

Wordplay

Remember *Spellbound* from a few years ago, that delightful film that introduced us to the relatively hidden, if fervent, world of little demon spellers? It put the National Spelling Bee on display as never before and has even led to other “bee” movies, including the current *Akeelah and the Bee*. Well, get ready for another documentary charmer dealing with lingo: *Wordplay*, the movie that reveals the crossword puzzle world to us all, is now on screens in the D.C. area.

The parallels between the two films are several, though *Wordplay*, of course, features adults, not kids, who are addicted to the *New York Times* crossword puzzle (and only the *Times* puzzle), long edited by the paragon of puzzlers, Will Shortz. Both movies are structured with mini-dramas introducing a countrywide parade of intriguing contestants, in *Wordplay*'s case, ranging from a chubby businessman and dad (Al Sanders) through a freelance pianist in New York (Jon Delfin) to a college kid from Rensselaer Polytechnic (Tyler Hinman). Both investigate the varied motives and drives of the contenders. Both films build up--with a nice, easy momentum--to a tense, winner-take-all finale, in the case of *Wordplay*, to Mr. Shortz's annual *Times* puzzle solving contest at the Marriott Hotel in Stamford, Connecticut.

One thing that the filmmakers, first-time feature director Patrick Creadon, along with his co-writer Christine O'Malley, add to this docu-cocktail, are several amusing interviews with icons and celebrities who also love the *NYTimes* crossword. We learn of the passion that folks like comic Jon Stewart, filmmaker Ken Burns, ex-prez Bill Clinton, baseball pitcher Mike Mussina, and the musical group The Indigo Girls have for the puzzle. Also, we meet some puzzle-makers, like the freelance crossword master Merl Reagle, who, during the course of the film, confects for us a crossword called “Wordplay” which is ultimately selected for a Tuesday crossword in the *Times* and which we see actually--and amusingly--solved by the several celebrity puzzlers. Delightful.

The film is full of delights, starting with the easy-going, thoughtful intelligence exhibited by Mr. Shortz himself, a puzzler apparently out of the womb, who designed his own college degree in the one-of-a-kind field of “enigmatology.” He started the American Puzzle Tournament in Stamford himself in 1978, when he was 25 and eager to see how the best puzzlers might do against each other. He is one kind of self-deprecating genius, who informs us, not surprisingly perhaps, that the best crossword fans have a bent for math and music more than for literary or vocabulary skills. Put simply; spelling bee stars focus on word origins and roots; crossword puzzlers, somewhat intuitively, find patterns in words.

Also like *Spellbound*, the finale of *Wordplay* is a gas, a rousing contest between players with whom we have already come to identify, at the staid Marriott. Even better, at the last stand, when the three top puzzlers must solve one last puzzle live, in 15 minutes, before TV cameras, we witness a genuine thriller, which itself turns on an excruciating error by one of the key contestants. Solving a crossword puzzle excruciating? Yes, and again, yes.

While *Wordplay* can be unreservedly recommended to those who already do crosswords (as this writer occasionally does), I think others may get caught up in it, too. I would hope so, because what we are watching is a kind of very serious fun.

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