

# A Fresh Look at

# Crosswordese

A Q & A with

David Bukszpan

BY RAYMOND SIMON

David Bukszpan's recent book, *Crosswordese: A Guide to the Weird and Wonderful Language of Crossword Puzzles*, may change your mind about those 3- and 4-letter words solvers love to hate, like ORT and ESNE. Bukszpan not only has a unique take on them, he also provides numerous examples spread across 10 categories, including Anatomy and Sports, all illustrated with clues taken from published puzzles. In the Q&A below, conducted via email, he shares his thoughts about answers usually dismissed as mere fill.



Photo by Natalia Boesch

**Raymond Simon:** Your new book is a veritable defense of crosswordese. I think it's safe to say that, within the "cruciverse," you hold a contrarian viewpoint. How did that come to be?

**David Bukszpan:** Maybe I'm just contrarian by nature, because I think even my defense of crosswordese is essentially a critique of how we approach it. For me, crosswordese seems similar to how Brian Eno, rock star, ambient musician, and de facto crosswordese poster boy, famously described his music: "as ignorable as it is interesting." When I started solving, I learned some crosswordese—but essentially only as answers, basically ignoring them inasmuch as they might exist outside of crosswords. My reasoning felt fairly pat: I didn't know these answers; therefore they were crosswordese; therefore there was no reason to think about them as anything other than (bad) crossword answers.

Then one day a puzzle stumped me with the clue "Gulager of old TV and film." Eventually the crosses revealed the three-letter answer: CLU. The clue's answer was Clu? This I couldn't ignore. A quick Wikipedia and IMDb search soon escalated into a deep dive into the surprising details of his life, his career, and the origin of his incredibly apt-for-crosswordese name. (A family of martins nesting in the family's house when Gulager was born earned the baby the nickname "Clu," after the bird's Cherokee name, *clu-clu*, which mimics their song.) A few months later I ran across the actor's name again, this time not in a crossword but in the credits to Quentin Tarantino's *Once Upon a Time... in Hollywood*. Not only was I pleased to recognize the name and think about martins clu-clu-cluing in the eaves of his childhood home, but I could appreciate how Clu's cameo offered a clue about the film, as I recognized

that the story of Leonardo DiCaprio's character, Rick Dalton, chimed with events in Gulager's life.

I realized that the more I connected with answers, the more I enjoyed the clue-by-clue experience of solving puzzles. And solving also felt more rewarding when I let obscure answers introduce me to something new. So that's the model for *Crosswordese*: exploring what goes into crosswords to get more out of crosswords.

**RS:** My impression is that you have a broader conception of crosswordese than the typical solver or constructor. You're not just referring to answers like ESNE and ORT. How do you define crosswordese?

**DB:** In the book, I define crosswordese as answers that seem to appear more frequently in crossword puzzles than in our daily lives, and I suggest that they exist across a spectrum. On one end of that spectrum are the obscure answers like ESNE and ORT that folks typically call crosswordese; on the other end are the much more familiar and frequent answers like ESP and ORE, sometimes referred to as "repeaters."

Imagining a crosswordese spectrum—with obscure answers like ESNE/ORT on one end and repeaters like ESP/ORE on the other—creates space for answers that fall in-between, like ESPY and ORD. It also helps illustrate how the same answer can be crosswordese in different ways, depending on the clue. For instance, ORE would be on the familiar end as "Mined stuff" but solidly on the obscure side when clued in more foreign terms as "Part of a krona" (referring to *oré*).

"Crosswordese" has long been a term of derision, but hopefully recasting it as an umbrella term for the answers that solvers will find the most quirky and useful will allow many of these answers to be considered afresh. Don't get me wrong: I still dislike many crosswordese answers. But my dislike is not necessarily connected to their being crosswordese. Instead, it's based directly on their inability to reach that tenuous and unwritten threshold of relevance in our shared culture or language to merit reference in the grid.

**RS:** You provide an interesting analysis of crosswordese, all illustrated with easy-to-understand graphs. What can you share with our readers regarding your number crunching?

**DB:** Well, it's not hard to intuit that short

answers are important in crosswords. But it wasn't until I dug into the numbers that I realized how much it's a matter of classic economics: not just high demand but low supply.

Extrapolating from xwordinfo.com data covering roughly 815,000 answers from 10,000 Shortz-Era *New York Times* crosswords, I found that on average about 30% of crossword puzzle answers are four letters long and 20% are three letters long. But to answer those 400,000 clues, crosswords have only used around 7,000 distinct four-letter answers and 2,700 distinct three-letter answers, respectively representing only about 6% and 2% of crosswords' 115,000 answer lexicon.

Taken together, that means half of all crossword clues are satisfied by just approximately 8% of crossword answers. So while the average 12-letter answer has appeared only 1.1 times since late 1993, the average three-letter answer has appeared about 56 times. (If you're wondering, ORT appeared 85 times over that span, and ORE was mined nearly 500 times.) With such a premium on short answers, it's no wonder the bar for entry is lowered a bit for them.

I think the graphs make this point more clearly than I just did, just as another set of graphs I made tell the story of how much effect editors can have on curtailing obscure crosswordese. If you don't have a copy of the book, you can find the data posted at [crosswordese.info/data](http://crosswordese.info/data).

**RS:** Obviously, you're open-minded regarding crosswordese. Still, I can't imagine you love all of it. What crosswordese would you banish from grids?

**DB:** I find it hard to support ALER and NLER, and you can add NHLE and NLER to that. Luckily, NBAER has pretty much disappeared—and MLBER has never shown up, as far as I can tell. (Look at that: Ari Melber is almost a pro ball player!)

At best, crosswords can be a sort of prism, clarifying or refracting reality, challenging assumptions about how we see, describe, and name things. But answers like ALER and NLER do the opposite: they offer a sort of gaslit version of language and reality, tacitly asserting that such wordforms are sufficiently part of the world to earn purchase in the grid. In truth, not only are they incredibly rarely used, but they're

also not interesting or evocative. They have nothing to offer but the utility of their letters. (While I firmly believe that a great clue can make almost any answer palatable, even the amusing and bemusing clue "An A or an O, say" can't save ALER from landing with the disappointment of a long foul ball.)

On the other hand, take ETUI. Granted, I was vexed, irked, ired, piqued—call it what you will—when first presented with the clue "Needle case" and expected to know that weird word. (Oh, I guess in that case I was needed.) But then I looked it up, ready to justify my outrage by discovering an etui wasn't really a thing—that it was just another NLER. But it was my indignation, not the answer, that was unwarranted. Etuis were very much actual things deserving of (at least occasional) attention, but the word "etui" had an incredibly rich and surprising etymology (and is itself the etymological root of "tweezers"). I could go on and on about "etui."

Imagine if clues for ETUI did a better job describing it in informative or amusing ways, like "It holds needed needles," "Bygone thing for string," or "Once popular clothing repair kit." Then, by dint of solvers' increased familiarity with it, clues could get more bold and colorful: "Sewer system?," "Thread-bearer?," "Portable toiletries?," "Where to find a needle in a hand sack?," "Needle-exchange supplier?," "It's useful if you burst into tears," "It can tie up loose ends," etc. Okay, that's enough; you get the "Needle point?"—I'll "Put a pin in it!"

**RS:** In 2012, you wrote *Is That a Word?: From AA to ZZZ, the Weird and Wonderful Language of SCRABBLE*. Did that inform your approach to crosswords? Is there an overlap between crosswordese and Scrabble?

**DB:** I laugh now recalling how I thought the two projects would be so similar—even wondering if the crossword lexicon would be easier to tackle since it lacked two-letter words. What I somehow failed to appreciate was that while a Scrabble word is just that—a word—or, more to the point, perhaps an English word whose basic definition it might be fun to learn—a crossword answer could be a word in English or maybe French or Italian or Latin, etc.; or the name of a person or character; or the title of a song or movie; or an acronym, Roman numeral, or even other linguistic

oddities. And then, dare I say it, almost any answer can offer a variety of subtly different meanings, not to mention homographs.

Then again, beyond all those extra entries, I soon realized that unlike Scrabble words, crossword answers could not exist in isolation from their meanings. The idea of a "crossword answer" necessitates a "crossword clue." And those clues are rarely straight definitions. ORE is a good example. There was no need to include ORE in the Scrabble book, of course, since everyone playing Scrabble knows what ore is. But what fools we crossword solvers must be, as suddenly identifying the "Seamy stuff" that's a "Gold band?" is the "Stuff of mine" or an "Iron man's quest." With so many answers and clues to sift through, there was just much, much more material to include (and exclude) in the crossword book.

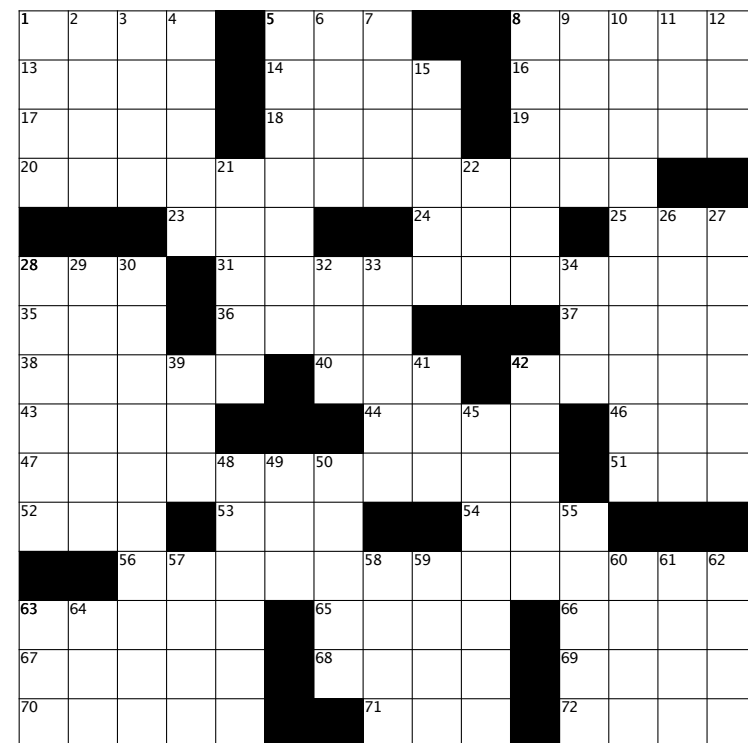
For one thing, the Scrabble lexicon is set in stone—or at least bound in paper, as they're codified in wordlists that are only updated every few years. The answer list of crosswords increases every day, as do the ways old answers may be clued. Unlike crosswordese, there's no bias against using super weird and obscure words in Scrabble—at least not if you're the player laying the tiles down! So Scrabblish (my term for the words in the Scrabble lexicon that are of outsized importance compared to their use in everyday English) leans much more heavily on arcane words.

Of course, both being books about language, they have much in common—including being absolute pleasures to research and write. Perhaps more importantly, Scrabblish and crosswordese can often feel like foreign or at least distinct languages. Yet I doubt I often go even a day when I don't at some point encounter a word or reference or crosswords. ■

Curious to try one of David Bukszan's puzzles? Just turn to the next page!



## SUPER SALAD by David Bukszan



### ACROSS

- 1 Fundamentals  
5 Up in the air, briefly  
8 Sings  
13 Dinghy-type thingy  
14 Yesteryear  
16 Be an omen of  
17 Cornell of Cornell  
18 A year like this one  
19 Drug cops  
20 "Whether a reader QUITE SLOBBERS at these original recipes..."  
23 Former Caucasian  
24 Moo \_\_\_ pork  
25 Vitals checker  
28 Windy City setting  
31 "...or wants to REWORD CONCH or some other ingredient..."  
35 Words with "crossroads" or "dead end"  
36 She's briefly seen with a snake in "The Lego Movie," briefly  
37 Visiting, as a team  
38 Priest's frequent companion in jokes  
40 "Weekend Edition" ailer, initially  
42 They're done while bearing it  
43 "The Motorcycle Song" singer Guthrie  
44 Man, in Italy  
46 Holiday in Hanoi  
47 "...and since there's NO CHEF IN, NOR a line cook..."  
51 What some hands on faces show, for short  
52 Tee preceder  
53 Monopoly quartet: Abbr.  
54 Light wts.  
56 "...DO CHECK ONLINE (or in these clues) for what's needed to prepare them yourself."  
63 Blood fluid  
65 "Be \_\_\_!" ("Help me out here!")  
66 Princess in a metal bikini  
67 Brush back to fluff up  
68 Persian mystic poet who said, "My head is bursting with the joy of the unknown"  
69 No longer troubled by  
70 A, to Homer  
71 Wager  
72 Introductory course?—Or, with 70-Across and 71-Across: A POTABLE PUSH to solving several answers in this puzzle?

### DOWN

- 1 Cain's victim  
2 Wearer of size 83AAA shoes  
3 Source of blood sugar, for short  
4 Hidden stockpile  
5 Aleve alternative  
6 Dutch South African colonist  
7 Wanting some punch?  
8 "Macbeth" ghost  
9 Poi-ous occasion?  
10 Saw things similarly  
11 Tampa Bay pro  
12 Upper-class studs?  
15 Of the Anglican Church: Abbr.  
21 Stanley of CNN's "Searching for Italy"  
22 "Hey, I'm trying to eavesdrop here!"  
26 Not so nice  
27 Some hot lunches?  
28 Topeless wine server?  
29 The Packers' Bart and the Beatles' Ringo  
30 Ort  
32 "Star Wars" baddie Kyo  
33 "\_\_\_ intended" (phrase rarely applicable to crossword clues)  
34 Card game without strategy, ironically  
39 Nice assessment?  
41 Profits vs. cost assessment: Abbr.  
42 Subjective, freewheeling style of journalism  
45 Like some winter days in Iceland  
48 Black Sea peninsula  
49 "I'm with her" initials  
50 Liam's role in "Schindler's List"  
55 Lacks backing  
57 Kind of money or puppy  
58 Digital book file extension  
59 Impressive thing to drop?  
60 "Whip It" band  
61 Place  
62 Any of three brothers who might say, "What's up, Doc?"  
63 Grand Central or Union: Abbr.  
64 Conjure this conger!



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