

# 20 questions

Interview by Elisabeth Andrews Photography by Ben Weller

## for Will Shortz

### The New York Times Puzzle Editor and IU Grad

For most people, college majors fade into the background soon after graduation. But for Will Shortz, crossword editor for *The New York Times* and Puzzle-master for National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition Sunday*, his Indiana University degree in "enigmatology" — the study of puzzles — remains wholly relevant.

Originally from Crawfordsville, Indiana, Shortz, 55, has been fascinated with puzzles since childhood. Arriving in Bloomington in 1970, he created his own major that allowed him to research every aspect of puzzle culture and creation. He has since written over 300 books on crosswords, sudoku, and other brain-teasers, served as editor of *Games* magazine, and founded the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament, the subject of the 2006 feature film *Wordplay*.



(top to bottom to top)

"I started making puzzles when I was eight or nine."

"IU was a good school, in state, low tuition, why not?"

"I'm actually a shy guy. But I overcame the shyness."

"Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones are fans...they do *The New York Times* crossword together."

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16 Journal-Review  
 Thursday, Oct. 5, 1972

**WILLIAM F. SHORTZ, a junior at Indiana University where he is majoring in economics, served as a summer intern in the office of Seventh District Congressman John Myers. He is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Lyle Shortz who reside on Perrysville Road.**

From the *Crawfordsville Journal and Review*, 1972.  
 All newspaper clippings courtesy of Will's mom

Shortz's connections to Bloomington remain strong. He has promised to donate his collection of puzzle literature—the largest of its kind—to IU's Lilly Library. He is also this year's scheduled commencement speaker. On a recent visit, Shortz sat down with *Bloom* writer Elisabeth Andrews to answer 20 questions.

**BLOOM** What was your childhood like in the '50s in Crawfordsville, Indiana?

**SHORTZ** I grew up on an Arabian horse farm. I'd ride my pony every day. I spent a lot of time with horses, a lot of time in the woods. My brother and sister were nine and seven years older than me, respectively, so most of my childhood I was by myself.

When I was indoors, I did brainy sorts of things. I was a fanatic for puzzles, especially word puzzles. I liked brainteasers, math puzzles, and logic puzzles, anything that will twist the brain.

I started making puzzles when I was 8 or 9. I invented this game imagining that every name that I could spell from the letters in a town's name would be a new person living in the town. Crawfordsville has terrific letters, and with such a long name, according to my system, it has the highest population in Indiana.

I remember when I was very young my mom had a bridge club over, and to keep me quiet for the afternoon she took a piece of paper, ruled it into squares, and showed me how to enter long words across and up and down. And I was happy all afternoon making my little puzzles. When the bridge club left, my mother came in and numbered the grid for me and showed me how to write clues. So that was my first crossword.

**BLOOM** You published your first puzzle when you were only 14. When did you know you wanted a career in puzzles?

**SHORTZ** In the 8th grade, when I was asked to write a paper about what I wanted to do with my life, I said I wanted to be a professional puzzle maker. I didn't think it was honestly possible to do that. I thought it would mean a life of poverty because puzzles don't pay very much.

Around that time I wrote to a puzzle author, Dmitri Borgmann, whose book *Language on Vacation* came out in 1965. It's considered the seminal work on recreational word play. I told him about my interest in puzzles and asked him what he thought I could do to pursue this career. He wrote back all the different ways he could see me making a career in puzzles and he was basically saying, "Don't do it, it's impossible, you won't survive."

**BLOOM** What did your parents think of your ambitions?

**SHORTZ** My mom was a little more supportive than my dad. She was a writer and she was the one who encouraged me from the start to submit puzzles for publication. She was also the one who discovered the Individualized Major Program for me at IU. My dad took a little longer to come around because he was a corporate type. He was the personnel director for RR Donnelly, the printing company in Crawfordsville. To him, money was more important. But over the years, he finally came around too, once he saw that I was making a success of this.





Will and some favorite puzzles. *The Crawfordsville Journal and Review*, 1973

**BLOOM** You went to Indiana University and designed your own major in “enigmatology.” How did you decide that IU was the place to pursue your puzzle dreams?

**SHORTZ** My older brother Richard went to IU. I didn’t apply anywhere else. It just seemed IU was the place to go. It was a good school, in state, low tuition, why not?

I’m so lucky I did go to IU because there are only about a dozen universities in the country that have an innovative program like the Individualized Major Program. There are other schools that have programs where you can invent classes, or have a specialty within the English department or something, but to have a program where you can literally major in anything is a very unusual thing. That’s one reason IU was so great for me.

Secondly, the resources are wonderful because it’s a large university. You know, if you go to a school with 2,000 kids you’re not going to have the professors and the wide range of subjects that you have here at IU.

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The third great thing is the library here that is one of the best university libraries in the country. A number of my puzzle courses were independent study researching the history of puzzles. For example, my thesis was on the history of American word puzzles before 1860. To study this, I would literally go to the main library and go through microfilm and microfiche for every publication they had on file there published before 1860.

**BLOOM** What sort of classes fulfilled your enigmatology major?

**SHORTZ** I took a course my junior year on 20th-century word puzzles with a professor in the English department and a course on popular mathematical puzzles when I found a math professor willing to work with me. I took a course on logic puzzles with a professor in philosophy and a course on the psychology of puzzles through a professor of psychology.



And I took a course on crossword magazines through a professor in journalism.

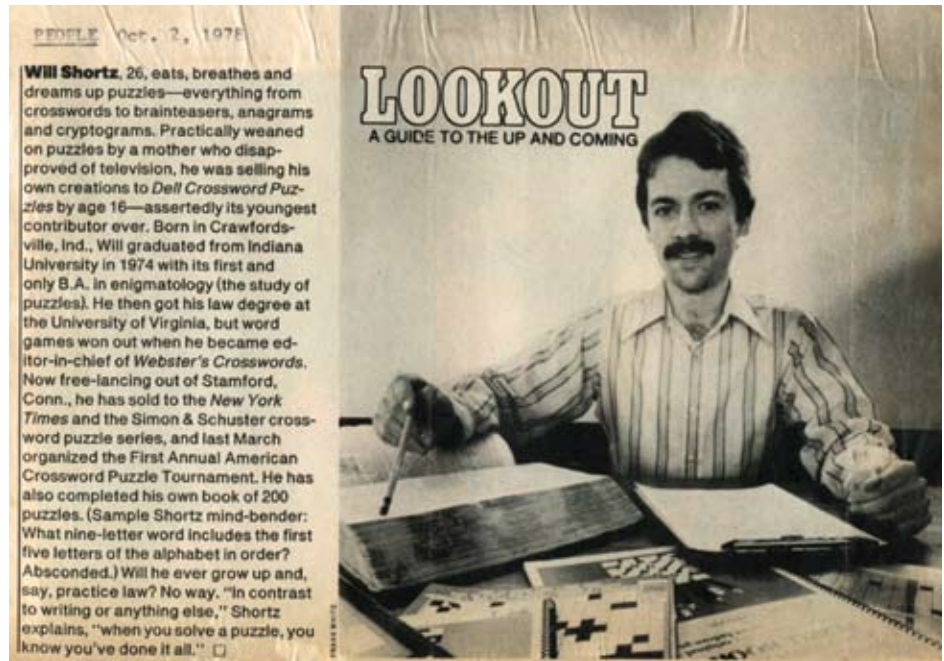
**BLOOM** Which professors influenced you the most?

**SHORTZ** One of my courses my senior year was on crossword puzzles. If you're going to major in puzzles you have to know crosswords. My professor for that was Georges Edelen in the English department. When I took the course, every two to three weeks I would go into his office with a new crossword I made and would sit with him as he solved it and critiqued it. That's when I made my first professional-quality crosswords.

My advisor was Fred Householder in Linguistics. I worked with him on my thesis. He was a very important person to me too.

**BLOOM** People might assume that with your interests you'd be something of an introvert. But you were actually rush chair and later president of your fraternity, Pi Kappa Alpha. Do you see yourself as fitting the mold of a frat guy?

**SHORTZ** I'm actually a shy guy. But I overcame the shyness. I don't remember talking about puzzles a lot in college. I was kind of a



People Magazine featured Will in its "Up and Coming" section in 1978.

regular guy. I played tennis. I was all-fraternity tennis champion my senior year.

I was at IU in the time of, I'd say, the least interest in fraternities. In the old days before me, my sense is that Greek life was much bigger and there was more hazing. During

my time at Pi Kappa Alpha hazing was reduced basically to zero. Pledges had to learn the history of the fraternity, and they were expected to do duties around the house, but it was all sensible, you know? You were joining a group and we weren't going to belittle

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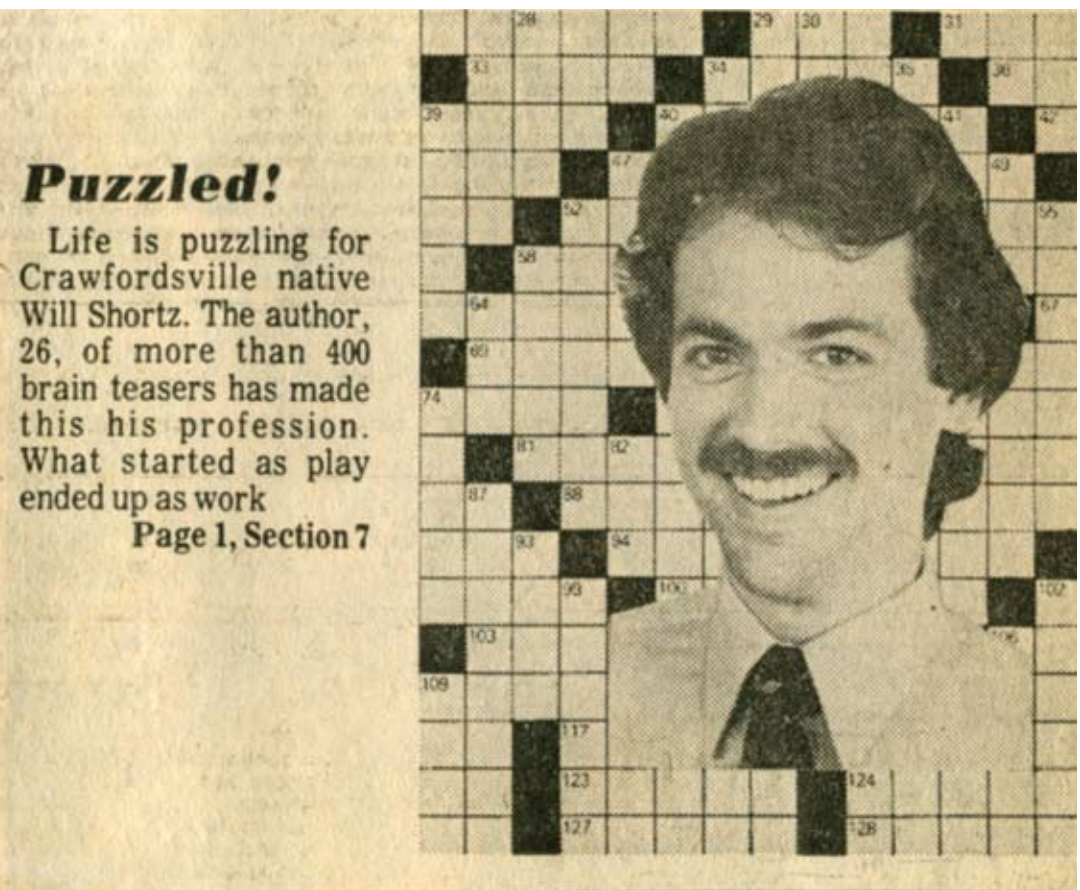
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From the Indianapolis Star, 1979

people, physically or mentally. From what I've read and heard since I graduated, hazing increased somewhat. So from my standpoint, I was in the fraternity at the ideal time.

Later on, my fraternity unfortunately had drinking violations and was kicked off campus. We didn't have drinking violations in my time, because the regulations were much looser. I mean we had keggers all the time. I think those are verboten now.

**BLOOM** What else do you remember about Bloomington in the early '70s?

**SHORTZ** There used to be a bar downtown called Fiddlers Green where our fraternity cook went to drink, so my senior year I spent a lot of time there. There used to be two movie theaters in town—one was the Von Lee, which I see is now a noodle house. But now if you want to see a movie you have to drive to it. That's too bad. I used to like to walk to the movie theaters.

I remember one of my favorite things to do was to go to the Union where there was a grand piano and students would come and play, and it was such an elegant place to be. That's one of my good memories.

I also went to basketball games. Bobby Knight started coaching while I was there.

**BLOOM** After IU, you went to law school at the University of Virginia, but you never took the bar exam and instead began editing for puzzle publications. Why did you feel it was important to get a law degree?

**SHORTZ** My intention was to practice law for ten years, make a lot of money, and then retire to do what I really wanted. But in the summer between graduating from IU and going to law school, I had an internship at *Penny Press*, which was a puzzle magazine in Connecticut, and that was the breakthrough for me in realizing how I could have a career in puzzles. To make puzzles full-time is very difficult because puzzles don't pay very much. But if you're on a salary somewhere editing puzzles, then you can have a career.

In the spring of my first year of law school, I wrote to my parents that I would be dropping out at the end of the year and going into puzzles. I remember there was this pause in correspondence and then my mom wrote me this wonderful letter explaining all the reasons why that was a terrible idea and why I should continue to get my degree. She said, "Get your degree, and then do what you want." I thought about it and decided she was right. So I went

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ahead and got my law degree at UVA, but I never took the bar exam, never practiced law, and never looked back.

**BLOOM** So at that point did you view law school as further puzzle training?

**SHORTZ** Once I made the decision that I wasn't going to practice law, then I could just have fun with it. I took courses and wrote papers on copyright protection and patent protection for puzzles and games. I just took crazy courses I was into, like Socialist Legal Systems. There was no reason to take that course but it just appealed to me so I took it.

## Two of the four people who have been *New York Times* crossword editors have been named Will and from Indiana.

I don't regret law school for a number of reasons. First of all, law is terrific training for the mind. It teaches you to take a complex issue and break it down into its component parts and analyze each strand separately. That's an important thing to do with puzzles.

I'm sort of an independent businessperson—I actually work freelance for *The New York Times*. I direct my crossword championships as a business. So it helped me to learn about the business world. I learned about intellectual property, so that's been useful.

I also think if my only academic degree was in puzzles, people wouldn't take me seriously. I followed it up with a law degree from another prestigious university, so now people can take me a little more seriously.

**BLOOM** After 15 years as editor of *Games* magazine, you became *The New York Times* crossword editor in 1993. Before you took over, the crossword never referenced popular culture or current events. How did you decide to change that?

**SHORTZ** Well, one of my predecessors was Will Weng, who by the way was born and raised in Terre Haute. That's very interesting that two of the four people who have been *New York Times* crossword editors have been named Will and from Indiana.

Anyway, Will Weng said when he took over the *Times* crossword he tried to copy the first editor's style, and he was criticized for not living up to her standards. He decided if he



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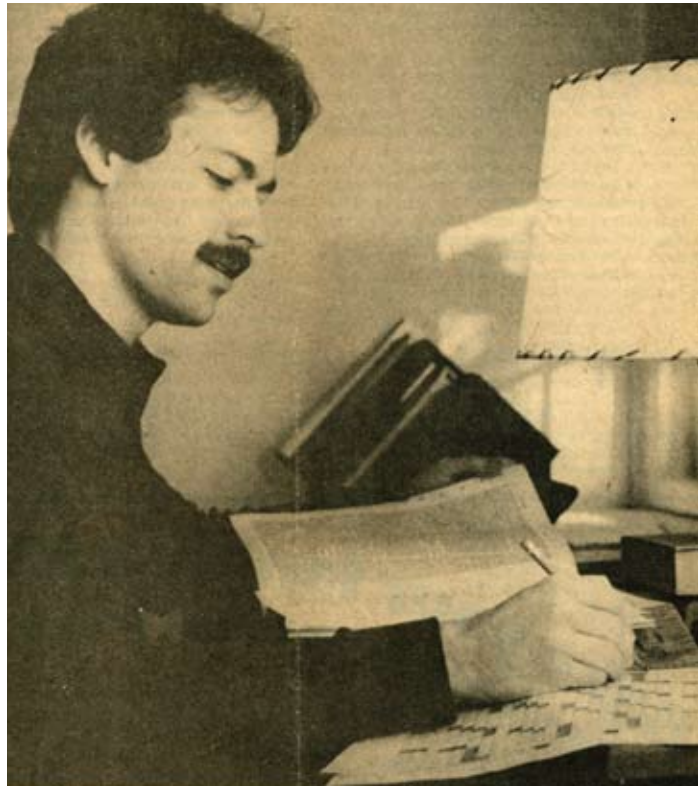
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Working on a puzzle. *Greenwich Time (Connecticut) 1978*

was going to be criticized, he wanted to be criticized for writing the puzzles the way he wanted them and not the style he was copying. So I agreed with him and adopted that philosophy right from the start.

First of all, I thought the crossword should embrace everything that *New York Times* readers know and are interested in, including modern culture and old. An editor told me once that under my predecessor if there was any reference in the puzzle to anything that occurred in the last 30 years, it came as a shock. I'm not trying to make the puzzle hip, but I think it should reflect the newspaper.

Also, I wanted puzzles to be more playful, so there's a lot more trickery, deception, clues that are intentionally misleading. That wasn't done before at all. Another change: I steepened the increase in difficulty over the week making Monday and Tuesday easier than ever before, Friday and Saturday harder than ever before. My hope is that I will have one that is perfect, at some point in the week, for you.

**BLOOM** How did you become the Puzzlemaster for National Public Radio's *Weekend Edition Sunday*?

**SHORTZ** The first host of the show, Susan Stamberg, had the idea that the show should be the equivalent of the Sunday newspaper with features, news, and a puzzle portion. I agreed to do it, but what kind of puzzle do you do on the radio? It can't be a crossword or a grid of any kind. And it has to be something that doesn't allow for long periods of silence. We needed quick answers. I came up with a format that we've used for 20 years now, quick word teasers to get quick answers from the listeners.

**BLOOM** You also contributed riddles to the 1995 movie *Batman Forever*. How did that come about?

**SHORTZ** They had already starting filming the movie and had worked into the script four riddles, but once they started filming they realized a)

they don't have riddles and b) they don't know how to write riddles. So they heard me on NPR and thought I'd be the right guy.

The one constraint was that each riddle had to include a number somewhere in it. My favorite was the last riddle. It went: "We're five little things of an everyday sort, you'll find us all in a tennis court." The answer is vowels. There are five vowels and you'll find them all in order literally in "a tennis court."

**BLOOM** How did it feel to be named one of the "100 Best People in the World" by *Esquire* magazine in 1997?

**SHORTZ** That was wild. It was an interesting group of people. One of them was Jack Kevorkian. One was Homer Simpson.

**BLOOM** Who's your favorite celebrity crossworder?

**SHORTZ** Let's see, I keep a list of them. One I just learned about is Sting. Michael Douglas and Catherine Zeta-Jones are fans, in particular I know they do *The New York Times* crossword together. Bill Clinton, and he comes up a lot in puzzles, especially members of his cabinet like Janet Reno and Federico Pena. Every time one of them comes up in a crossword, I wonder about him doing the puzzle and seeing his name in the clue.

**BLOOM** Most people say they do puzzles to unwind. When puzzles are your job, how do you unwind?

**SHORTZ** I play table tennis. I'm fanatical about it. I play six nights a week.



**Will and a big crossword.** *Sou'west Shore's The Advocate Magazine*

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Will kicks back with his favorite newspaper at the Bloom office during a recent visit to Bloomington.

**BLOOM** In the same way that exercise keeps the body fit, researchers are finding that doing puzzles and brainteasers helps to keep the brain active. Is that something you've always suspected?

**SHORTZ** I remember 10 years ago or even 20 years ago I knew that as a fact, but you didn't read much about it. Now psychological studies have shown literally that doing puzzles will stave off the onset of Alzheimer's disease, and

lessen the effects once you do get Alzheimer's. And you have to think, if puzzles are doing that for minds that are about to get Alzheimer's, they must do good things for everyone.

I believe puzzles are like going to a gym. A crossword, just by itself, tests your knowledge, your vocabulary, your mental flexibility, your sense of humor. If you go to the gym you're probably going to do the Stairmaster, or the rowing machine, or the treadmill, but if you do a crossword it's like going and doing all the machines.

**BLOOM** You're the only person to ever get a degree in enigmatology, and in many ways you've really blazed your own trail. So who have you looked to for inspiration?

**SHORTZ** In terms of crosswords, I'd say my hero is Margaret Farrar, the first *Times* crossword editor. Her puzzles have a timeless elegance to them. I also think of Marcel Marceau, how his name is synonymous with mime, and how I would like for my name to be synonymous with puzzles.

**BLOOM** Do you dream in puzzles?

**SHORTZ** I don't think I dream in puzzles because puzzles are such a big part of my life I tend to dream about other things.

As I was coming into Bloomington last night I realized that I dream a lot of Bloomington and IU. It's not as if anything is going on, it's just that I'm walking, or driving, and recognizing buildings and roads.

**BLOOM** What do you think of the Bloom crossword puzzle?

**SHORTZ** It looks good. I like how you put it at the end of the magazine, like it's dessert. ✨

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