

MERL REAGLE, CROSSWORD PUZZLE CONSTRUCTOR

By **Sam Roberts**

- Aug. 24, 2015 NYTimes

Merl Reagle, a playfully irreverent crossword puzzle constructor whose clues set off spirited celebrations from his fans rather than frustrated surrenders to dictionary arcana, died on Saturday in Tampa, Fla. He was 65.

The cause was complications of pancreatitis, his wife, Marie Haley, said.

“Many of today’s top constructors, in fact, got their inspiration from him,” his friend Will Shortz, the crossword puzzle editor of The New York Times, said on Wordplay, the crossword blog on nytimes.com. In an interview, Mr. Shortz added, “His puzzles were genuinely funnier than anybody else’s, and he was an expert interlocker.”

Mr. Reagle started creating crossword puzzles when he was 6. (“The English language was the best toy a boy ever had,” he once said.) At the urging of his high school English teacher in 1967, when he was barely 17, he became the youngest person to sell one to The Times — for \$10.

While his record was broken only two years later, by a 13-year-old, he followed the advice of the puzzle editor, Margaret P. Farrar, who wrote to him that crosswords should be entertaining above all.

“In the 1980s, a new group of puzzlemakers saw that crosswords were starting to remind them of their worst teachers from grade school,” Mr. Reagle wrote in a 1997 article for The Philadelphia Inquirer’s Sunday magazine. “Wouldn’t it be more fun and attract more solvers if puzzles were a little more playful? Just a smidge trickier and a lot wittier?”

According to Mr. Shortz, though, “Incredibly, The Times’s editor, Eugene T. Maleska, had written Merl that he had no talent.”

Readers disagreed. Mr. Reagle would go on to contribute devilishly inventive puzzles to The Times and to create them regularly for The Washington Post Magazine and The Los Angeles Times, as well as syndicating them to dozens of other newspapers.

He would be featured in “Wordplay,” a 2006 documentary about the Times puzzle and its devotees (revealing, among other trade secrets, why he did not use descriptive terms for bodily functions as answers).

Mr. Reagle and Mr. Shortz’s appearance in that film inspired cameos by them, in cartoon form, in a 2008 episode of “The Simpsons,” “Homer and Lisa Exchange Cross Words,” in which Lisa solves a puzzle that was actually published in that Sunday’s Times. Mr. Reagle’s syndicated puzzle, published the same day, was “Simpsons”-themed and included a 21-letter diagonal that corresponded to the final 21 notes of the “Simpsons” theme.

Mr. Reagle’s signature clues were more likely to be inscrutable brain-twisting puns or anagrams than recondite factoids. The answer to “completely” was “atoz” (think a-to-z). If the clue was “Least popular cookbook ever,” his answer was “To Grill a Mockingbird.”

Readers prompted by “expensive job for Jimmy Durante” were supposed to assume “nose X-ray.”

For a puzzle featuring song titles with one word scrambled, his answer to “Anagrammy-winning baking song” was “You Ought to Be in Pie Crust.”

Another had the theme of movie titles with missing letters. For “ ‘Empire of the Ants’ co-feature,” the answer was “Lice in Wonderland.” Playing along with “Of Human Bondage”? “Untie Mame.” For a puzzle focused on punny surnames, the clue was “Golfer who invented the all-plastic club.” The answer: “Arnold Polymer.”

Mr. Shortz met Mr. Reagle in 1979 at the American Crossword Puzzle Tournament.

“Everyone knows how great a constructor Merl was,” Mr. Shortz said. “Who knew he was such a good solver, too?”

Merl Harry Reagle (he was named for an uncle killed when a German guided bomb sank the British troop ship Rohna in 1943) was born in Audubon, N.J., on Jan. 5, 1950. His father, Sam, was a truck driver. When Merl was 10, after his parents had separated, he moved to Tucson with his mother, Evelyn, a nurse, and his older brother, Sam Jr.

He attended the University of Arizona, where he was a copy editor for the campus newspaper. After dropping out a few credits short of a degree in English, he worked as a copy editor for The Arizona Daily Star before moving to Santa Monica, Calif., where he wrote for television game shows.

“I remember thinking, who wants to be 58 years old and look back and say, ‘I made crossword puzzles my whole life’?,” he told The Daily Wildcat, the University of Arizona student paper, in 2009. But in 1979 he began doing that full time, at first weekly for The San Francisco Examiner and Chronicle.

Besides his wife, Mr. Reagle’s survivors include his father and his brother. Helping to care for his mother-in-law inspired him to team up with the Alzheimer’s Foundation of America to establish the National Brain Game Challenge to raise awareness of the disease.

As one of the few full-time crossword puzzle craftsmen (he only recently began using a computer program for incidental words), Mr. Reagle recognized that he fulfilled multiple roles, among them wisecracker, provocateur and tease.

“There’s a fine line,” he acknowledged, “between entertainment and torture.”