Cecily van Gend

'Half a million people in the United Kingdom do it every day. Most people remember their first time, and everyone has a favourite. You can do it in bed, standing up, or on a train. You can do it alone, with a loved one or in groups. The Queen, it is said, does it in the bath. It is not illegal, immoral or fattening.'

This is taken from the blurb of a book called **Pretty Girl in Crimson Rose (8)'**, subtitled **a memoir of love, exile and crosswords,** by Sandy Balfour. Balfour was born in Johannesburg, but left South Africa as a young man in December 1983, to avoid the army, and has settled in London. He uses his discovery of and love affair with crosswords as a kind of metaphor for the significant episodes in his life, and for exploring the whole concept of Englishness. He also examines the history of crosswords, while discussing his favourite clues, and introducing the philosophy of crosswords and of the people who set them.

I first started doing crosswords regularly on a trip across America in a Greyhound bus. It seems that there is a crossword syndicated in all the daily newspapers right across the continent, so that it is possible to do the puzzle one day, in one state, and find the solution the next day in the next state. It whiled away the monotonous miles of middle America, and the habit continued once I had reached the West Coast and travelled on the wonderful Amtrak Coastal Express all the way from Los Angeles to Seattle and back. These were not cryptic puzzles, but the straightforward variety with just synonyms.

It is rather appropriate that my interest in this form of recreation should begin in America, because it was there that crosswords, to quote the **Encyclopedia Britannica**, were 'developed into a serious adult pastime'. Elementary forms were around in Victorian England, but it is generally agreed that the first modern crossword appeared in the *New York World* on 21 December 1913. It was the creation of a Liverpudlian immigrant who edited the Fun section of the paper. On this particular day, he was having trouble finding material to fill the space so included a puzzle, which he called a Word Cross. The idea caught on, and had soon spread to England, despite the rather pompous reaction to the *Times*, which declared it 'a menace because it is making devastating inroads on the working hours of every rank and society'. Ironically, the *Times* crossword is now regarded by many the ultimate challenge in crossword puzzles.

According to the **Britannica**, crosswords are found in almost every country and language, and are regarded by language teachers as an excellent way of improving the vocabulary. There are even crosswords in Latin. I believe, however, that these are mainly of the straightforward, synonym variety.

It was the British with their love of puns, word play and hidden meanings, who developed the cryptic crossword to its present sophisticated level, as exemplified by those appearing in the *Times* and the *Guardian*. The word cryptic means 'hidden', and in this particular form of the puzzle, the answers are deliberately misleading, hidden in a kind of code employing such devices as puns, anagrams, double entendres and abbreviations. A cryptic crossword will always say what it means, but will not necessarily mean what it says. It is really a kind of code. In his novel **Enigma**, Robert Harris describes the World War II attempts at Bletchley Park to decode enemy signals. It is interesting that the codebreakers were recruited from the ranks of *Times* crossword winners.

Back home from America, I began to get interested in cryptic crosswords, beginning slowly by looking at the solutions and working backwards to arrive at the reasoning behind the clues. Some puzzles provide two sets of clues for the same grid, one cryptic and one straightforward, both arriving at the same answer. These are particularly useful for beginners, enabling them to arrive at the answer first, and then work out how to get there.

I gradually learnt how to read a clue, and to spot the various conventions and clue indicators. I am now completely addicted, and justify the time spent on them (and on the daily Sudoku challenge) as a marvellous form of mental stimulation, and a means of warding off the dreaded Alzheimers.

One does have to learn certain conventions. The whole thing about solving puzzles is to think laterally, and it is important to remember that things are never what they seem. You have to know how to read a clue: the best clues read like perfectly normal English sentences, whose meanings usually have nothing to do with their literal sense. The clue is usually in two parts: a definition, and the disguised meaning, or the subsidiary indication.

The title of Balfour's book is a classic crossword clue, which has appeared in varying forms in different puzzles. The surface meaning suggests a pretty little girl in a pink dress, perhaps looking something like a rose. The answer to the clue has absolutely nothing to do with this. Firstly, you have to decide which is the definition, and which the subsidiary, and to do this, you have to repunctuate it. 'Rose' is not a qualification of crimson. Put a comma after crimson, and the word 'rose' becomes the definition part of the clue, and it has nothing to do with the flower. The word 'in' here is an indication of a type of clue called a 'split': one word is split, and another is placed inside it. Now, think of a synonym for crimson. We have RED, which has to be split, because the synonym for 'pretty girl', which is BELLE, is 'in crimson'. So we have REBELLED, that is, 'rose'.

It took me a long time to arrive at the stage where I could work out a clue as involved as this one. There are simpler types of clues, and these are usually the backbone of the puzzle. One type is the anagram, where the letters of one of the words in the clue has to be shuffled around to form a word fitting the definition. There will be an anagram indicator hidden in the clue: some obvious ones are 'somehow', 'wild', 'arranged', 'reformed' and 'perhaps', but in more sophisticated puzzles they are subtler, and the solver has to be on the lookout for them.

Another fairly common type of clue, known as a double literal, consists of two words, in which both words have a common synonym, but where the two words taken together suggest a completely different meaning to the one required. Sandy Balfour gives as an example 'potty train', evoking images of recalcitrant toddlers in nappies. Banish that picture, and concentrate on each individual word, then try to find a connection. 'Potty': mad, crazy, nutty, batty? 'Train': engine, coach, railway? The answer to the clue is LOCO.

Splits, as is the Pretty girl clue, are fairly common. An example is 'Everybody in favour of party novelty'. Here, the definition is party novelty. Everybody is easy - ALL. 'In' indicates that it is inside 'favour'. This is a little more difficult, but given the hint 'party favour' you can work backwards. A favour is a boon, so the solution is BALLOON.

I think the cleverest of this type has to be one quoted by Sandy Balfour in his book. Apparently it appeared in a *Guardian* themed crossword, where the solutions were the names of twentieth century

plays. The clue was 'Angkooler'. Absolute gibberish, you might think, but think a little harder, and bear in mind the names of plays. It is a split, combined with a reversal. The answer is LOOK BACK IN ANGER. Work it out.

Then there are numerous code words: 'points' or 'directions' usually refer to the points of the compass: N, S, E and W, and 'notes' to musical notes. L stands for Learner, or pupil (although this can also mean eye), and the Roman numerals IV, V, X, L, C, M and D often feature. A 'writer' can be a pen, 'flower' is often a river, and a bridge can be a 'spanner'. 'Sailor' can be AB (as in Able Seaman), or tar, and doctor can be Dr, MB or MO. Graduates are often BA or MA. 'Worker' can be ant or bee. I could go on an on, if I had the space. There are hundreds of such code words, and dozens of types of clues - in fact, there are dictionaries devoted to them, but crossword setters are an ingenious lot, and are forever thinking up new variations to test out wits and drive us potty, or loco.

In my view there are few pleasures to beat the satisfaction that comes with solving a difficult clue. It combines a feeling of fulfilment, of resolution, with an appreciation of the skill and wit of the setter. There is an absolute rightness, a knowledge that the answer can be that and no other. It is this feeling to which I have become addicted - it is more potent than any drug.