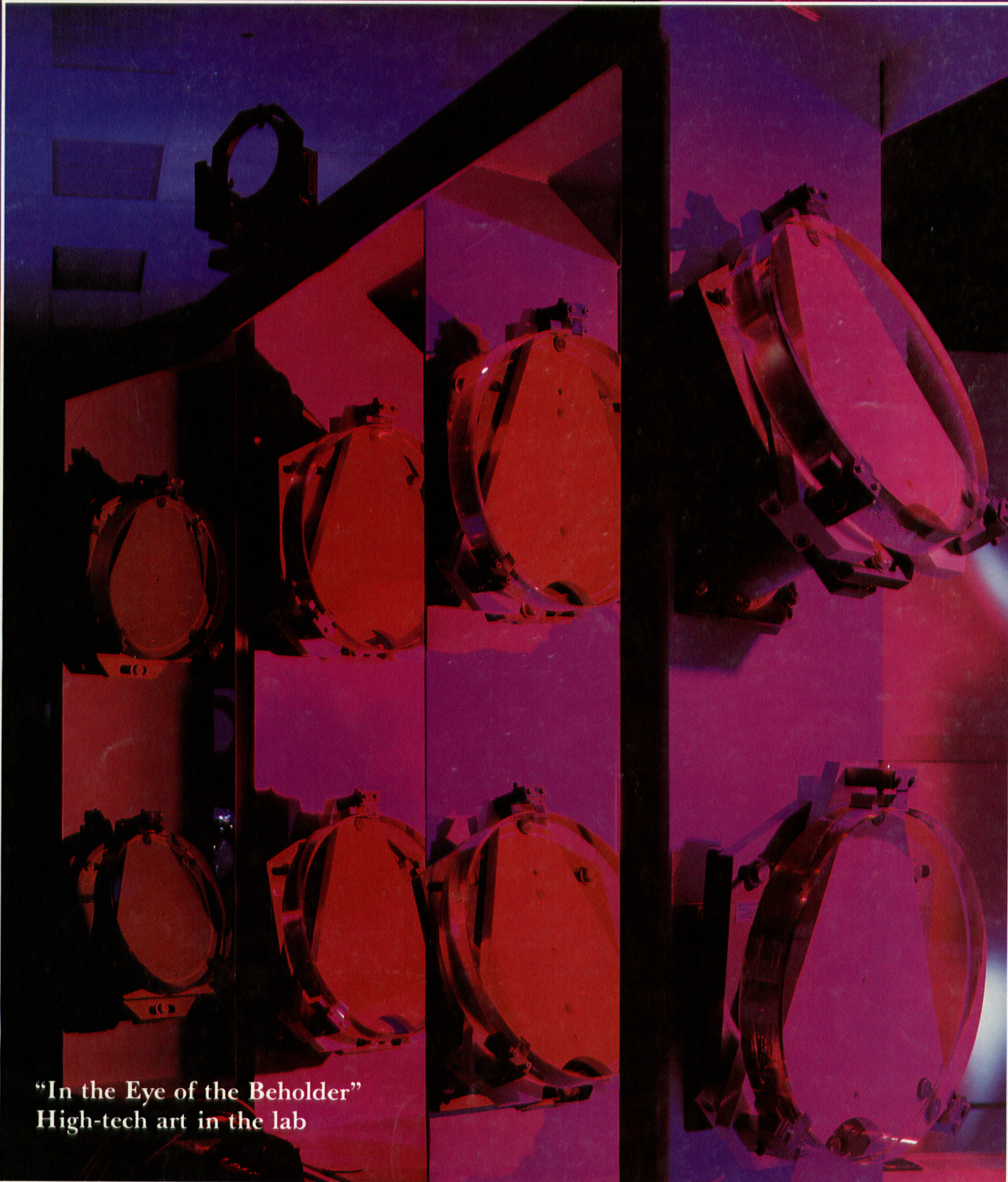


ROCHESTER REVIEW

University of Rochester

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"In the Eye of the Beholder"
High-tech art in the lab

Ever a Cross Word

By Daniel M. Kimmel

In the 1920s, when crossword mania first hit America, people sported its ubiquitous black-and-white squares all over their clothing and jewelry, libraries put time limits on the use of dictionaries, and rabid fans inspired a Broadway revue, a prison riot, and at least one marital murder-suicide.

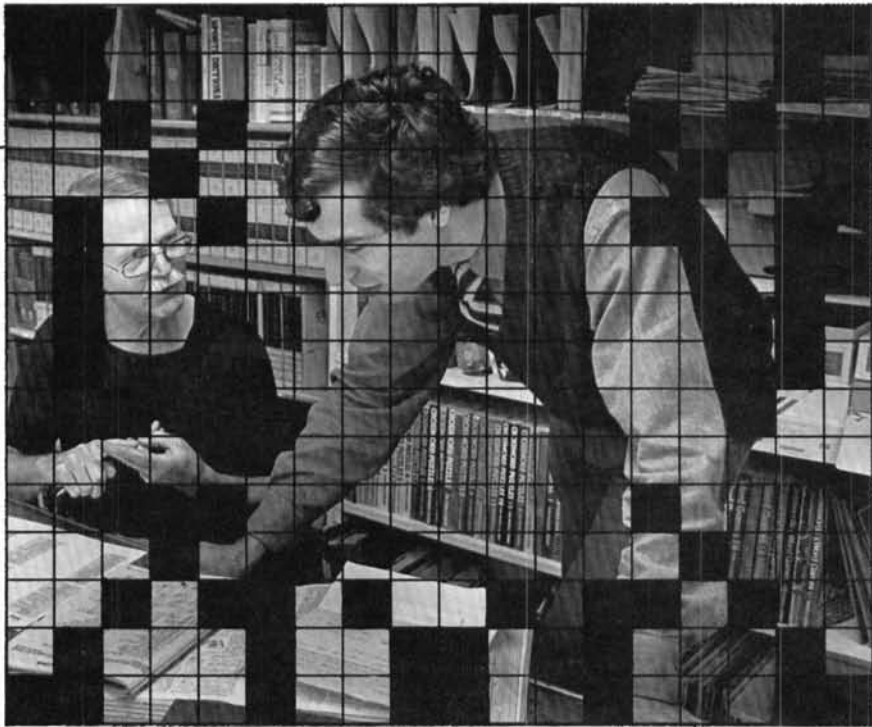
The craze is still alive, and Douglas Heller '77 is right in the middle of it.

If you went to Rochester in the mid-seventies, you knew who Doug Heller was. He was the one who wrote those "Campus Times" crossword puzzles.

There they were, regular as clockwork every day on page four, crisp checkerboard relief among the day's gray headlines ("UR Combats Food Waste," "Opinions on Bookstore Vary," "VP Cites Inflation in Tuition Rise," "Senate Investigates CIA," "Wilson Commons to Open in Fall," "Reagan Future 'A Mystery'") and the endless pleas of the campus classifieds ("Lost: In the vicinity of the quad, retainer, orthodontic, if found please call Gregg at x6711; reward offered").

During those years the CT was perhaps the only daily college paper in the country running original crosswords created by someone right on campus. These were no amateurish attempts either. These measured up to the *pros*.

Always looking for fresh challenges, Heller sometimes hid messages to surprise or amuse the solver at the moment of triumph. In fact, the first puzzle he had published in the CT—and also the first one he ever wrote—contained a message of sorts: A diagonal reading of the completed puzzle re-



Puzzlement: Doug Heller (right) talks it over with Dee Stewart, one of his Penny Press editors.

vealed a spattering of obscene words. "They were pretty *civilized* obscene words," he says now, "but we did get a few letters to the editor complaining about appropriateness."

Heller was about halfway through his freshman year when he constructed that first crossword, inspired not by years of puzzle-solving as a youngster ("nobody in our family ever did puzzles") but by his years of admiration for music-maker Stephen Sondheim, who is also, it turns out, an expert puzzle-maker.

Heller took to puzzling as easily as, well, an eider takes to H₂O, and enthusiastically entered the curious world of dedicated "cruciverbalists" who effortlessly, as Norton J. Bramasco and Jordan S. Lasher note in their Crossword Puzzle Compendium, "knew what to do with awls and adzes; who could navigate proas, xebecs, and dhows up the Aar, Ems, or Dee; whose gardens were verdant with sloes, aloes, and corms; and who could shout 'Evoe!' at the sight of an esne standing beneath an orle in a

stoa." They are also the kind of people, one might add, who have the lexical chutzpah to offer "Short samurai" as the clue to "SAWED OFF SHOGUNS."

Within a matter of months after his "Campus Times" debut Heller was offering fellow students an informal course in how to construct crosswords and sharing his space in the CT with the efforts of his protégés. Most days, however, the puzzles were Heller's own, and he frequently wrote five of them a week, sometimes supplementing them with "Sunday paper" type puzzles for the campus literary magazine "Logos."

To Heller, the daily chore was a toss-off. He could drop by the office and produce a brand-new puzzle in "about twenty minutes," but, he concedes, "those weren't my best efforts. The more unusual ones I did on weekends." Anyone who has ever attempted to construct a simple four-letter word square will recognize the facility Heller so casually admits to.

Doug's puzzles were *very* popular with the campus community, but to

him they were just undergraduate kid stuff. When he left school in 1976 he had no thought of ever creating one again.

"Oh, I paid for a breakfast once with a crossword puzzle when I was spending that first summer hitchhiking across the country. And another time I got lodging for a puzzle somewhere else," Heller remembers. But puzzling was just "a lark," back then, he says. "I didn't know there was a profession out there that did this."

Heller is doing his reminiscing sitting in his office in Norwich, Connecticut. The walls of that room, as you might already have guessed, are lined with puzzle books and magazines, many of them put out by Penny Press, a leading publisher in the field. Doug Heller, who thought puzzle-making was just a lark, has grown up to become the company's editor-in-chief, a practicing member of the profession that in his college days he didn't know existed.

In school, he majored in English. Once out, he got a job as a typesetter in Stamford, where he moved in order to pursue his relationship with Janis Weiner '76. She knew Heller from his CT days and would eventually marry him, becoming one of his managing editors as well as the mother of their two children, Gregory, six, and Robert, two. She's now one of the two senior editors overseeing the production of Penny Press's publications.

While still a typesetter and wondering what to do next, Heller caught a notice about a meeting of a local crossword-puzzle group and decided to take it in. "One of the people there had the job I didn't know I was about to hold. He said he was going to be quitting the next day and hadn't told the boss yet. He told me, 'If you're interested, there'll be an opening tomorrow.'" The about-to-be-vacated position was as a puzzle editor for Penny Press, which at the time published three puzzle magazines (it now publishes seventeen of them).

Heller was put in charge of one of the three magazines, and when the press added a fourth title, he was given responsibility for that one too.

Although it may not be obvious to the casual observer looking them over in a magazine rack, each of Heller's titles is geared to a slightly different

audience. Even the five magazines that are primarily made up of crosswords exhibit subtle differences readily apparent to veteran puzzle fans.

Heller starts explaining. "'Good Times Crosswords' tends to be a pleasant friend. This is your kindly companion. It's not going to throw you any punches." "Good Times" is geared, in other words, to people who like their crosswords straight, without any twists.

"Approved Crosswords" is also in the friendly category. "We keep to the standard definitions. It gets tough," says Heller, "but it gets tough in a very fair way."

"What appears to be a crossword puzzle inscription appears in an Egyptian tomb. Some say the history of word manipulation goes back as far as 6000 B.C."

Then there's "Joy of Crosswords," which specializes in thematic puzzles. "We play some tricks—it gets very hard towards the end of the book. It's much more for the dyed-in-the-wool crossword solver."

"Classic Crosswords," on the other hand, is more literary. In cluing this one, "the dictionary always wins out over the TV set. If there are choices for the person who writes the clues, this one goes by the book. If you had an old-style education, this is for you—the kind of magazine that reflects that background." The fifth magazine, "Family Crosswords," is the one that goes with allusions to the TV show or the movie in preference to more literary or technical definitions.

If all this seems arcane, it's something Heller has to think about. Consider that he has to clue the same word differently in each magazine. "PARIS," for example, could just as easily be "City in France," "Helen's abductor," or "An American in _____."

Neither Heller nor Weiner nor any of their other editors actually write

many of the puzzles that appear in his magazines. Their job is to *solve* them, several times, to make sure they work—and to fix them if they don't.

"The skill is in the grid, but the *art* is in the clues. Generally, in the crossword puzzles we receive from contributors, the definitions are what need help the most. You have to make sure they are correct—but that's the least of it. You also have to make sure the puzzle is consistent with your house style and that the level of difficulty is appropriate for whatever else is in the magazine. If you've got one of those constructors who gets very flaky at times, then you have to be able to tame down the flakiness a bit. That's not an attempt to homogenize, just to bring it within limits."

There are about 1,200 people worldwide who send material to Heller's magazines. According to crossword chroniclers Bramesco and Lasher, the well-populated ranks of avocational puzzle-makers represent "a remarkable cross section of the population at large." Among the elite group of top constructors they cite are an actor who has played in "Star Trek," a Texas oil tycoon, a kindergarten teacher, a drugstore receiving clerk, and a symphony musician. The symphony musician, incidentally, is Alfio Micci, who is one of Heller's contributors and has something in common with him other than puzzles: They are both Rochester alums. Micci, who before his retirement played first violin for the New York Philharmonic, graduated from the Eastman School in 1940.

Considering the time and effort that go into putting out five different crossword magazines, it's amazing that Heller's company would be interested in doing anything else, but it turns out that crosswords are only the tip of the iceberg. Penny Press also publishes books and magazines containing word searches, fill-ins, logic problems, diagramless puzzles, cryptograms, and a particularly challenging sort of crossword called "codewords" that sets you up in solving a grid *with no clues at all*.

Heller is always on the lookout for something different, and many of his contributors send him ideas for new kinds of puzzles. When that happens,

he says, "We review the ideas and solve the puzzles. Very rarely are they in a particularly great form when they first come in, so we work on them, and present things a little differently, and then we try them again."

Once Heller and his crew decide a new kind of puzzle is ready to be sprung on the public, it's tested in the pages of "Merit Crossword Puzzles Plus," which he describes as somewhat "funkier" than Penny Press's other publications. Here the puzzle solvers are prepared to be challenged by the unusual—or even the downright outlandish. When the new puzzle is actually in print, Heller's team solves it again, just to make sure.

If the editors still think they have a good puzzle after all this, they ask the constructor to submit others that are similar and begin introducing them in the appropriate publications.

He admits it's difficult to come up with something completely untried—the history of word puzzles goes back too far. What appears to be a crossword puzzle inscription appears in one of the Egyptian tombs; some say the history of word manipulation goes back as far as 6000 B.C.

"People will very often say, 'I've invented a new puzzle,' but they're more often variations on an established theme—diagrams or blanks to be filled in, or anagrams, or words hidden in an array, or rebuses. You take these basic formulae and put them together, or combine them in a slightly different way, and give them a theme, and it's a 'new' puzzle."

So are there any truly new puzzles? "Well, we certainly didn't invent the crossword." (That honor belongs to Arthur Wynne, who published what is known as the first modern crossword in the "New York World," on December 21, 1913.) Heller goes on: "Therefore we did not invent the 'Double Trouble.' That idea of putting two or more letters into one box appeared as early as 1925, when somebody did it as a one-time toss-off."

As for the diagramless puzzles—as every puzzle buff knows, that's a form of crossword where only the clues are provided and solvers must create their own grid—they also have a long history. According to puzzle legend, the diagramless was invented when a publisher accidentally left out the grid for a crossword puzzle, and diehard fans went ahead and solved it anyway.

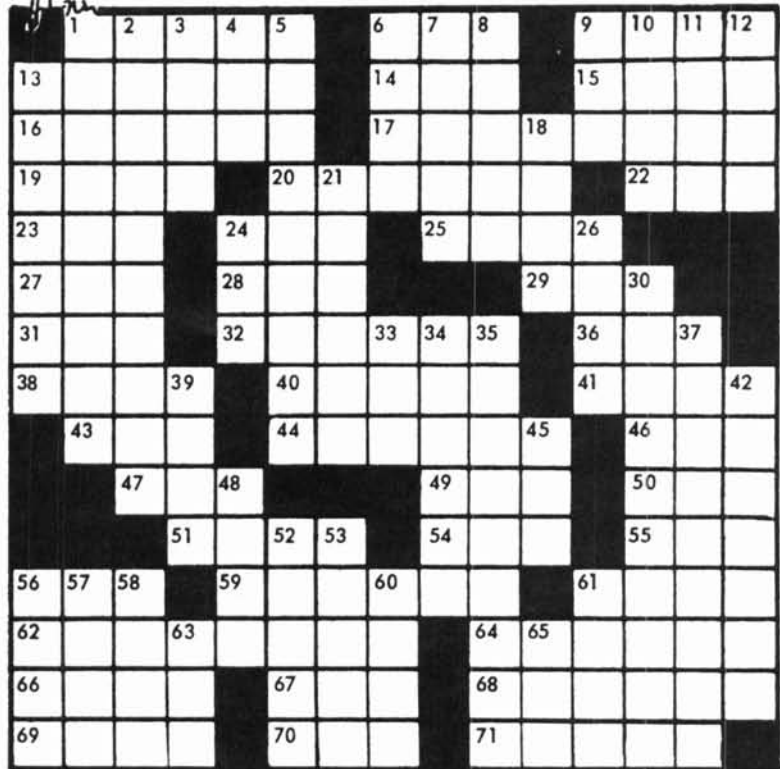
Wit's End

Doug Heller's Last "Campus Times" Crossword Puzzle



(Reprinted from "Campus Times" March 1, 1976)

Be warned: You'll never find this one in "Good Times Crosswords."



ACROSS

1. Equation of 1905
6. Molds
9. Agree
13. Excellent
14. Gym equipment
15. Beheaded goats
16. Ubert _____ Umphrey
17. Equivalent
19. Myrna et al.
20. Fail to follow suit
22. Simple sugar
23. _____ grabs (available)
24. _____-Margret
25. Take care of
27. _____ to (fill the requirements)
28. Turf
29. Milne character
31. Legal statute
32. Fast horses
36. NASA words
38. Slaughter of baseball
40. Suit _____
41. Two-man basketball contest
43. _____ Lanka
44. Famed sisters
46. Nun's brother?

47. Maori food
49. Bone: Prefix
50. Art abbr.
51. Not all
54. "No No Nanette" song
55. Corn unit
56. Take-out order words
59. Time to be in
61. Guthrie
62. _____
64. Excuses
66. _____ spumante
67. Barbie's beau
68. Question re one's sanity
69. Kept off the street
70. Time periods: Abbr.
71. Simple song

DOWN

1. French and Slavs for example
2. Women's lib slogan
3. N.L. team
4. Dernier _____
5. Soliloquy words
6. Overseer
7. Horse hairs
8. World, to Shakespeare
9. Bill's buddy
10. Othello villain
11. Ballet skirts
12. Words of understanding
13. Like a fair puzzle
18. Stare
21. Win one's heart
24. Rear end
26. Year in the future
30. "I have _____ blood, toil, tears and sweat"
33. Ike's theater
34. Indicate
35. Turns the clock ahead
37. Actually
39. Thailand
42. Puzzle opener
45. "_____ Brute"
49. Rock band
52. One-horse carriage
53. Adjuster
56. Common fish
57. Golly gee
58. Bismarck
60. Marshes
61. "It _____ Me Babe"
63. First or foreign
65. To him: French

Solution on page 34

“Frameworks” are yet another kind of puzzle, this one involving putting words into an open—as opposed to a crossword—grid. Heller has seen examples of this type of puzzle dating back to the eighteenth century.

With countless volumes of old puzzles available, one might wonder why Heller doesn't simply reprint old magazines. Certainly no one is going to remember a puzzle from twenty-five or fifty years ago. In fact, older puzzles do get recycled into Penny Press books and its “grab bags” of back issues, but passing off old puzzles as new ones creates problems Heller would prefer to avoid. “We've changed our standards over the years. One thing we did, for instance, was to eliminate two-letter words from our puzzles.”

Solving older puzzles still can be fun, but, he points out, “You have to put up with finding definitions like ‘our president’ and then having to fill in ‘TRUMAN.’”

A clue like that could be rewritten (to thirty-third president, for instance) but there are some things that no longer work. “There are personalities who were very hot at one time and are long since forgotten. Every so often I'm going through old puzzles and I spot a name and realize I haven't thought about that one in years.”

In fact, it's precisely this sort of question that's one of the biggest issues in the puzzle world at the moment. “When is it appropriate,”

Heller asks, “to include in a crossword puzzle the name of something that is very, very new? Or something that is very, very old? Where do you draw the line?”

He gives an example. “If you have the entry ‘CARS,’ is it appropriate to clue it as ‘rock and roll band’? Or is it better to stay clear of that? Do you want to clue it as ‘Reos and Hudsons’?”

“This question of young versus old in puzzles is one that's really very hot. What's happened is that many puzzle publications are edited by young people—‘young’ meaning certainly under forty, and a lot of them under thirty. Their choices tend to reflect their knowledge, and their knowledge tends to reflect little that's nostalgic for older people. World War II, for the young ones, is history that doesn't exist. Its battle sites are obscure words.

“But modern rock bands—like Aha!—are common knowledge to these young editors. Now if you ask me, Middle America doesn't know Aha! We may all know Madonna and Prince and Michael Jackson, but we don't all know Aha!”

“So there's a lot of discussion that maybe we should realign down a bit. Let's back off from all this trying to be so hip. We've had a lot of complaints from old-timers saying ‘I can't do puzzles anymore. I don't know any of this stuff. And worse than *not* knowing any of it is that I really don't *want* to know it.’”

One way in which you'd think the modern puzzler would be hip is in the use of computers, considering the sheer variety of the species and the variables that go into the making of each one. Oddly, that isn't the case. “It's fascinating how little computers have touched the puzzle business,” says Heller. “To me, it's common sense that they can do a lot of work for us.”

In spite of—and perhaps because of—the constant quest for improvement, Heller is very happy where he's ended up. “It's a great job. We have a wonderful group of people here, and we're working to do something that's really for fun. We're not destroying the world, we're not trying to prove anything. We're simply trying to entertain the world a little bit.”

And what does a professional puzzle editor do for his own entertainment in his spare time? Besides his family (the six-year-old already shares

the family interest in games and puzzles and has started punning) and his enduring partiality to the music of fellow puzzle-maker Sondheim, Heller enjoys—guess what? Solving puzzles.

But the puzzles Heller does for recreation are not the kind that appear in “Good Time Crosswords.” His favorites are printed in a magazine called “The Listener,” the newsletter of the BBC in London. “They're *really* tough. I have a friend in England who sends them to me every week.” ■

Daniel M. Kimmel '77 is a Boston-based film critic and a correspondent for “Variety.” His last article for “Rochester Review” was on Greenpeace USA president Peter Bahouth.



The Ner Man

No interview with Doug Heller could be complete without a question about one of the hallmarks of his “Campus Times” puzzles, an enigmatic cartoon character who went by the name of Ner Man.

Named for a stumper in the Sunday “Times” crossword (“Father of Abner”), Ner first appeared as a little drawing accompanying Heller's CT puzzles. Ner's creator, and the individual who got stumped with Heller on that “Times” puzzle, was his roommate, Gary Fink '77. Pretty soon, Ner began to take on a life of his own and would appear dressed up for holidays and other special events, as “Sant-ner Claus” for instance. Eventually, the CT sponsored a create-your-own Ner Man contest for amateur campus cartoonists. (The winner, who submitted “MoNer Lisa,” inexplicably never stepped forward to claim the prize—a lifetime subscription to the paper and an eight-by-ten glossy of the original Ner.)

Heller is still in touch with Fink, who has pursued a career in radio production. “I love that Ner Man,” says Heller. “That Ner thing was great.” Would Ner ever pop up in one of Heller's Penny Press books? He smiles, admitting it's an idea that he's enjoyed toying with over the years. “I won't say no,” he finally replies, perhaps already contemplating what a diagramless Ner Man would look like.

Career twists

Dan Kimmel '77 would like to do a story on people like Doug Heller (and Dan himself, for that matter) who have fashioned careers based on what they did at Rochester that was outside their majors. If you got your start in radio at WRUR, or in journalism at the CT or in acting through COPA, or were otherwise introduced to your life's work outside of your major field of study, please write or phone Dan at 186 Commonwealth Avenue, #15, Boston, Massachusetts 02116, (617) 262-5739.