A unique crossword book for Christmas and a very special event for crossword addicts in January

One of Britain's most challenging and innovative compilers of cryptic crosswords has published a book of his fiendish crosswords just in time for Christmas:

Boatman – The First 50

Collected crosswords from the Guardian and the stories behind them
Ashley Knowles

And the Keymer resident will be putting in a personal appearance in January at Waterstones in Brighton as part of a distinguished panel that will shed light on the mysterious world and fascinating personalities of the crossword compilers:

Boatman and Friends

Ashley Knowles and John Halpern with Guardian Crossword Editor Hugh Stephenson in conversation

Waterstones Brighton
7 pm, Thursday 19 January 2017

Boatman – The First 50

Collected crosswords from the Guardian and the stories behind them – Ashley Knowles

Ashley Knowles, better known to Guardian readers as Boatman, began compiling crosswords for his own amusement in 1999: his first puzzle was about Mrs B's dog. His crosswords began to be featured in the enthusiasts' magazine 1 Across, then his first piece for the Guardian appeared in October 2008. Boatman puzzles have been enjoyed with increasing regularity ever since, and his fiftieth Guardian puzzle was printed last year.

Ashley's book celebrates the passing of this milestone with a collection of beautifully typeset editions of these 50 crosswords, with an additional bonus puzzle first published in the Guardian's online Genius slot. As you'd expect, there are solutions for all the puzzles. Unusually, there are also notes explaining all the wordplay: if cryptic crosswords have been a closed book to you until now, this will be a revelation!

But this is much more than a puzzle book. In it, Ashley tells the story in his own words behind the development of each crossword: how he thought of the theme, the ideas that didn't make it into print and the unlikely coincidences that emerged afterwards. He reveals his working methods and the lively relationship between setter and editor, and the book is studded with extra teaser clues and delightful quotes from solvers who took the time to comment on the puzzles when they were first published.

Boatman puzzles are difficult to imitate. There's always a theme – sometimes, there's a secret that you'll need to crack before you can finish the crossword, but usually the theme is there to give the puzzle meaning and to draw you in with its particular atmosphere. The clues tend towards the fiendish, but they'll never leave you wondering what you did to deserve such torture. Ashley's style is to disguise the way that his clues works – all the really good cryptic compilers do that – and then to go further by dropping in red herrings, which may suggest anagrams or Spoonerisms that don't exist and which can be devastating to experienced solvers whose senses are tuned to look for such things and as a result are sent on personal wild goose chases.

Ashley's working name derives from the time when he lived on his 30-metre Dutch barge in Brighton Marina. No longer living literally on the sea, Ashley (57) can now be found on the other side of the Downs, in Keymer, next to the creative village of Ditchling, with his artist wife, a teenage daughter, one very lazy greyhound and several unappreciated fish. During the week, he is a reluctant commuter; look out for him on the London to Brighton line in the evening, though, and you may find Boatman in his own world, happily compiling.

Ashley also teaches the art of crossword compiling, and each year leads a number of masterclasses and advanced workshops at the Friends' Meeting House in Brighton. His former students have gone on to find their own place in the mysterious world of the cryptic compilers, and their work can be seen in the Independent, Guardian and Financial Times.

Reviews of Boatman – The First 50

This is one to savour. Boatman's puzzles are witty and ingenious – and he never forgets that his job is to delight the solver. It is now an extraordinary pleasure to read how his unique mind works. The First 50 is a book I never knew I needed in my life. Gift it to yourself and to the word-lovers in yours.

– Alan Connor, question editor of BBC2's Only Connect and crossword columnist for the Guardian

This is a unique book of crosswords. Few compilers can, like Boatman, regularly achieve a cryptic puzzle that leaves the solver genuinely satisfied with the time and effort expended.

– Hugh Stephenson, Guardian Crossword Editor

I think of Boatman as the Kandinsky of setting. His puzzles inhabit their own world and, even if I'm stumped by the odd clue, I could merrily sit staring at them every day.

– Bingybong, Guardian reader

Quotes by the Author

"Compiling cryptic crosswords may be the most fun you can have on a commuter train without annoying your fellow passengers. You learn to see things differently (though, to be fair, you probably do that already), and you have the pleasure, if you're lucky, of seeing the reactions of your victims. You can enjoy playing the part of the evil genius; but remember, when you imagine yourself torturing those who venture into your mountain lair, that Bond always wins."

"My personal fantasy is of a puzzle in which all of the solutions share a theme, all the clues have a related surface reading (which may or may not subvert the theme of the solutions) and the completed grid can be read to reveal a deeper meaning … It goes without saying that this is unachievable … or is it?"

Availability

Boatman – The First 50 is available direct from www.ypdbooks.com or from Amazon and other online and high street booksellers at a price of £10.95. ISBN 978-0-9956082-0-7

Check again at www.boatmancryptics.co.uk or on Twitter @BoatmanCryptics for the latest news of more events.

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Ashley Knowles and John Halpern with Guardian Crossword Editor Hugh Stephenson in conversation

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7 pm, Thursday 19 January 2017

Ashley will be putting in a personal appearance in January at Waterstones in Brighton as part of a distinguished panel that will shed light on the mysterious world and fascinating personalities of the crossword compilers.

He will be joined by John Halpern, one of the world's foremost crossword setters, known to Guardian readers as Paul and also appearing in the Financial Times (as Mudd), the Independent (as Punk) and in The Times, and by Hugh Stephenson (Guardian Crossword Editor) to talk about the art of crossword compiling and to sign copies of their books.

Boatman – The First 50 will be on sale at the event. If you give or receive the book for Christmas you can bring it with you for Ashley to sign on the night.

Full Text of Foreword to Boatman – The First 50 by Hugh Stephenson, Guardian Crossword Editor

This is a unique book of crosswords.

There are countless books of cryptic puzzles in print or online and almost as many books about how to set or to solve them. This one consists of Boatman's first 50 Guardian puzzles, plus solutions. So far, so normal.

What makes the book unique, though, is that he has added to each solution a commentary on how that puzzle evolved in his mind as he was in the process of creating it.

Boatman belongs to that class of cryptic crossword setter who is happiest when there is a theme running through all or most of the clues in a puzzle. But his solutions do not require the solver to have any esoteric knowledge of the theme in question. Boatman puzzles can be solved with pleasure without having to resort to Googling or specialist reference books.

His commentaries on each puzzle's solution describe how, in a good cryptic puzzle, there is a texture and a cohesion that goes beyond simply filling a grid and writing clues that observe the recognised cryptic conventions. Many compilers, especially with the help of modern software, can fill in a grid and write technically acceptable clues. Few, like Boatman, can regularly achieve a cryptic puzzle that leaves the solver genuinely satisfied with the time and effort expended.

Favourite Clues

Two of Ashley's favourite Boatman clues:

> You may find gateaux on it, but not fruitcakes (7)
> Answer: TROLLEY (because fruitcakes are off their trolley!)

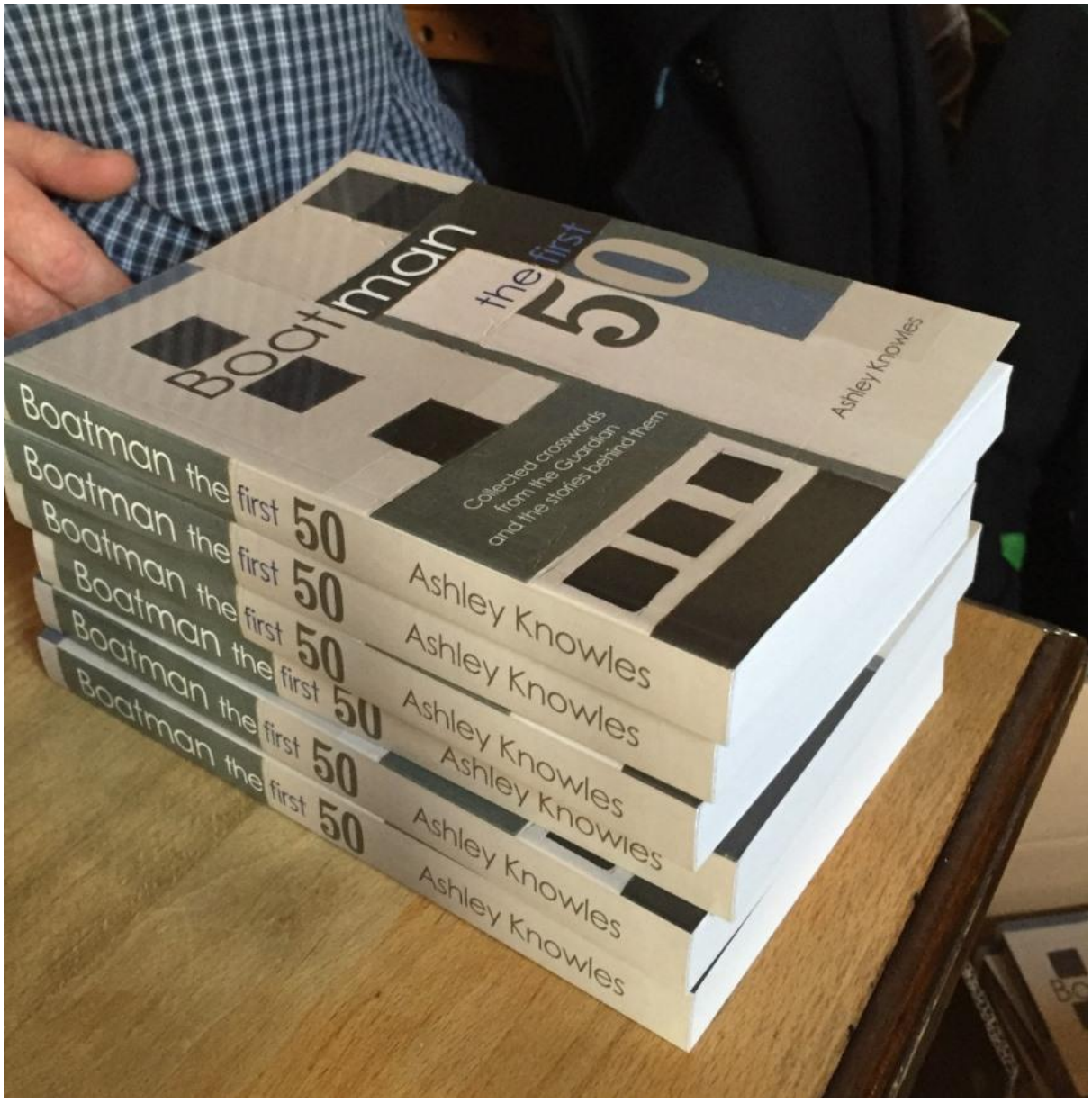
> Fool gave West Ham a daft epithet (1,4,2,3,6)
> Answer: A GAME OF TWO HALVES (look for the anagram …)

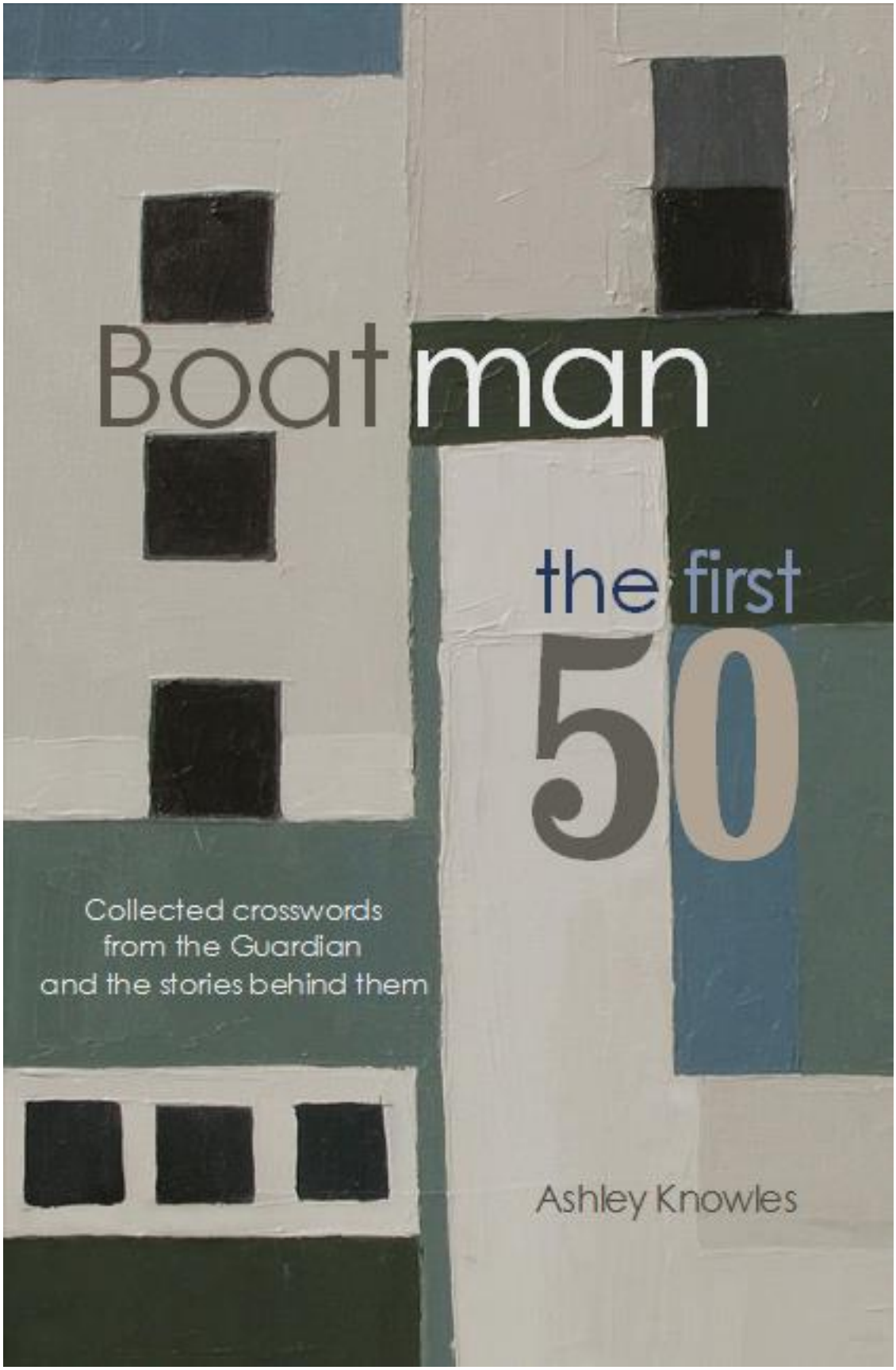
And John's favourite clue, writing as Paul:

> To make cheese, how do you milk a Welsh hedgehog? (10)
> Answer: CAERPHILLY

Portrait © Bernadina Lloyd

Images of the Book





The cover artwork is by Bernadina Lloyd.

Sample Pages

Spooked

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Across

1/15 Long odds of tango and cha-cha foes dancing together (1,5,2,1,6)

5 See 10 Down

8 Awful, stumbling hag on dance programme missing trick, you say? (7)

9 Harass people involved in wrongdoing (7)

11 Much to-do from zealotry at heart, on and on, using psychic powers on dead? (1,3,2,4,5)

12 See 10 Down

13 Communicate with those we miss, who bequeath £10? (5,1,4)

17 It's not vital to get tipsy from potion (2,2,6)

18 Séance appears really inexplicable at first but, as you say, it's a fabrication! (4)

20 Blame the frost? He's upset about a Xmas bloom (4,2,9)

23 Morse, perhaps, out in sound and vision (7)

24 Hollowly beatify dead souls? From the start, let them be (7)

25 Phantoms from below, heralded by sulphur (6)

26 Number (one transcending 50) and one of its qualities (6)

Down

2 70s rock instrument used in Wales (9)

3 Perhaps put Boatman in work - a lot of it! (6)

4 Back pointless meeting: the man is after nothing? That's a record (3,2,4)

5 It returns the part the Church keeps (5)

6 French perhaps sing solver's one anthem (8)

7 Irrigation for Zimbabwe at last: an answer to prayers sent up (5)

8 Creepy ghoul eats beast, exploits socially unacceptable growth promoted here (11)

10/5Ac/12 Solver taking on psychic sees, as might appear hazily, the power of subliminal suggestion (3,6,2,3,7)

14 After victory, reconstruct (liberate outright) (9)

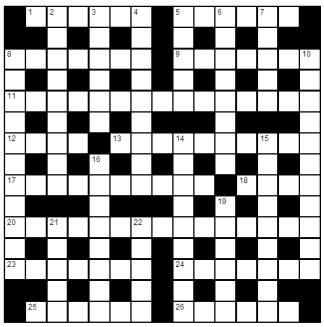
15 See 1 Across

16 Presented headless first, it's said, for the dead came back (8)

19 Soaring mountain road missing from visitant's haunt (6)

21 A historic drink at pub (5)

22 Potions said to cause livid hue (5)



First published as Guardian cryptic crossword No 26,129
Thursday 12 December 2013

Boatman must respect one showing Spooner's supernatural wit (10)

Spooked

35

Hugh suggested that I might like to try setting a ghost theme, by which he meant that a theme doesn't have to announce itself in the clues: it can emerge ghost-like from the solutions. I thought it might be fun if the ghostly message turned out to be about ghostly messages.

There are certainly plenty of set phrases that contain the word "ghost". A GHOST THEME wouldn't fit any of the Guardian grids, but A GHOST THEME'S would, and that led me to think about related concepts. A GHOST OF A CHANCE came quickly, but I worried about THEME'S until I realised that it might be hidden in a longer phrase. And so THE MEDIUM IS THE MESSAGE came to be both the message and a comment on the medium by which the message was communicated, in something of the spirit of McLuhan's far-reaching comment on the relationship between form and content.

Even then, I had two alternative fills – the first three rows in the other contained A GHOST THEME'S TINY TIM DISMAYS EBENEZER SCROOGE, which was tempting to say the least, especially as the puzzle was to be published just before Christmas, but I couldn't think of a way to clue the Christmas Carol solutions without giving the game away, and I liked the ESP references in this version, which worked well with the "medium" aspects of the theme. The top two rows of the final grid suggest an echo of the original intent.

You can see the final result as a gentle meditation on ghosts, ESP and mediums, but Aztobesed and SumaHu got the point, discussing the business of the medium and the message in theguardian.com and concluding that one of the characteristics that distinguishes a work of art from, say, craft is that an artwork has a life of its own, in which ideas can come to the fore that its author could not have placed there consciously.

In 1/15 and 8 Across, I may have been watching Strictly Come Dancing while I was setting this one – Mrs Boatman certainly was. Concerning 2 Down, I played a glam organ in the 1970s, before I discovered the piano. Curiously, the younger Mrs Boatman was growing up there at the time.

Solution to teaser clue: COASTGUARD
Spoonerism = GHOST CARD

Across

1/15 (TANGO + CHA CHA FOES)*, **8** HAG* + StricTLY, **9** MEN inside TORT, **11** zeALOTry + ON + ON + ESP + LATE, **13** double definition, **17** (FROM POTION)*, **18** Séance Appears Really Inexplicable (it's a fabric, Asian!), **20** (BLAME THE FROST HE)*, **23** homophone = INSPECTOR (he's out, so he's not IN), **24** BeatifY + GONE + S(ouls), **25** HADES after S, **26** E (e is transcendental) + L + EVEN.

Down

2 GLAM + ORGAN, **3** I inside (OP + TON), **4** TRYST - S + O + HE + LP, **5** IT reversed + THE Semi-&Lit, **6** homophone = YOU'RE A PAEAN, **7** zimbabwE + AMEN reversed, **8** GHOUL* containing ASS + uSES, **10/5Ac/12** THEE containing MEDIUM + (SEES AS MIGHT)*, **14** V + LIBERATE*, **16** hOSTED after RIP, **19** ALP reversed + GUEST - ST, **21** ALE + PH, **22** homophone = BRUISE.

I once wrote a critique of an early Picasso painting in which I found more symbolism than he could ever have intended

SumaHu