Oh hey, it's the banana peel in your purse because you can't find a trash can, Alie Ward, and this is *Ologies*, this is a podcast about things. This week, crossword puzzles. Really? Crossword puzzles? There's an ology for this? Hell yeah, there is. So, an enigmatologist is someone who studies and writes word, or math, or logic puzzles. 'Enigma' comes from the Greek word for 'a dark saying', or a riddle, or a tale. And enigmatology, it's a real discipline, it's a real thing. It was founded in 1974 by a guy named Will Shortz, who created his own major in puzzles at Indiana University. And that guy, Will Shortz is now the head of the *New York Times* crossword.

And this guest has been a friend for years; he's always been a friend who was cooler than me, smarter than me by a long shot, and capable of pulling acts of extreme evil with the gifts he has but is actually a really solid dude. He graduated from Harvard University, little place named Harvard, where he did a thesis on magic, and has written crosswords for the *New York Times* since 2006 and he also launched this interactive one-man show called, *The Enigmatist*, which just had a run last year at the Geffen Playhouse in LA. I caught the show and I've wanted to have him on for years but we were both traveling and I was taking care of my dad this summer so we just met up at his home in the winding hills above Hollywood and we posted up in his living room.

But before we get to the conversation, a quick thanks to everyone at Patreon. Hi! Thanks for supporting the show. It costs \$1 or more a month and you can submit questions; that is at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://Patreon.com/Ologies). Merch is also available at [OlogiesMerch.com](https://OlogiesMerch.com) including some brand-new "Spirit of Health or Goblin Damned" merch, inspired by the Vampirology episodes, so get yourself some of that. And thanks to everyone who is subscribing, and rating, and reviewing, I read all the reviews including this recent one by KansasJustGotGayer, who wrote:

*I've been listening to this every day while I clean houses for my job and I'm learning so much, I LOVE IT! It's making me consider switching my major to do some ecology alongside animation. Who knows? But anyway, thank you for the show, it truly takes my job from tedious to tantalizing.*

Thank you, KansasJustGotGayer, and also congrats to Kansas on having you there because you seem cool. Okay, onto the conversation with magician, puzzle maker, puzzle solver, speaker, performer, brainiac, friend, and enigmatologist, David Kwong.

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**Alie:** First thing I'll have you do to check your mic is if you can say- I love that you have a Rubik's Cube going already. *[laughs]*

**David:** I'm David Kwong, he/him.

**Alie:** I've known you for quite some time, years.

**David:** Yeah, we met at The Magic Castle, right?

**Alie:** We did meet at The Magic Castle! Holy shit, I forgot! How hard is it to become a magician at The Magic Castle?

**David:** It's quite prestigious. There are a lot of people that aspire to come to LA and perform there for a week and you have to audition your material. And then there are the magician members, and you do have to do a 15-minute or 3-trick routine to a committee to be accepted as a magician member.

**Aside:** Okay, so quick aside. The Magic Castle is a restaurant and a private club in the Hills, right above the Hollywood Walk of Fame. It was built in 1909 and it has turrets, and stained glass, and a dress code involving sport coats, and you can only get in through a personal invite from a magician. And inside it's got red carpet and brass fixtures, dinner smells like gravy there, and there are magic shows happening in little theaters in corners all over the place. It's truly surreal. And David has been an approved and esteemed member for 13 years. So yes, there is a semisecret cabal of Hollywood magicians, and he is one of them.

**Alie:** Which came first for you, magic or puzzles?

**David:** Magic came first, at the least the home videos show me doing things when I was about 6, 7 years old. I think every kid has that phase, they get a magic trick set. And then puzzles came from my mother, who is the history professor, so there was this love for word games and Scrabble. [*"Ah-ha-ha! Triple word score."*] And then it wasn't until much later in life when I decided to fuse those things together. So, in 2010 I threw a 30th birthday party for myself – that tells you how old I am – and I threw a party at The Magic Castle, and decided I wanted to do a trick for everybody. And I came up with this crossword puzzle routine that has become my signature effect ever since.

**Alie:** It's absolutely mind-blowing. I watched you perform this at the Geffen, and I think about it often. I still am like, "How did he do it?!"

**Aside:** So, I saw his one-man show, *The Enigmatist*, last winter during its run at the Geffen, and it was the most intellectually engaging live show I've ever been to. Puzzles, on puzzles, on puzzles for the audience to solve, and it was thrilling to learn I sucked so bad at them. But David has talked about puzzles and magic publicly before, during his 2014 TED Talk.

[clip from David's TED Talk, "Two nerdy obsessions meet – and it's magic":]

*Puzzles and magic. I work in what most people think are two distinct fields, but I believe they are the same. I am both a magician and New York Times crossword puzzle constructor, which basically means I've taken the world's two nerdiest hobbies and combined them into one career.*

**David:** There's a great tradition of puzzles and magic overlapping. A lot of the books from the turn of the last century, the magic books, have a puzzle section, and then there are famous magicians that, Martin Gardner and the mathematicians, or mathemagicians if you will, that feature the overlap of numbers, and probability, and data, and shuffling playing cards. There's a great tradition in it. For me, it was more that the lightbulb turned on that I could distinguish myself, differentiate myself from everybody else in the field by doing a different type of magic.

**Alie:** Have you ever gotten drunk and accidentally told someone how some work?

**David:** Umm... not really. [*Alie laughs*] It depends what it is. I'll say this, my approach to magic is already one that's fairly transparent. The show that you saw at the Geffen, *The Enigmatist*, starts with me revealing how a trick works, I put up on the screen the, saw a lady in half trick from 1921, and I'm not out to ruin anyone's magic show but I enjoy describing the principles of illusion to people and putting forth that it's all tricks, it's all misdirection, and it's a puzzle for you to figure out. And I don't pretend to have superpowers and I think that is what makes me a little bit different than most magicians that, on some level, are pretending to channel the powers from beyond. But there's a small sect of magicians that acknowledge right up front that it's all tricks. Penn and Teller famously, for decades, have been doing that.

[clip from Penn & Teller show:]

*Guest: So, you didn't read my mind just then?*

*Penn: Well, there's no such thing, it's absolutely lies. We did a trick.*

*Guest: A trick?*

*Penn: An absolute trick.*

*Guest: So, it is a trick.*

*Penn: All that stuff is tricks.*

And you get some real mechanics and practitioners of sleight of hand who also say, "None of this is real, I'm just a step ahead of you," and that can be very entertaining.

**Alie:** When it comes to making crossword puzzles, obviously you must have been very good at it; you did it from a young age, I imagine. Who writes these, how many people are writing crossword puzzles versus who is doing them? I feel like I didn't even think about crossword puzzles being written by someone until I met you. I sort of figured they were just birthed from a stone somewhere. How did you start?

**David:** Okay, well my love for word games and competitive Scrabble, it's no surprise that I found crossword construction, known as cruciverbalism, or a cruciverbalist is one who constructs crosswords. So, *cruca*, meaning 'cross' like crucifix and verbal meaning word. [*"I like that."*] I started just after college, so I've been doing it about 20 years. I had a friend Kevan Choset, who showed me the ropes and we've collaborated on a number of puzzles.

The *New York Times* and most other publications are freelance. Anyone can mail one in and if you're listening to this and you're encouraged to do so, reach out and I'm happy to give you a few tips. It's gotten much more competitive now, in the pandemic, it exploded. So, the *New York Times*, it used to be like, you would have to wait 6 months to hear back. They may still say that, but I just know that they're getting dozens and dozens a day and we're in a golden age of puzzles. There are a lot of independent crossword resources now, crossword publications. *The New Yorker* has one, I think *New York Magazine* has one, *The Browser*, they're all over the place, a lot of indie blogs feature them. So, lot of places to submit your puzzles.

**Alie:** But what do you think of the word 'enigmatology' from an etymological standpoint?

**David:** That sentence was very hard to say.

**Alie:** Thank you. [*laughs*]

**David:** Enigmatology from an etymological... [*both laugh*] Enigmatology was coined, I believe, by Will Shortz, or at least he made it famous because he went to college at Indiana University and created this major for himself. So, we all bow to the great puzzle guru, Will Shortz, he's a lovely guy, he's been a friend and a mentor for years, and enigmatology is the study of puzzles. I took a page out of that book, and I combined enigma and enigmatology with an "-ist" type of word like a hypnotist, an illusionist, a mentalist, and I came up with the enigmatist.

**Alie:** It's perfect. Also, I love that someone who constructs crossword puzzles can just make up words if they want. That's one thing I've learned here. [*laughs*]

**David:** We made up cruciverbalist and it's in some dictionaries but not all.

**Alie:** There's no rules.

**Aside:** If you're writing them, or maybe you're just solving them, or maybe you're intimidated by them.

**Alie:** Do you ever look into the neuroscience of puzzles and magic and why our brains want to solve things?

**David:** Sure. What I consider often is that we are wired to solve problems, and I think that the first people had to figure out how to get their food and if you go left, you'll avoid the saber-toothed tiger and if you go right, you'll be able to cross the river by knocking a tree over and using it as a bridge. These puzzles... we figure things out to survive, so I think it goes back to the beginning of time and it helps us make order out of chaos.

Another way to look at recreational puzzles is... I'm not sure if I entirely agree with it but I'll say it anyway. I've heard some people put forth that puzzles are kind of like pain, you are subjecting your brain to this challenge, and it's stressful, and you work at it, and you work at it, and you work at it, and finally you solve it, you have that enormous release, this Aha!-moment of, "I triumphed, I figured it out." And there's a basic human need to overcome adversity like that.

**Aside:** For some light reading on this you can crack open the *Journal of Human Brain Mappings'* August 2018 edition for the study titled, "Ultra-high-field fMRI insights on insight: Neural correlates of the Aha!-moment," which took a bunch of German volunteers willing to get stuffed into a functional MRI machine while doing word puzzles. They were given simple tasks: try to figure out what word connects three other words. Like, house, bark, and apple, what's the common word? ["Hold on."] Tree. Treehouse, tree bark, apple tree. So, when the volunteers figured it out, they were to press a button and then the fMRI was like a brain paparazzi, flashing, going off, seeing what's happening.

And the researchers found that no matter the level of difficulty, that solving the puzzle caused, "Robust subcortical activity changes in the bilateral thalamus, hippocampus, and the dopaminergic midbrain comprising ventral tegmental area, nucleus accumbens, and caudate nucleus." What the fuck does that mean? It means your brain gets tickled and then you release dopamine, and it feels so nice. So yes, we like overcoming adversity.

**Alie:** Especially in a way that is low stakes. It's not like I'm trying to jump between buildings. I'm like, "Figured out the Wordle," a triumph a day is all I need maybe.

When it starts with a crossword puzzle, and I'm going to admit that I fucking suck at crossword puzzles and it's one of those things that I don't know why I'm bad at it. I like Bananagrams, I like Wordle, I suck at Scrabble, but I have so much trivia and facts in my mind, but when it comes to crossword puzzles, I just stare blankly at them and I don't know why and I'm ashamed of it.

**David:** No, don't be ashamed of it.

**Alie:** [laughs] Why are some people good at it and how do you get good?

**David:** First of all, start with Monday, that's the easiest day of the week, everyone can do a Monday puzzle.

**Alie:** "Everyone," I'm going to say, okay.

**David:** The *New York Times*, it gets harder throughout the week. Monday through Thursday are themed puzzles. Thursday is when it gets really tricky; things are upside down and multiple letters in a square and it gets really devious. Friday and Saturday are themeless, big open grids, they're much harder. And Sunday goes back to being a themed puzzle, it's sort of an extra big Thursday. But start with Monday, everybody can do it.

And don't be so hard on yourself because the crossword constructors' goal is to fool you to some extent, is to hold back the reveal as long as possible so that when you get to it, you have this Aha!-moment and again, you have this explosion of, "Oh my god, I'm smart, I figured it out." And this is

why I think there's so much in common between puzzles and magic, because a good puzzle misdirects you and you think something else is going on and there's a twist to it and then finally, you figure it out. And the clues are meant to be deceptive as well, they purposely use wordplay to mess with your brain. And you get better at them when you see those patterns, when you start to expect that.

So, every time I see the word 'hero' I'm immediately thinking, "This is probably about a sub sandwich and not Superman." [Alie laughs] Every time I... And I've just learned this over time, when I see 'cream' for example, I immediately know the answer is 'trio', Eric Clapton's group was Cream, it has nothing to do with what you put in your coffee. So, there are these quick little triggers where I remember, it's pattern recognition. And the people that win the crossword tournaments every year for speed, the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament and a handful of others, the people that win those are usually math and music people. It's not a verbal thing, you are writing down letters but it's data driven, it is recall, it's pattern recognition.

**Alie:** What kind of patterns are in there?

**David:** Well, I think it's not so much visual patterns. If you see an S and a V then you're already thinking Sven or Svelt, you know, right? It's quick recall from the clues and it's not being misdirected by that first layer that's meant to deceive you. It's cutting through that and knowing exactly what they're getting to.

**Alie:** When you're at a gathering or a cocktail party or something and it comes up that you write crossword puzzles, do you instantly have a report with someone if they're like, "I do it every day."?

**David:** Yeah, it happens all the time and more often than not it's, "My grandmother does it every single day, in pen, no pencil allowed," and I say, respect, that's an OG solver.

**Alie:** [laughs] Do you use a pencil or a pen?

**David:** I'm pretty much all computer now just for ease, though for variety puzzles, cryptic puzzles, and things from puzzle hunts, which we can talk about in a second, I am now using my iPad and the digital pencil because there's a lot to keep track of, and there are various colors, and things are hidden all over the place.

**Alie:** What is a cryptic puzzle?

**David:** So, a cryptic crossword is, it's the British style and I think it's the most sophisticated word puzzle out there, and every clue consists of diabolical wordplay. The wordplay, the hint that unlocks the answer is right in front of you, hidden within that sentence.

**Aside:** So, cryptic crosswords, news to me, I'd never even heard of them. They're more popular in the UK where they originated, but typically, the answer is hidden in the clue, like one example I found in a *Guardian* article, the clue is, "Cooking equipment taken back from heiress I tormented." So, "Taken back from," indicates it's backwards and hidden in the words, "Heiress I tormented," backwards, is the word "Rotisserie." What?!

I kept looking for cryptic crossword examples, I even resorted to getting ass-deep in the Wikipedia page for cryptic crosswords, and I just have to share this one clue example. So, the clue is, "Very sad unfinished story about rising smoke." What's the answer? Fuck if I know. But "Very sad unfinished story about rising smoke," is broken down thusly. You ready for this? "Very sad" is the definition, "Unfinished story" gives T-A-L which is the word 'tale' with one letter missing because it's unfinished. "Rising smoke," gives the word, 'ragic', because cigar is a smoke, and this is a down clue so, rising indicates that cigar should be written backwards, ragic. "About" in the clue means that the letters of T-A-L, the unfinished story, should be put on either side of 'ragic', giving the

answer: Tragical. So, “Very sad unfinished story about rising smoke,” gives you, “Tragical.” And I’m like, “I have enough problems in my life, I don’t need cryptic crosswords,” but some people love them.

David later emailed me a cryptic crossword clue example saying, “*Ologies* host from a wild, wild area,” and after a few minutes I experienced robust subcortical activity changes in the bilateral thalamus, hippocampus, and the dopaminergic midbrain because the first “Wild” indicates it’ll be an anagram because it’s wild, and “A wild area” is an anagram for Alie Ward. So, cryptics, the Russian nesting dolls of puzzles.

**David:** But there’s anagrams, it’s words hidden between other words, it’s words going backwards. The *New York Times* runs about one a month now and then there are brilliant, brilliant puzzle makers that are members of The National Puzzlers’ League. And I think Mark Halpin is my favorite puzzle designer, he makes the most beautiful puzzles. This past Labor Day, I solved his annual Labor Day Puzzle Hunt; it’s like a holiday for me. I do it with my friend Craig Mazin, the screenwriter and producer, and we block out the world [*Alie laughs*] and spend the entire long weekend solving his puzzle hunt. And what a puzzle hunt is, is it is many puzzles, 10 puzzles say, where every single answer is funneled into the final puzzle which is the meta puzzle to reveal the final ultimate answer.

**Aside:** So, Mark Halpin, just a side note, has a ton of puzzles on his website and what? He’s also an accomplished stage designer and an associate professor of stage design at the University of Cincinnati. Mark, pick a lane! Be excellent at one thing only please, leave some accomplishments for the rest of us, okay? How dare? But yes, he makes extraordinarily complex and really challenging puzzles, within puzzles, within puzzles.

**Alie:** And do you feel like those meta puzzles, these mega, these cryptic ones, these very hard ones, do you feel like simpler ones like Wordle have been a gateway for people in the last couple years?

**David:** Absolutely. Gateway is the right term for it. I always say that the mini crossword for the *New York Times* is the gateway drug to the big one. It’s very successful and these things that just take a couple of minutes are putting puzzles in the hands of millions of people. I do Wordle every morning.

**Alie:** You do! I was wondering what you thought of it because it’s so simple compared to other puzzles. But is there something in that simplicity that you can do it while you’re putting in your contact lenses or whatever? [*“While I’m on the toilet.”*]

**David:** It’s brilliant. Josh Wardle, who created Wordle, he took an old format, Mastermind and there’s a few other board games, but he made it so clean, and simple, and digestible, and the social sharing of it is really what caused it to spread like wildfire.

**Aside:** Okay, so real quick, in case you don’t know this origin story of Wordle. A software engineer named Jason Wardle created this game because his partner loves word games. And on November 1, 2021, there were 90 daily users. By Christmas, there were 300,000, and by the end of January 2022, 10 million people were playing daily. So, Wardle sold Wordle that month, in January. He’s like, “I’m out, I don’t want to manage this,” for a few million bucks to the *New York Times* and we all play it every day still on my family text thread. And your PodGram, Fancy Nancy, has excelled for years at Words With Friends and naturally she kicks our asses at Wordle.

**Alie:** Do you do the same opening one every time or do you just think of a five-letter word that comes in your head?

**David:** I change it because I get bored. But a lot of people like ‘audio’.

**Alie:** Audio! I've never tried that. I tried 'toile'. 'Rogue' is a good one.

**David:** Uh-huh, get those vowels out.

**Alie:** Audio.

**David:** Soare, is a type of hawk or something, a bird, I don't really know but it works; soare. A lot of people like 'raise'.

**Alie:** Oh, raise is a good one.

**Aside:** So, a soare means a young hawk or a falcon, which is great if you're just a fledgling Wordler.

**Alie:** I think you're right that the social aspect is part of puzzles and being in a café and seeing someone doing the same crossword puzzle that you might be doing, that sort of shared misery and delight, you know? *[both laugh]* What about Scrabble? How ruthless are you? Do you win by just hundreds of points?

**David:** No, I'm pretty good and I can beat the average player, but at a tournament I would get destroyed because it comes down to what you've memorized, how much of the dictionary you know, and they know all of it. Talk about a real pattern recognition game. I know my two-letter words, my threes, I think most of the fours, you've got to know your vowel dumps, words that have a Q but no U, I know a lot of those.

**Aside:** According to [ScrabbleWordFinder.org](http://ScrabbleWordFinder.org) there are 47 acceptable Scrabble words that have a Q but no U. And a few of them at "Qi," like the Chinese energy for 11 points; there's "Qat," a leaf that's chewed as a stimulant of made into tea; and there's "Qin," the Chinese dynasty that built the Great Wall. And in Scrabble, there are also these things called Bingo Words and when you use all 7 of your letters, you get a 50-point bonus reward. And there's this one nationally ranked Scrabble champion named Mark Abadi who recommends looking for prefix and suffix letters like "un" or "pre" or adding "-est" or "-ing" to shorter words like, bingoing, for example, which is 8 letters, but you get the point. So yes, some is strategy and skill, and some is just memorizing lists and learning to scrabble as a verb, to speak in Scrabble.

**David:** For those of you that want to play Scrabble, learn those 100 or maybe it's up to 104, 2-letter words and you will double your score.

**Alie:** What are some of them?

**David:** Well, it starts with 'Aa', which is rough, cindery lava and...

**Alie:** *[hushed voice]* Oh my god. It's so infuriating. *[laughs]*

**David:** And goes all the way to 'Za', which is pizza which ruined the game of Scrabble. *[both laugh]*

**Alie:** How is that even a colloquialism?

**David:** Because someone in Brooklyn said, "I'm going to go get some za," and it became a thing. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** I feel like 4 people on Twitter said it in 2013 or something, you know?

**Aside:** I am incorrect. The word "Za" is a form of casual truncation, known as clipped slang, and 'za' has been around since the last 1960s so this one is on the Boomers. But it's had Scrabble's official approval since 2006.

**Alie:** I mean, how often are they having to change the Scrabble dictionary to be like, *[grunts]* "Fine."

**David:** I think it's every four years, they come out with a... It's always a big holiday when they announce the new words.

**Alie:** Can I ask you questions from listeners?

**David:** Yeah.

**Alie:** Okay. I just want to get into it because they had great ones; some very specific and some wanting strategies.

**Aside:** But before we solve your puzzling queries, let's first send some cash money to a cause of David's choice. And David told me that he frequently performs magic for children's hospitals via this great program called Lollipop Theater, it's a 501(c)(3) organization that brings movies to pediatric wards as well as a music program, entertainment-themed arts and crafts activities, and of course, magicians, if David is around. So, to learn more about them you can go to [LollipopTheater.org](http://LollipopTheater.org) which is linked in the show notes. And that donation was magically made possible by sponsors of the show.

[Ad Break]

Okay, let's get a clue and answer some questions.

**Alie:** Okay, I thought this was a great question, someone whose name is Miss Palindrome and Stephanie Leské, they wanted to know: Those games where the first word that jumps out with you is the word that is supposed to tell you something about your psyche, are those accurate? You know when you look at a word search and then suddenly, you're like, "Oh, those are the three words I noticed?"

**David:** I don't think they're accurate but you're also talking to a magician who is a- and magicians are the great skeptics, [Alie laughs] we kind of know how all the tricks work, which is why we don't believe in psychics and fortune tellers. If that works for you, go for it, people get a lot of answers and peace out of consulting things like that. But for me, I'm aware of the tricks, I know that there are words that are positioned strategically so that you choose them. I'll just say this, I'm always looking for a word that they did not mean to hide in there, so what can I find on the diagonal? Oh, I guess the word "Panda" is... [laughs]

**Aside:** So, a cursory search will deliver word puzzles that promise to predict your whole year, or your weekend, or your personality, even your hair type, based on the first three words you'll see. So, I'm about to have a voluminous, luscious, and full weekend, with my hair looking hopeful, and strong, and genius... I took a lot of those word search tests.

And I figured people were playing word search games on, like, Roman tablets but nope, they emerged around the same time as the word 'za', around the 1960s. And the inventor or word searches is kind of a point of disagreement among historians. One guy had his puzzles ripped off by a publisher he submitted to, but others think that word searches originated from the Spanish enigmatologist, Pedro Ocón de Oro, who called them *sopas de letras*, or soup of letters. But did the soup have any eggs?

**Alie:** Shelby Reardon, Zed Shirogane, Kevin Wilson all used the term "Easter eggs." They wanted to know: Are there ever hidden Easter eggs in crosswords? Do you ever sneak things in there like a little nod to your family or friends, just for you? Like a Wilhelm scream but in puzzles? [short scream, starts loud then fades]

**David:** I try to put family members' names in all the time but the cardinal rule is that the puzzle has to operate as normal, so it might just be like... My mother's name is Joan, so if I have a chance to put "Joan of Arc" in a clue, or my dad's name is Tai, so it might be "Mai Tai" or something, but you can't mess with something that millions of people are going to solve.



Now, that said, I am in cahoots with Will Shortz, and Will has let me hide things in the puzzle for my own purposes. My TED Talk, if you're interested, that really changed my career, that was timed with the *New York Times* crossword, so when I finished the TED Talk, I say:

[clip from David's TED Talk:]

*Ladies and gentlemen, we have today's New York Times. Many of you in the first couple of rows have it underneath your seats as well. Really dig, we hid them under there. See if you can fish out the newspaper and open up to the Arts section and you will find the crossword puzzle.*

And if you open it up, you'll see there's a hidden message in it. Now, that hidden message echoed what I was doing on stage, but Will made it very clear to me, "This has to be a normal Wednesday puzzle so, this is a bonus thing if people find it."

**Alie:** You got married three months ago. Did you...?

**David:** Nope.

**Alie:** Nope, obviously you didn't propose with a puzzle. Did you try to hide anything...?

**David:** I didn't do... No, I kept the magic and the puzzles out of it. I've helped a lot of people propose with puzzles and I've used magic tricks to help people propose, but I separated work from personal life. [laughs]

**Alie:** I wonder if she would have been expecting that. Does she do puzzles at all?

**David:** Well, I do have to throw her off the scent all the time. My wife is very clever and she's onto me, so I'm using every bit of misdirection I can to make it so that she doesn't see things coming.

**Alie:** Nice. I bet you'd throw the best surprise party.

**David:** When I proposed, I threw a surprise engagement party and yeah, it was all set up, she didn't see it coming, it was great.

**Alie:** [laughs] It's all the misdirection, it's the excuse to get you somewhere else that is what it all hinges on, right?

**David:** So, misdirection, I'll give you a fun little technical tidbit. There's a great Dutch magician named Tommy Wonder.

**Alie:** Real name.

**David:** Yup.

**Aside:** His actual name, Jacobus Maria Bemelman. ["Nice, nice, nice."]

**David:** And he said that misdirection is the art of giving people something of greater interest to pay attention to. So, bad misdirection in a magic show is, I want you to look somewhere else, so somebody comes out on the stage with a platter full of cookware and they drop it on the ground, and it clangs, and everybody looks over. That breaks the moment, and everybody knows that you were trying to distract them. But if you can bake the misdirection into your routine... So, if I want to steal something from my pocket, I'm going to reach up with my hand and pull a coin out of the air, a shiny coin, everybody's going to look up at that and enjoy that moment and my other hand is going for my pocket. So, you're giving people something else to enjoy while you sneak the next thing. So, I guess when it comes to a surprise party, [Alie laughs] give your partner another reason to get excited about something else, you know?

**Alie:** Yeah, instead of being like, “Ah, we gotta pick up the car from the shop.” [both laugh] “We gotta go pick up a bunch of dishware that I dropped in a parking lot.” [“Opa!”] That’s great advice. Okay, a lot of people had questions, I will list them in an aside.

**Aside:** Looking at your brains, Elijah, Frances Quinlan, Eli Jonathan, Ruby Bray, Winnie’s a Witch, Brandon J. Willis, Olga, Sam Moody, BeckyTheSassySeagrassScientist, Gracie Zrain, Alicen Meysing, Les Chats Gourmands, Will Kingan, Kylie M Smith, Dantooine, Elena Horn, Lani Bouwer, and first-time question-askers Em and Taylor Clinton, all of whom wanted to know...

**Alie:** About brain health in Pavka34, first-time question-asker’s words: Are puzzle games used to help people with Dementia? And Eli Jonathan wants to know: Do word games actually help preserve or improve cognitive abilities?

**David:** I don’t have a scientific answer, but I think the studies are pretty clear that it works. I could tell you that my father just retired, and he immediately started doing logic puzzles and he does them all the time and I think it does keep the neurons firing.

**Aside:** Okay, so I looked into this, and several studies show that doing daily puzzles can keep your melon sharp. And in 2014 there was a paper published called, “Association of Crossword Puzzle Participation with Memory Decline in Persons Who Develop Dementia,” and it found that late-life crossword puzzle participation was associated with delayed onset of memory decline in people who developed Dementia. And then there was a 2018 study in the *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, and that reported that the frequency of word puzzle use is directly related to cognitive function in adults over the age of 50.

But these studies tend to be observational, so they can’t determine the cause and effect. Can the crosswords stave off Dementia? Neuroscientists think it might just be that daily puzzles keep you sharper overall so if you do develop Dementia, you’ll be starting from a higher cognitive baseline and the effects of Dementia wouldn’t be noticed for, on average, 2-and-a-half years, according to the Bronx 20-Year Longitudinal Aging Study. So, puzzles, come for the dopamine, stay for the tenuous grasp on reality and all that you’ve ever known or love.

**Alie:** Matt Thompson asked: What are some lesser-known word puzzles that we should be doing?

**David:** Well, I have to go back again and recommend the cryptic crossword, but they are very tough, and very fun, and very clever. A good puzzle makes you feel smart, that’s the mantra that comes from Will Shortz and trickles on down to all of us; it should be an enjoyable experience. And when you crack a good cryptic crossword, you feel really smart about yourself, and you also simultaneously respect the person who came up with the clever ruse that you just overcame, so cryptic crosswords are great.

We talked about Wordle, but if you want more of a challenge there’s Quordle, and Octordle, and there’s even 64ordle which is 64 Wordles at the same time. Every morning I wake up and I guess one word in the 64ordle to try to kid it because I’ve never gotten a perfect score on that and one day I’m going to.

**Aside:** So, first-time question-asker Hannah Boyd, who wanted to know his favorite alternate version of Wordle, let’s direct our attention to the landing page of 64ordle.au which says, “Sexaginta-Quattuordle, a monstrosity perpetrated by Catherine Cowie based on Sedecordle by Brad Bednar, based on Octordle by Kenneth Crawford, based on Quordle by Freddie Meyer, based on Dordle by Guilherme S Tows, based on Wordle by Josh Wardle.” So, I hopped on there and I tried solving all 64 Wordles at once, and after 5 minutes I experienced a kind of brain vertigo that made me physically nauseated and my throat was swelling with cortisol. So, the tagline of this giant, daily free word puzzle is, “Play as much as your dare. Every Sexaginta-Quattuordle is a

nightmare.” But maybe in an increasingly boiling planet, with an ongoing pandemic, and just the start of the next presidential campaigns, a playtime nightmare is preferable.

**Alie:** Do you stay off social media in a healthy way because you’re doing puzzles?

**David:** No. Everything is a juggling act. Yeah, I’m on there just like everybody else. *[both laugh]*

**Alie:** I was going to say, it’s probably so much better for you to be doing a Quordle than it is just to be like...

**David:** There’s a great puzzle community online so...

**Alie:** Oh, that’s lovely!

**David:** The Spelling Bee, sorry! I can’t believe that slipped my mind. The Spelling Bee I do every day with my mother on the phone. We started it in the pandemic, it’s the loveliest tradition. It’s another *New York Times* word game and it’s great. You have 7 letters, and you have to use the middle one and make as many words as you possibly can and it’s awesome.

**Alie:** Now, that is not an anagram one though, right?

**David:** Yeah, they are anagrams. Well, a pangram, pan meaning all, uses all the letters. So, there are sometimes several pangrams, which means those are all anagrams of each other. But anagram is just mixing of letters.

**Alie:** Some people, Paul Cirillo, Miranda Panda, Fuzzgoddess, Davis Born, Sarah Mathew, Anna Thompson, all had questions about, like in Sarah’s words: Why is it that some people like filling empty space, like Wordle or crosswords, while others like moving letters around like word scrambles. They are an empty space filler themselves. But yeah, is it a different part of the brain that fills things in versus unscrambles?

**David:** Wow, good question.

**Alie:** Right?

**David:** It’s a similar muscle but when you’re filling in the blank spaces, you are using logic in a different way to know what your possibilities are. With every letter it narrows the possibilities down and you’re drawing on your database of words to know what can still fit in there. Whereas when you have all the letters in front of you, it’s a little more of a physical exercise of moving things around and recognizing the patterns that are right in front of you. I like doing both.

**Alie:** Yeah. I feel like I have to really let my mind be more flexible and elastic because sometimes if I see a word scramble and it starts with ‘T-H’ all I can think of are ‘th’ words and I have to force myself to split the T and the H, you know what I mean? You’re like, “I can only see it as this one thing.” My brain gets stuck in that loop, you know?

**David:** Well, there’s a new word game that came out, a fun little thing you can do every morning that Adam Wagner made, it’s called Anigrams and it’s animal grams, sort of. These are the levels you can get to: owl, giraffe, dolphin, parrot, octopus, all the way to the goat, and you try to get to the goat. So basically, you have these letters, and you have to make words out of them.

**Aside:** This one is just a difficult delight, and it has nothing to do, really, with animals, don’t let that throw you. It’s just spelled A-N-I-G-R-A-M and the levels go up to goat, or Greatest Of All Time. And it starts with a 4-letter word scramble and then it adds a letter each level until you’ve got 9 letters to work with and the emojis of cute animals are just kind of a visual bonus. So, that is Anigrams.us

**Alie:** I like this game already. This is a new one?

**David:** Yeah, I think he put it out a month ago, a couple months ago.

**Alie:** Do you feel like since Wordle's--?

**David:** Yeah, it's exploded, these daily games have exploded. There are all sorts of spin-offs. A lot of them are plays on the word, "Wordle." So, you have Heardle, where you're listening to things, and you have Worldle where you're looking at the world and trying to recognize countries. I mean there's a movie recognition one that people are into now, movie scenes, they just give you a still and you have a number of guesses to figure out what movie it is.

**Aside:** This is called Framed.wtf and I played one round and based on pictures of a jungle and a guy in a cape, and some ogres, and a sword, I guessed *Lord of the Rings* and then *Eternals*, *Avatar*, and then I don't know, I just typed in the word "Winter" with a question mark. And finally, I gave up and I was trying to just burn through my guesses, and I just put in like, *Magic Mike*. It was the fantasy movie, *Warcraft*, so my bad. Framed WTF indeed.

**Alie:** Do you think people are doing it out of a sense of play or out of a sense of, "Oh, maybe I can have the next big hit."?

**David:** Making them? Both.

**Alie:** Both. Okay.

**David:** I mean, 64ordle, 64 Wordles is not trying to be the next big hit.

**Alie:** That's a very good point. Cate Muenker wants to know: Okay David, so you might create the Sunday crossword, but can you do them yourself?

**David:** Oh yeah, I can solve them. I'm not the fastest. I would say the Sunday *New York Times* puzzle takes me about 12 to 15 minutes.

**Alie:** That's it?!

**David:** The world's best are doing it in 7 maybe, less.

**Alie:** [*whispers*] Oh my gosh, oh my gosh.

**David:** People are posting... This last Monday's puzzle was all, like, Hollywood references. It was like Shonda Rhimes was the... it was things like rhymed with Shonda like Honda. And I saw people on Twitter posting times that were under 2 minutes, [*Alie gasps*] on the computer presumably, but like, you know, 1 minute 30. Monday puzzle, I can blaze right through it.

**Aside:** People who suck at crosswords, people who are scared of crosswords, I am your people. And I did this week's Monday puzzle, and I finished a whole crossword. It took me 25 minutes... 25 minutes, okay? Some people get it in like 2 minutes. But let me tell you that when I finally got that "Cesar dressing?" was a clue for the word 'toga', I was like, "Y'all got me, that was a good one." Monday crosswords are designed for children, marine mammals, or maybe Martians who landed just a few months ago, or me, and I loved it.

**Alie:** Felix Wolfe wanted to know: Who decides what are easy, medium, and hard clues?

**David:** It starts with a constructor in that when you think of a theme, you kind of envision what day it might be on. So, if there's multiple letters in a square, it's certainly going on a Thursday or a Sunday. If you're doing a very easy bit of wordplay, it's probably a Monday puzzle, and you write the clues accordingly. But the clues are changeable and the editing staff at the *Times* will change the clues to calibrate the puzzle and maybe make it a Tuesday instead of a Monday. And then also, they're changing clues because they want to avoid what might have just been used because the words repeat all the time. So, if 'Oreo' was... Oreo is in the puzzle all the time. [*Alie laughs*] If it was

in the day before and it was clued as, “Black and white cookie,” the next day it’s going to be like, “Double stuf company” or I don’t know...

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Peta Luck says: I heard that puzzles that appear in newspapers are easier to do later in the day because people use solutions from the puzzle more in their chit-chat during the day. Is there something to that? Do words get implanted in us subconsciously?

**David:** Yeah, I hear that point that people are talking about things around the water cooler and if you hear some answer, then it’s going to be in your subconscious, and you can put it in the puzzle. I think more on that line of thinking is this idea of tip-of-the-tongue memory, and that is when you’re trying to think of something, and you can’t recall, and you can’t recall it, and then it just pops into your head an hour later, that’s tip-of-the-tongue memory, and that’s a very real thing. Your brain is working to solve problems like that and crosswords even when you’re not thinking about it.

**Alie:** So, is that why if you put something away and you come back to it, you might have...?

**David:** Yes.

**Alie:** Does that help with your work-life balance, knowing that, like, let’s say you’re stuck on a problem or something that you could go to the beach, or go to a petting zoo or something and come back and be better at it?

**David:** Certainly, for puzzle construction. Something will just pop into my head, and I’m searching for some word or some pattern that I could use to get out of some corner of a puzzle that I was stuck in, and it will just pop in. So, it helps constructors as well.

**Aside:** Patrons JustUsBears, Krista Jones, Maren Proffit, and Shelby Mills wanted to know about sources for inspiration, and if he starts with the solutions or the clues? How does he do it?

**Alie:** Do you have something on your Notes app or some sort of tiny notepad that you write ideas as they come to you?

**David:** Yeah, I have, let’s see... my computer is open so, like, Puzzle and Crossword Ideas, yeah like...

**Alie:** They’re in a spreadsheet?! How did I expect anything less? Oh my gosh, this feels like espionage.

**David:** So, first of all, don’t use any of these, by the way, listeners. No, you can, whatever. Look at Kumail Nanjiani, that’s got to be in a puzzle. Come on, those letters are insane!

**Alie:** Yes! Absolutely.

**Aside:** You may know Kumail Nanjiani from *The Big Sick*, or *Eternals*, or *Chippendales*. Great actor, wonderful dude, and I’m absolutely bragging when I say that he has been to my birthday party. So, I’ve known Kumail for probably a decade socially and back when he hosted *The Meltdown*, this comedy show in the back of a comic book store on Sunset Boulevard, I remember Kumail telling this story about how his last name was slang for a cooch and I was like, “What is that story?” Well, folks use something called rhyming slang.

For example, why call the steps stairs when you can call them “apples and pears,” with more syllables and no relation to stairs? A joke might make you “bubble bath,” rather than laugh. And if you’re in between paychecks, you’re not broke, according to UK slang, you’re “coals and coke.” “satin and silk” means milk, and “rats and mice” are a pair of dice. I’m like, what is this slang? I had no idea anything about rhyming slang.

So, back to Glasgow. Kumail Nanjiani happens to have a second cousin who was an esteemed Scottish broadcast journalist, and in the local brogue, Shareen Nanjiani rhymes ever so slightly

with the word “fanny,” which is your front butt. So, a Shareen Nanjiani means a babymaker there. So, different parts of the world have all kinds of linguistic angles. On that note...

**Alie:** Joe Porfido wanted to know: How much consideration is given to the diversity of the puzzle solvers? Some people would be more familiar with certain words than others.

**David:** We’re in a revolution right now. The crossword, just like everywhere else, has really tried to become more diverse and they’ve done a great job over at the *New York Times*. You’re seeing fewer and fewer puzzles that are just themed on, like, oldies songs from the 1960s. [*Alie laughs*] And then clueing can be adjusted so, again, instead of referencing just white people from the 1950s... they’ve just done a great job over there. And then they’re trying to really democratize the submissions process so it’s not just constructors of old, but anyone can go through the portal now and submit a crossword. And you’re seeing people from all walks of life submit crosswords and that leads to more diverse content as well. So, you know, hats off to the *New York Times*, they’ve done a great job with that.

**Alie:** It kind of dovetails to Jennavieve Jellybean, who committed assault by asking: Why are they all geared toward old people? Sincerely, a 25-year-old who likes old people games except for the ‘80s trivia parts. Perhaps I’m looking in the wrong places but the crosswords often always contain pop culture trivia from the ‘80s, which is an automatic “No” because I wasn’t alive then. [*both laugh*]

**David:** Yeah, yeah, I hear you.

**Alie:** Trivia from the ‘80s I’m like... [*slight moan*] I get it.

**David:** It’s changing, and the crossword audience is getting younger and broader, and I think the *New York Times* is hitting a wide demographic, so there’s a mix of stuff. But if you go to the indie crosswords, they skew much younger.

**Alie:** There should be crosswords for what year you were born because I know that if I tried to do a Gen Z crossword, I would not get it. But then again, there are probably... the Cream trio is not something I would get. They should just gear it like...

**David:** Cream, yeah that was a reference of a white band from the ‘60s.

**Aside:** So, where does the youth of today go to crossword? David likes Rex Parker’s blog; he trusts the links there. There’s also Crossword Fiend and AVX Words, which bills itself as “Crosswords for the not-faint of heart.” And I’m starting to realize that word puzzles have kind of the same vibe as hot sauce. Like a variety of pain levels that people can find invigorating and use as a badge of survival, and then for others, they’re just a horror show to be avoided at all costs. Hot sauce people are just hot sauce people. [*“Why do they make those sauces so hot?”*]

**Alie:** Do all of the enigmatologists... do they kind of know each other?

**David:** It’s a very small community.

**Alie:** Are you guys on a WhatsApp thread that’s like, “Hey guys... good one.”

**David:** [*chuckles*] No, we’d all be ripping each other’s puzzles apart. [*Alie laughs*] No, that’s not fair. It’s actually a very supportive community.

**Alie:** Well, on that note, Hannah Nolen said: In the *New York Times* puzzle this week, one of the answers was “shade tree” however the entire word shade was in one square. How? Why?

**David:** I missed that one but shade like, you would just shade in the square as a black thing and that was probably the... as a black square?

**Alie:** I don’t know, I mean, “However, the entire word shade was in one square.”

**David:** Oh, I remember it! Yes! That was in the lower right-hand corner. [*Alie laughs*] What's the question? How, why is that allowed?

**Alie:** Yes, how? How? Why? [*both laugh*]

**David:** It's allowed when there is a consistent rule to explain what's going on. You can't just throw a curveball in there, but if the whole puzzle has one consistent, tricky rule in it, then it's up to the solver to figure that out, and unlock that, and have that Aha!-moment and hopefully you feel smart when you figure it out. That was a very weird little corner. [*Alie laughs*] I remember kind of raising an eyebrow when I saw that. I don't think it was my favorite, but you know... Look, constructors are always trying to push the envelope a little bit, right?

**Alie:** Mm-hm, it just feels like, "We've got one rule here and it's one letter per box," is what I thought.

**David:** No, you can do multiple words in a box. That's called a rebus.

**Alie:** Oh! Someone asked about a rebus.

**David:** Here, I'll show you some of the rebus puzzles I've made, shall we?

**Alie:** Yeah. I'm learning new vocabulary. Has rebus ever been a clue in a puzzle? Do you know what I mean?

**David:** A clue?

**Alie:** Like just the word rebus is the answer.

**David:** The answer? Yeah, sure. Let's see, ready? I'm on the database.

**Aside:** You can scour past puzzles at the website [XWordInfo.com](http://XWordInfo.com), which I will link for you, my nerds.

**Alie:** A rebus of a rebus.

**David:** Rebus has been in 25 times [*Alie gasps*] since Will Shortz took over.

**Alie:** Oh, that's the database.

**David:** It was clued most recently on July 2, 2022, as "Image problem?" Like a puzzle, "Image?"

**Alie:** See, I would see "Image problem" and I would instantly be, like, a publicist, branding.

**David:** But the question mark is what tells you, that's the nomenclature for, "There's some wordplay going on here."

**Alie:** Really? I didn't realize that that was the tip of the hat.

**Aside:** Speaking of tips, patrons Audrey Lloyd, Becca Christensen, Melissa Berger, Jessie Dragon, first-time askers Becca Van Tassel and Carolyn Cullen, wanted to know, in Carolyn's words: What are some tips, tricks, and strategies for tackling a crossword?

**Alie:** Are there any other things like that that are, once you do puzzles a lot, you'll go, "Oh, okay. When they..."

**David:** Yeah, if there's an abbreviation in the clue, there's an abbreviation in the answer. If there's a first name in the clue, they're usually going for a first name in the answer. So, if it was... Let's see, what's a good movie to reference?

**Alie:** I keep thinking of volcano movies. How about *Jurassic World*?

**David:** Okay, *Jurassic World*. So, that was Chris Pratt and Bryce Dallas Howard, right? So, if the answer were 'Bryce', it would be, "Chris' co-star in *Jurassic World*."

**Alie:** Ohhh, but if it were, “Pratt’s costar,” it might be, ‘Howard’?

**David:** Yeah.

**Alie:** Ohhh!

**David:** It’s a little tricky there because she’s Dallas-Howard but...

**Alie:** Okay, that’s a good point, that’s a good point. Okay, that’s super helpful.

**David:** God, my rigidity, I’m just like, “No, you can’t do that.” [*laughs*]

**Alie:** No, that’s helpful, that’s helpful! This is helpful. Calista Donohoe wants to know: Are there any clues that you’re particularly proud of? Where you’re like, “That was a good one.”

**David:** I can tell you puzzles I’m proud of, is probably the easiest way to do that. So, I made a Sunday puzzle with my friend Kevan that was a *Mad* magazine fold-in. So, you would fold the page on the dotted line, so the right side linked up with the left and there were words that ran across that. That took a couple years to make.

**Alie:** Oh my god.

**Aside:** This one was co-written with Kevan Choset, *New York Times*, Sunday, January 24, 2010, should ye dare attempt it.

**David:** This one I just called up here, we were talking about rebuses and this one is grid art. This is made to look like a panda, the black squares.

**Alie:** Oh my god. [*gasps*]

**David:** And then running across the middle there’s panda, but as you solve the puzzle you start to realize that that parses as P and A and there are P and A squares around the puzzle.

**Alie:** Oh... my... lord. So, there’s a lot of rebuses in that.

**David:** Yeah, there’s probably a dozen.

**Alie:** Wow.

**Aside:** I know what a rebus is now!

**David:** But you can see that it’s all cohesive. It says, “Popular zoo attraction or a hint to 11 squares in this puzzle.” Panda.

**Alie:** How long did it take you to work on that?

**David:** I probably spent a week on that, I don’t know. When you get really into it and you’re feeling the groove and you unplug everything and just work on that, yeah it probably took a week.

**Alie:** It’s funny too because I remember earlier you mentioned, “If I were to put in a word... panda,” which clearly, this was on your mind. Is that similar to how the subconscious works when you get people to guess certain things in a magic act or when you lead someone you kind of implant something in their brains so it’s at the top of their mind?

**David:** So, what did you mean exactly? I need you to rephrase, I didn’t quite catch that.

**Alie:** You had mentioned an example of a word earlier, and you used the word panda. [*playback: “I am always looking for the word that they did not mean to hide in there. Oh, I guess ‘panda.’”*] And clearly the word “panda” has been on your mind.

**David:** Oh, I did say that before. [*Alie laughs*] It’s a go-to word, I guess.



**Alie:** But is that similar like, how you kind of subconsciously get someone, lead someone to say an answer by putting it in their mind enough times where it's something on the tip of their tongue?

**David:** For magic?

**Alie:** Mm-hm, for magic.

**David:** For magic, for mentalism, you can get people to say things by influencing them. It doesn't always work, and you take risks to hope somebody will fall into that trap, and you always have a backup plan in case they don't say what you want them to say. But that's just fun for us to try to pull that off.

**Alie:** I was wondering earlier when you said panda why the word 'panda' was on your mind, and now I know.

**David:** I don't know why.

**Alie:** That's great, I think that that proves so many points.

**Aside:** But back to the puzzle he loves the most.

**David:** Let me show you the puzzle I'm maybe most proud of. This was a Halloween puzzle. What year was it? 2013. I have in the upper left-hand corner the word 'wolfman' and then in the middle of the puzzle vertically, you have the word 'mirrors'. So, wolfman is on the left-hand side of the puzzle, on the right-hand side it says, "Wolfman seeing through mirrors," and you have to write it backward on the right. And these are all Universal monster movies. So, then you have, "Universal Studios' role of 1931" is 'monster' from Frankenstein's Monster, seen through mirrors is 'retsnom', which is 'monster' backward, right? Then here you have 'phantom', and over here you have phantom backward from *Phantom of the Opera*. But then in the lower left-hand corner, you have 'Dracula'... seen through the mirrors and there's nothing on the right-hand side.

**Alie:** Oh, fuck you! [*laughs*]

**David:** So, no reflection for Dracula so there's a blank space in the puzzle. And what's fun here is as you look at this, you think everything is one letter longer than it really is because there's a blank space you have to account for.

**Alie:** Ohhh. Oh my gosh. So, all of those downs.

**David:** Yeah.

**Alie:** [*gasps*] Evil.

**David:** So, it's a little story, right? And it's a little, you take them down this path, and they see what's going on and they figure out what the initial trick is, but then like a good magic trick, there's a twist and you get to the bottom of it, and you try to reflect 'Dracula' and you can't.

**Alie:** Oh my gosh.

**Aside:** The set ups, the punchlines, the long game, then that sweet, sweet dopamine at the moment of a payoff.

**David:** It is storytelling, and we tell our lives through narrative, and it's how we make sense of the world. It's set up and payoff; it's foreshadowing, and reveal, and conclusion and I think we run our lives through that, absolutely.

**Alie:** Yeah, our brains are wired to love that, somehow.

**David:** We like completion.

**Alie:** You know, you were saying that we are geared toward completion and how satisfying that is but there must be something that is not satisfying, there must be something that sucks about writing puzzles. Is it ire from the public? Is it anxiety? Is it... What sucks?

**David:** What sucks? Yeah, when people don't get it, when they don't appreciate what you wrote. So, I had a *New York Times* Sunday crossword that I joke was the Sunday crossword America hated. [*both laugh*]

**Alie:** Oh shit.

**David:** I'll show it to you. It was...

**Alie:** What was the date? Do you remember the date on this?

**David:** Yeah, I'm going to get it right here. Let me look it up. It was really upsetting.

**Alie:** Did you know it was going to be a tough one?

**David:** It's not that it was tough. It's that people did not get the extra level of complexity to it.

**Alie:** [*laughs*] They didn't get you.

**David:** Okay, so here we go. It was called, "Could you repeat that number?" *New York Times* Sunday puzzle, September 6, 2020. Have a ball guys, it's not... [*laughs*] And the way it worked was the clues with double numbers, 11, 22, 33, 44, all the way up to 99, you have to picture the clue, there's the number and then the clue follows it. You would read that number as the word "Double." So, for clue 33, it read, "33. 07 film." I it reads as, "Double 07 film." And the answer was, 'You only live twice'. This is really, I thought, very clever and mean. But for 44 across, it's, "U preceder." And I wanted everyone to write the letter T, which comes before U but if you read it correctly it's, "Double U preceder" which is V. I'll give you a couple more examples. "Day competitor," was "Double day competitor," publishing house, 'Little, Brown and Company' was the answer. "Tree alternative," "Doubletree alternative," was 'Intercontinental'.

**Alie:** [*quivering voice*] Oh my god! [*laughs*]

**David:** But what happened is, you can miss that layer to it, there's no apparent trickiness to the answer. When you have an answer that has a bit of a joke to it or there's letters kind of mixed up or replaced, or a funny phrase that comes out of it then you know that some transformation happened, and something occurred. But people took, "07 film" and they solved for, 'You only live twice', and they thought, "Okay, well that's a movie and that's a real phrase and I guess that answers the clue, "07 film," but they didn't think like, why? It's not really an 07 film, it's a *double* 07 film.

**Aside:** It's like when you laugh at a joke, but you don't fully get it and who among us hasn't done that every day of their lives?

**Alie:** Yeah.

**David:** I think I was asking too much. The title was, "Could you repeat that number?" and...

**Alie:** What kind of feedback did you get? Did you get some people who were like, "Respect, man."

**David:** I got respect from certain constructors that... I think, Mike Selinker, an amazing puzzle writer, wrote on Twitter, "Do you realize how hard it was for David to get these thematic answers to fall at the double clue numbers?" It was really, really hard. And the second half to that question was, "And does anyone care?" [*Alie laughs*] He kind of pointed out that it was a feat of construction that's not really worth it, right? Only a few people noticed. I don't know, it was the puzzle America hated. [*Alie laughs*] But I just have to point out that for fun, at 111 across, the clue is, "A suggestion."

**Alie:** [*murmurs*] Double a suggestion.

**David:** And the answer is 'route'. [*"What? Oh."*] and the reason it is 'route' is because you read that as, "AAA suggestion." It's at 111, so that was a bonus little answer there.

**Alie:** Oh my gosh, oh my gosh.

**Aside:** I have no idea how that works, and that's okay.

**Alie:** I mean...

**David:** It was a good puzzle, people! Come on!

**Alie:** It was a good puzzle. [*both laugh*] I think that if you've stumped some people that is a job well done, a bit. You know? You just pushed them a little bit past their limit, that's good. I think that's good. What about a favorite word or your favorite thing about the job?

**David:** Let's see. Favorite word. I like 'quixotry', which is related to 'quixotic'. That was the highest-scoring Scrabble word of all time, that was something like 380 points or something. No, maybe it was like... Let's look it up. Sorry... 'Quixotry' scored 365 points. Yeah.

**Alie:** Dang. Out of one word. Someone's got to have that tattooed on their body.

**David:** Because it hid two triple word scores at the same time, which is like your holy grail, trip-trip in Scrabble. 365 points, yeah.

**Alie:** Nice, so that might be a favorite word. [*"Quixotic."*]

**David:** Yeah, what was the other question? What do I dislike about the job?

**Alie:** What do you love the most?

**David:** Oh! I love performing *The Enigmatist*, and I hope you get a chance to come see it at some point. It's me just doing what I love onstage, and I've had so much fun talking about all this with you and doing a deep dive on these puzzles. The puzzle fans come out for it and people that want to learn about puzzles, and the whole show starts with kind of like an escape room that you have to solve to get into the theater and it's just... nerdfest. It's just a great time to love puzzles and games.

**Alie:** It's such a good show.

**Aside:** I had to cut out part of the interview here because of spoilers but let's just say, follow David Kwong on social media and hope that *The Enigmatist* has a theatrical run in your town.

**David:** And it's a very fun, interactive show. And as I said before, hopefully it makes people feel smart and that's the ultimate goal.

**Alie:** Thank you so much for doing this!

**David:** Oh, it was so fun.

**Alie:** This was the best.

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So, ask brainiacs some basic-ass questions because apparently learning keeps our lights on. So, follow him @DavidKwong on Instagram and Twitter, he is wonderful, I'll link that in the show notes. His website is DavidKwongMagic.com and he also sells this gorgeous card set called Enigmas, which features four of these special puzzle cards. He says they're not too hard, they just require you to think outside the box. So, solving all four puzzle cards in that deck unlocks this online puzzle hunt. So, those are at his website, it's an Enigmas deck, and that'll be linked on my website in case you need a really great gift idea. They were co-produced by David Shukan and Chris Chelko. And

David is also available for speaking gigs through his agents at CAA, and he's the author of an upcoming kids' book of magic tricks called, *How to Fool Your Parents*, which will be out in 2023, so look for that. So, look him up, he's great.

We are @Ologies on Twitter and Instagram, I'm @AlieWard on both. *Ologies* merch is available at OlogiesMerch.com. We have socks, and sweatshirts, and tote bags, and shirts, and stickers, OlogiesMerch.com. Thank you, Susan Hale for managing that and doing so much more for us. Erin Talbert admins the *Ologies* Podcast Facebook group with assists from Boni Dutch and Shannon Feltus. Emily White of The Wordary makes our professional transcripts, Caleb Patton bleeps episodes, those are available at AlieWard.com/Ologies-Extras. Kelly R. Dwyer does our website, and she can make yours.

We have kid-friendly and shorter episodes available called *Smologies*, they're right in this feed or you can find them all at AlieWard.com/Smologies. Thank you, Mercedes Maitland and Zeke Rodrigues Thomas of Mindjam Media for editing those. And extra editing this week was done by the wonderful Dave Christianson – thank you so much sir, excellent job – and also by Jarrett Sleeper of Mindjam Media who is both puzzling and magical in the best ways. And a huge, huge happy birthday to Noel Dilworth who is my right-hand lady, I do not how I would live without her. Happy birthday ballerina, you're the best.

And if you listen to the end of the episode, you know I tell you a secret. And this week's secret is that we just went to Tucson, Arizona for the Thanksgiving holiday. We visited Jarrett's fam, his aunt Emily, his grandma Sue, who is amazing. And we sat around, we played some word games. They love Bananagrams, as do I. His grandma is so good at Bananagrams, man. We were playing and all in a frenzy and then she shouted "Banana!" and she'd finished her tiles, and I looked over, she played some great words, one of them was, 'cunt'. [laughs] C-U-N-T. And I was like, "You... treasure. I love you." So, get out there, play some games, good for your brain. Okay, berbye.

*Transcribed by Aveline Malek at TheWordary.com*

### **Links to things we discussed:**

David Kwong's [website](#)

Follow David on [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#)

A donation went to [Lollipop Theater](#)

[The ENIGMAS playing card deck – with puzzles!](#)

[The origin of Enigmatology](#)

['The Enigmatist' written & performed by David Kwong at The Geffen Playhouse](#)

David's TED Talks ["The Science of Illusion"](#) and ["Two Nerdy Obsessions Meet — And It's Magic"](#)

[Ultra-high-field fMRI insights on insight: Neural correlates of the Aha!-moment](#)

[Why we call pizza 'za](#)

Games we mention: [Sexaginta-Quattuordle](#), [Framed](#), [Anigrams](#)

David's sources for Gen Z and Millennial-age puzzles: [AVCX](#), [Diary of a Crossword Fiend](#), [Rex Parker Does the NYT Crossword Puzzle](#)

[Database with Answers](#)

[This is your brain on Scrabble: Neural correlates of visual word recognition in competitive Scrabble players as measured during task and resting-state](#)

[Mark Halpin's puzzles](#)

[Mark Halpin's stage design](#)

[The backstory of Wordle](#)

[Association of Crossword Puzzle Participation with Memory Decline in Persons Who Develop Dementia](#)

[Regular crosswords and number puzzles linked to sharper brain in later life](#)

[An online investigation of the relationship between the frequency of word puzzle use and cognitive function in a large sample of older adults](#)

[Shareen Nanjiani is a celebrated Scottish newscaster – and Kumail's second cousin](#)

[Guide to Cockney Rhyming Slang](#)

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Theme song by Nick Thorburn