

Boatman – The Second 50

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

A Sussex resident, one of Britain's most challenging and innovative compilers of cryptic crosswords, has published his second collection of fiendish crosswords in a unique annotated format.

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 well-regarded enthusiasts' magazine *1 Across*, then his first piece for the Guardian appeared in October 2008. His hundredth followed 15 years later.

Ashley's book celebrates the passing of this milestone with a collection of beautifully typeset editions of his latest 50 crosswords, with an additional five bonus puzzles previously only available online, including the notorious Referendum Day puzzle that was able to predict the result of the UK's vote over its membership of the European Union with complete confidence. 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.

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 odd connections that emerged afterwards. Expect talk of crosswords and coincidences, politics and particle physics. Ashley 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 the solver must crack in order to 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 work – all the really good cryptic compilers do that – and then to go further by inserting red herrings, which may suggest wordplay that doesn'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 (64) can now be found on the other side of the Downs in the creative village of Ditchling, with his artist wife and uncountable squirrels and other wildlife. Having outgrown the commuting life, he is now free to divide his time between music, charity work and crosswords.

Ashley also teaches the art of crossword compiling. Many of 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 all the UK broadsheets.

Reviews of Boatman – The Second 50

If you want a fiendish crossword, you want the best – which means you want Boatman, because he is the best.

– Gyles Brandreth

Boatman reached his century of Guardian puzzles in 2023 and is still on flow with his distinctive puzzles and instructive explanations of how his cruciverbalist mind works.

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.

– Hugh Stephenson, Guardian Crossword Editor

Giddy stuff, merrily exceeding the sum of its parts ... Time with Boatman's puzzles is time perfectly spent.

– Alan Connor, BB2 question editor and crossword columnist for the Guardian

A Boatman crossword is like a theme park. Each daunting line is a rollercoaster that makes you throw your hands up and scream. He scares you witless. But you can't wait to do it all over again.

– Henry Morris aka the Secret Tory

I always feel a little bit smarter after I finish a Boatman puzzle, at least until I start the next one.

– Tim Dowling, columnist for the Guardian

Oh good, another 50 agonisingly frustrating train journeys.

– Jack Dee, actor, comedian and presenter

Cracking crosswords – each puzzle a delightful daily workout for the brain and a welcome tonic for the soul.

– Brian Bilston, Twitter's unofficial poet laureate

Availability

Boatman – The Second 50 will be published on 1 September 2023 and will be available from all booksellers or direct from BoatmanCryptics.co.uk

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Contacts

Author	ashley@boatmancryptics.co.uk
Publisher & Distributor	Boatman Cryptics
Wholesale	Gardners Books
Online Sales	boatmancryptics.co.uk/product-category/books/

Quote 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”.

Foreword by Dave Gorman

Put the kettle on. That's my advice.

Boatman's puzzles are best served with a cup of tea.

If a crossword is painting pictures with words, then every setter has his or her own style. Some create clues that remind me of a Heath Robinson cartoon – full of intricate detail and connections – while others bring to mind the simple brush strokes of an Al Hirschfeld caricature, where there can be almost nothing on the page and yet, somehow, Liza Minelli's face is staring back at you.

Boatman's puzzles are Magic Eye posters. You stare at them for a while and then suddenly something three dimensional pops out as your eyes defocus.

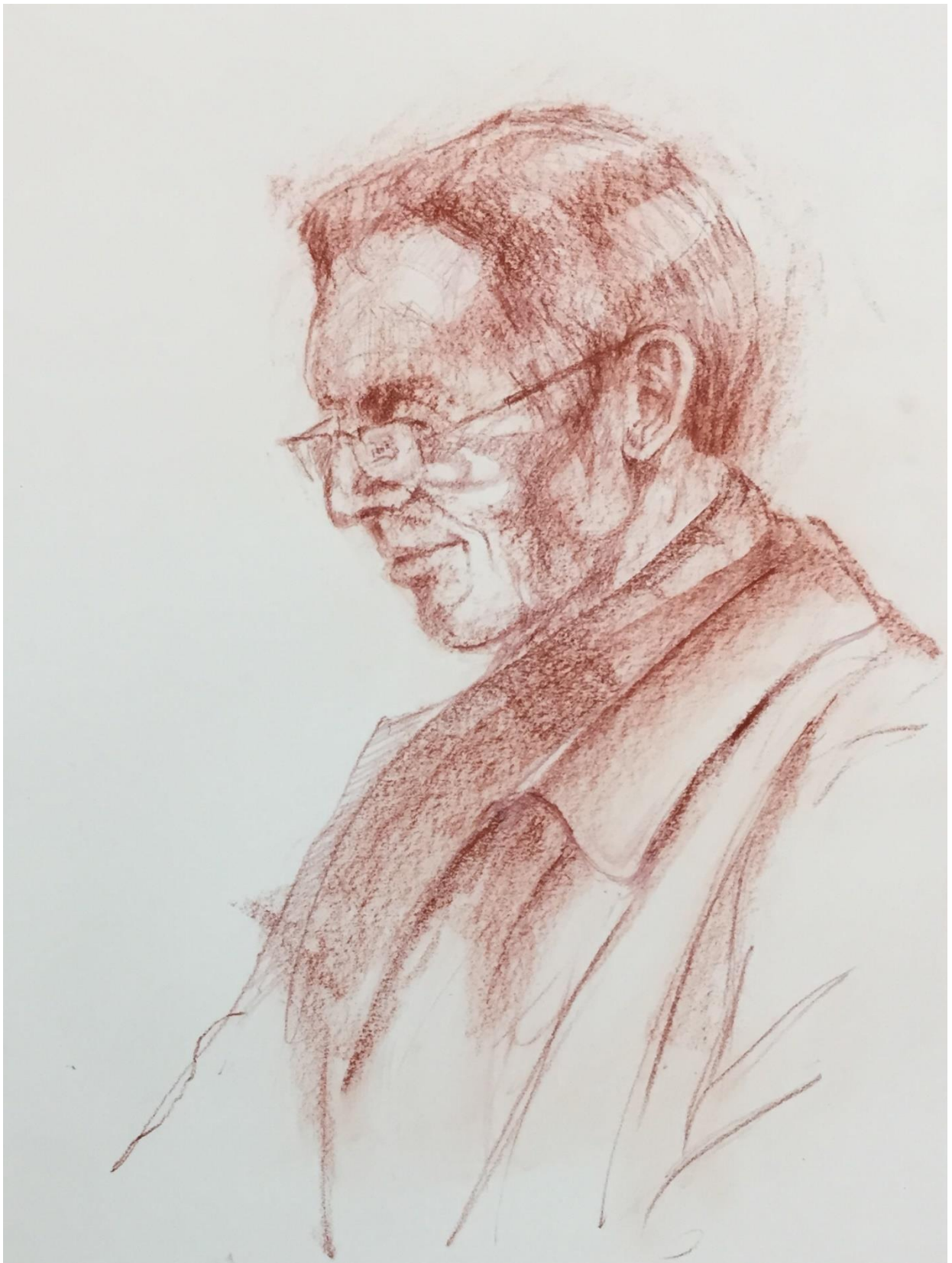
When you first scan through a puzzle, a theme may be apparent. Words will be repeated. Newspaper, newspaper, newspaper, Guardian, red-top, newspaper, newspaper, Independent. It may make you feel dizzy.

So put the kettle on. Make that cup of tea. Relax. Defocus. He's a devious sod and he enjoys going back to the same source and coming back with something different. And you know that it will always be different. No two 'newspapers' are ever the same. That's his thing. Don't be dizzied by it. Dance with it.

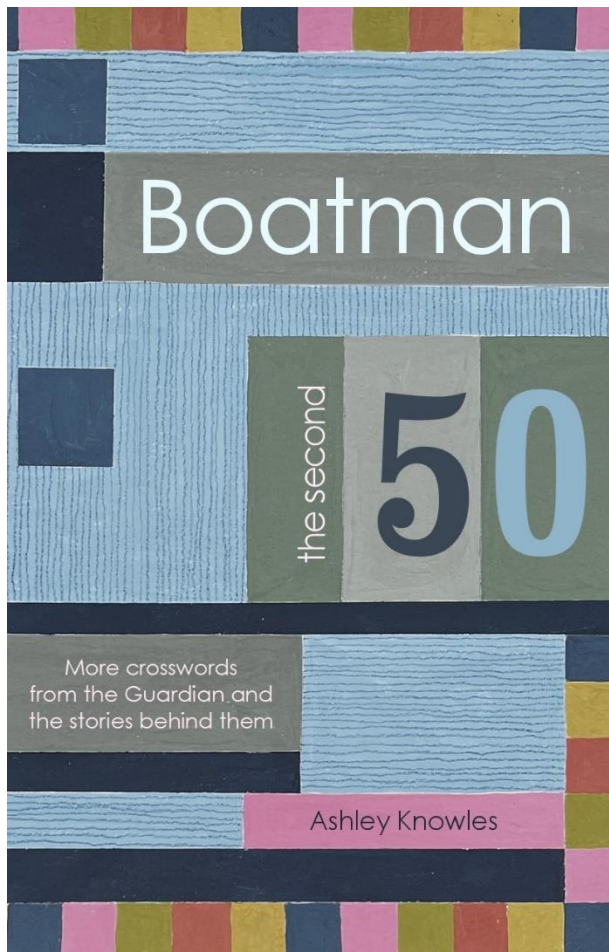
Enjoy. Then enjoy again as you get the insight from the commentaries that follow.

Mine's white with no sugar. Ta.

Portrait © Bernadina Lloyd



Images of the Book



Cover art © Bernadina Lloyd



Boatman – the Second 50 with its predecessor, Boatman – The First 50

Sample Pages

Across

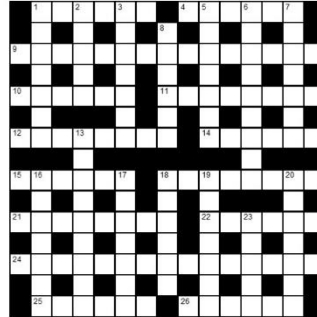
- 1/4 Independent's last edition attracts love and goes quickly - can't believe it (6,2,4)
 9 How the papers show the truth in ink, with balanced exchange of letters (2,5,3,5)
 10 Crossword fan put off taking on Times (6)
 11 Consumer items for Boatman bound by a large number of perverse rules (8)
 12 Periods of confinement for deceitful offence (6-2)
 14 One causes cuts in circulation, with red-top in panic (6)
 15 Bird in Mirror to mourn Independent, gullied (6)
 18 Crooked act conceals class (8)
 21 Fury at American church leader having cash injected by unknowns (8)
 22 Newspaper's leader has moral code about racial designation (6)
 24 Don't hinder telling of legend with face pulled repeatedly by hack, ok? (4,3,2,3,3)
 25 Times, say, shows these unpaid workers absorbing a newspaper (6)
 26 Couple lose last scrap of hope in case (6)

Down

- 1 Have a go, grabbing girl where skin is dressed (7)
 2 Drew attention (lose no time!) to rat (5)
 3 Unleashes chaos to rock Sun (7)
 5 Showing political unity in savage newspaper leader (7)
 6 It prevents rust in gold finish to exotic metal in heavy top (9)
 7 End of quote from paper's other edition (2,5)
 8 Guardian in conflict over retreat (6)
 13 Snapper we found misbehaving in one publication (9)
 16 Former newspaper, one that never stopped (7)
 17 Article on Polish nudity (3,4)
 18 To the Left, Conservative way causes decay (3,3)
 19 Here find a newspaper, a reversed one; a river runs through it (5,2)
 20 "Goodbye Porkpie Hat" or "1,000 lost, sadly"? (7)
 23 One's end; laugh wildly; guzzle an impala (5)

Former newspapers

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First published as Guardian cryptic crossword No 26,880
 Tuesday 10 May 2016

Another former newspaper exposed? What's that you say? (3,3)

This puzzle marked the end of The Independent's print edition, when it was published on paper for the last time on 26 March 2016.

I'd made a foray into the world of newspapers in The First 50. This time round the game was to mention a few titles while musing on their role in factual reporting. It's a reflection of their changing role (or our perception of it) that we cannot rely on the presumption encapsulated in the idiom that what we read IN BLACK AND WHITE ought to be, as the clue to 9 Across hopefully suggests, a balanced representation of the facts.

That clue, or a version of it, had been in my notebook for years, but the reference to the "Independent's last edition" in the clue to 1/4 was written specifically for this puzzle - I was pleased to be able to use the otherwise hackneyed trick of extending the theme by using a theme word's last letter but without the result feeling contrived.

A few possible clues for other newspapers failed to make it into the final grid. I was particularly sad not to find a place for this:

Regretting loss of say the Sun, perhaps producing another newspaper (7,4)

I planned to use another leftover clue as the teaser clue on Twitter. In a strange coincidence (or as a victim of the Curse of Boatman), the short-lived New Day printed its final edition on the Friday before this puzzle appeared, and so became another former newspaper.

Gallerymouse and others on theguardian.com noticed that "to the Left" in 18 Down would have worked better in an Across clue. With hindsight, I agree and I hope it didn't put you off too much. For this and other peculiarities, which annoyed some of the commenters on fiftensquared.net but which didn't stop them finishing the puzzle, Baerchen suggested that "the more flak he cops for going 'off-piste', the further off-piste he goes". I really don't do it deliberately, but if I see a place where fun is to be had, that's where I'll head.

Solution to teaser clue: NEW DAY
 homophone = NUDE, EH?

Solution to "loss of say the Sun" clue: MORNING STAR
 homophone = MOURNING + STAR

Former newspapers

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Across

- 1/4 independent + ISSUE + O + FLIES, 9 (INK WITH BALANCED)*, 10 DETER containing X, 11 D + RULES* containing AB, 12 LYING + SIN, 14 LATHE + R(ed), 15 WEEP reversed + Independent, 18 DEED containing FORM, 21 A + POPE containing L + X + Y, 22 N(ewspaper) inside ETHIC, 24 homophone = KEY + POUT + OFT + HEW + AY, 25 SERFS containing I, 26 ATTACHE - hopE.

Down

- 1 TRY containing ANNE, 2 SPOTLIT - (zero T), 3 (ROCK SUN)*, 5 FERAL containing ED, 6 IN + OR after BI inside HIT, 7 paper\$ OTHER Edition, 8 WAR + DEN, 13 (SNAPPER WE)*, 16 EX + PRESS, 17 THE + BUFF, 18 TORY RD reversed, 19 FT + ST containing LEE & LI, 20 (PORKPIE HAT - OR - K)* Semi&LIT, 23 laugh wildly; guzzle aN impalA & LI.

Boatman is the Neil Young of crosswords: "I don't give 'em what they want and they come back for more"

Capmus