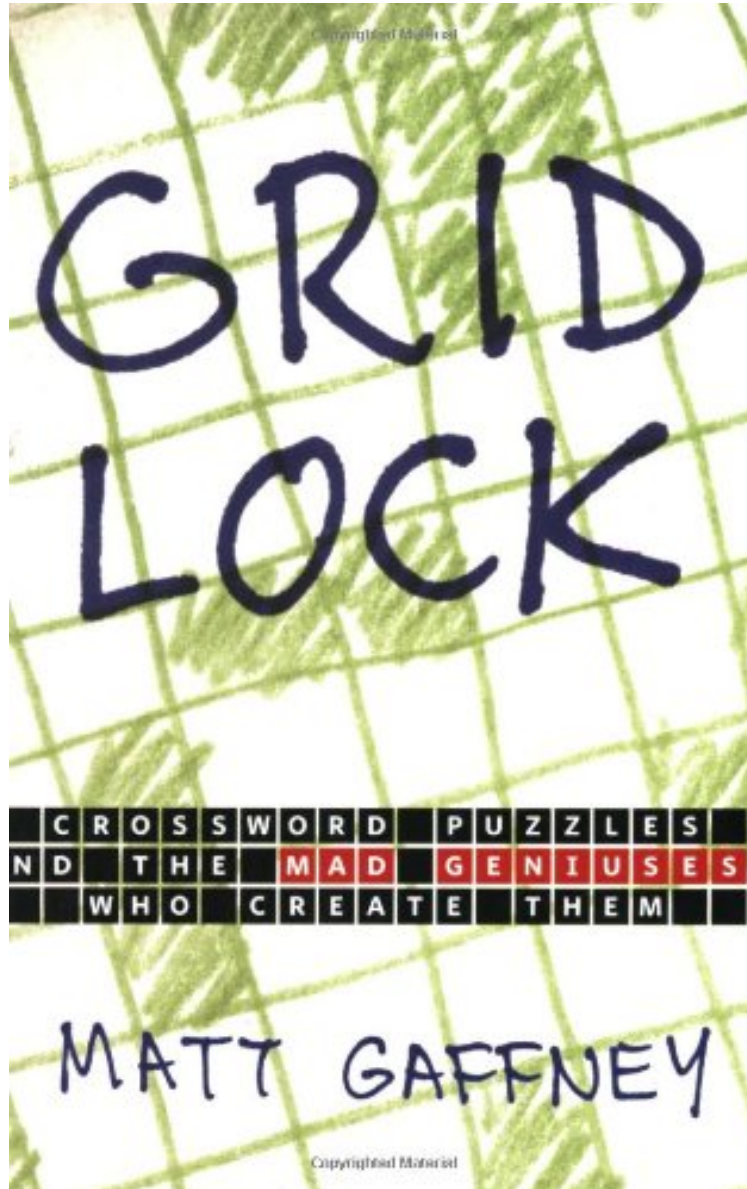


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# Gridlock: Crossword Puzzles and the Mad Geniuses Who Create Them

*Matt Gaffney*

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**Matt Gaffney : Gridlock: Crossword Puzzles and the Mad Geniuses Who Create Them** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Gridlock: Crossword Puzzles and the Mad Geniuses Who Create Them:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Light and Amusing Insight into CrosswordsBy northkonaGreat book for crossword geeks, and I am one, my favorite being the big Friday one in the Wall Street Journal. Recently got a book of old WSJ puzzles, and now playing them again after years of not doing so. That's what prompted me to buy Gridlock. The book is interesting, all kinds of info about puzzle construction. I must say, I was somewhat taken aback at the years of poverty the author tolerated while trying to sell his puzzles to publications, I think I would have had at least a paying job that covered the basics better, but each to his own. (I recently listened to the audiobook of Steve Martin's autobiography, and was shocked at the tough life he endured, terrible motels, on the road for years, so I guess people can show amazing stubbornness.) But about the book, for puzzle buffs, this is a fun read, the author writes well, and you find out a lot of surprising things. The author remarks that for himself, working a tough puzzle and conquering it puts a smile on his face. I know what he means, I worked one last night that was a tussle, but in the end, I finished it, and was well pleased. Try the book, it's a light and fun trip into the world of puzzle making.... PS: Weeks after I wrote my review, I read some other reviews that were highly critical of the book. I think those people were hoping for a different book, and they take the author to task for certain omissions, but again, that would be a different (and bigger) book. Some people thought the writing poor. I don't agree with that, I actually thought he wrote well. The one thing I did not like toward the end is some unfortunate descriptions of a few people's quirks, people who are still alive, and not deserving of being rudely described in what should be an entertaining book about crafting and solving puzzles. Black marks for doing that, nothing was gained, and it made me think the author is a jerk.

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. A fun read, but ends abruptlyBy A. D. NelsonThis was a fun read I consumed in a single sitting. I enjoyed it and learned a lot. However, it just ends seemingly in midthought. No summary or final thoughts, just a final chapter (a very good chapter) about meeting an eccentric puzzle creator, then I turn the page and it's just blank. But I don't feel cheated, just...puzzled. Lots of good insider info about life as a professional puzzle creator and about the puzzle tournament. I also enjoyed "meeting" the many other creators in the industry and hearing the detailed story of the author's specific career. I also enjoyed the chapter comparing human creators with software creators. And it turned me on to the author's line of puzzles called Jonesin' that I was previously unfamiliar with but are now my favorites. For those looking for advice on actually solving puzzles or for puzzles to solve, this isn't that kind of book. This makes an excellent companion piece to the WordPlay documentary, since it was written the next year. That brings up another point, this book was written in 2006, so some information is dated, but nothing of any real consequence.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating and thought-provokingBy rbnnThis is a marvelous book, intertwining biography and crossword construction. Now the ideal crossword revels in paradox, in the pun, in the word defined or used or linked up with others in an odd way. And Gaffney does an excellent job highlighting these paradoxes, these oxymorons, in the world too: where experts in the arcana of language don't go to college; where constructors whose work is enjoyed by millions of people cannot pay rent. Gaffney throughout does a masterful job of quietly displaying this quiet world. About half the book, I would say, is autobiographical; Gaffney's own somewhat tumultuous life fighting for himself in a strange world. The childhood reminisces, of the early crossword publications, of the strange uninterest of his teachers (who, one would think, would appreciate cruciverbalism), of the bizarre and unfair economy. Gaffney somehow adapts to all this and finally finds a niche. The other half comprises interviews or profiles of some famous crossword constructors, notably Will Shortz and Henry Hook. The Shortz bit is certainly fascinating, but the piece on Hook was one of the most moving profiles I have read in a while. At the same time it is a bit frustrating, how someone whose work has probably given people, quite literally, tens of millions of hours of pleasure is virtually destitute. Of course, Gaffney has his own theories about the economics that allow this to happen: maybe cruciverbalists are disorganized; or have competition from do-it-yourselfers; or perhaps Hook was not as forward in marketing himself as Gaffney (Gaffney is somewhat too glib vis-a-vis Hook, in general, actually, but Hook still stands as the book's most interesting character). Apart from the highlights of Shortz and Hook, there are a lot of extremely interesting side paths about computers, "hip" crosswords (a trend I disagree with, but recognize), and various characters at a crossword solving tournament. I found the stories about niche magazine crosswords, particularly one for "Tabby", a magazine about tabby cats, hilarious. There is just a lot that is fascinating here. That said, I had some small complaints about the writing. First of all, as is true in the vast majority of Kindle books, the Kindle transfer is poor. The transfer is still readable (which frankly puts it better than average) but there are several problems. There are occasionally extra spaces around punctuation marks (this is one of those enigmatic but characteristic Kindle typos), for example "Dave-- he's" on location 32 has a space after an em-dash; or "Longo 's database" at location 1294; or "switch- board.com" at 1803. More seriously, referring to an answer HIDEKI IRABU, the text quotes someone saying "notice his first name starts with an l, and his last name starts with I". Somehow a lowercase l was substituted for an uppercase I, which makes that sentence difficult to read. There is also a long block-quoted passage (from Merl Reagle's 1997 Philadelphia Inquirer piece) which, at least on my iPad app, is not sufficiently indented or otherwise distinguished from the surrounding text, making it difficult to figure out what the quote is. The excerpt does, for what it's worth, look OK on my Kindle for Mac app though: whether the fault of the iPad app unreadability lies with the publisher or with , I cannot say. Last but not least, the book ends, in my edition, with a footnote, apparently answering some clue many pages before. I don't even know what clue it is at this point. I

liked the writing, which was energetic and well-paced (certainly better than, say, the latest King abomination). One unfortunate editorial choice was a ridiculous explanation of what the word "jones" means in the context of drug addiction, to explain some pun - some puns, if the reader doesn't get it, shouldn't be explained. It just was absurd to explain this for the 5% of readers who don't already know the word, and it makes the author look out of touch. Enough cavils. Some nice quotes: "without rules there can be no beauty" (quoting Reagle, quoting Farrar) "Crosswords are an entertainment. Avoid things like death, disease, war and taxes - the subway solver gets enough of that in the rest of the paper." I frankly agree with Farrar (and Maleska) here. I think Shortz goes too far in allowing too many subjects into his puzzle. I mean, Shortz has many virtues, but this turning the crossword into some Showtime channel is not one of them. "Bizet called music a fine art but a sad profession".... "The life of a starving artist is indeed romantic, but only to those who aren't actually living it." "In the 1920s, world chess champion Jose Raoul Capablanca complained that chess was 'played out' ". (recounting a Henry Hook story) "This place near my house had a sign up that said they sold 'Essential Oils.' I went over and looked and thought, 'nope, I don't need 'em!' ". In sum, this was a charming book, at times quite funny, at times profoundly poignant.

In the spirit of *Word Freak* and *Searching for Bobby Fischer*, *Gridlock* is a chronicle of the quirky subculture of America's crossword puzzles. Tens of millions of Americans solve crossword puzzles regularly, but few know a thing about their genesis. Who writes crosswords, how and for God's sake, why? Matt Gaffney is one of two dozen people who earns a living as a cruciverbalist. In *Gridlock* he provides an insider's look at the people who put that puzzle in your paper every day. With verve and gusto, Gaffney traces his own starving-artist struggle to find paying puzzle gigs, including marketing hip crosswords to the Gen-X market. He then moves on to topics like the effect of computers on crossword writing, including a man versus machine battle he stages to see who writes better crosswords; the ever-evolving crossword puzzle book market, where a top-selling series now has books shaped like a toilet seat; and a trip to the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, where the "Cru" (collective slang noun meaning "the crossword puzzle writing community") hangs out in person once a year. *Gridlock* also features an interview with crossword rock star Will Shortz.

About the Author Matt Gaffney writes puzzles for the *Washington Post Magazine*, Simon Schuster's crossword book series, and Random House *Masterpiece Crosswords*.