

SO HOW DID YOU WIND UP IN AN EPISODE OF ‘THE SIMPSONS’?

Yeah, how’d that happen?

The very first I heard that a “Simpsons” episode might be in the works was when one of the writer-producers from the show approached Will after Will had done a puzzle talk at UCLA. Will was all for it (who wouldn’t be?) and I later heard from the episode’s writer, Tim Long, that a lot of the people who work on “The Simpsons” had seen “Wordplay” and liked it and that the show’s main producer, James L. Brooks, had the idea that Lisa should become hooked on crosswords and enter a crossword tournament. After that, it fell to Tim to flesh out the idea and write the script. (And last October, one day before the writers’ strike, Tim overnighted the script to me right before I flew to Philadelphia to attend last year’s sudoku tournament. I can’t tell you how uptown it felt to not only be reading a script on a plane, but a “Simpsons” script to boot, and one that was about crossword puzzles.)

Since “Wordplay” was the inspiration for the episode, the script called for New York Times crossword editor Will Shortz to make a cameo appearance toward the end. My role originally was an offscreen one—constructor of all of the puzzles seen in the episode (and there are quite a few). But the powers-that-be later decided that they could get a couple extra laughs if they added me to the scene, so they did.

I think Will recorded his lines in New York. I recorded mine in a little studio here in Tampa. And I was surprised to learn that Nancy Cartwright, who does Bart’s voice, sometimes does her Bart lines in the same little Tampa studio! This is due to the fact that she’s a frequent visitor to the Tampa Bay area because of her Scientology work. (She lives in L.A., where there’s a huge Scientology center, but Clearwater has a huge Scientology center also—it’s just across the bay from Tampa.)

Speaking of voices, Marie and I were in Los Angeles in May 2008 and it happened to be a week when another “Simpsons” script was getting its first read-

through. Tim invited us to sit in, after which Marie and I met all the voice stars and most of the “Simpsons” crew on the Fox lot, including the writers—most of whom are puzzle fans! (Which explains a lot, actually.)

As to the Times puzzle, I originally thought it would be a chance to hide a lot of character names throughout the puzzle—like “Lisa” in “palisade,” “Moe” in “amoeba,” etc.—but the more that we talked about it the more it felt like the puzzle should be a totally normal Sunday Times crossword (or as normal as I get) and that the “Simpsons” parts should be thoroughly hidden so that most solvers wouldn’t realize they were there until they watched the show. The diagonal message was suggested immediately (I forget by whom) but I also mentioned that the first letters of every clue could spell a message as well (me and my big mouth!). Tim immediately seized on that idea and ran with it—and ordinarily it would have been just an interesting challenge for me but it turned out to be a lot tougher than I expected because of the specifics of the message itself—like having the word “really” in it three or four times. (Clues that have to start with Y aren’t always the easiest to think of!) The hardest clue turned out to be the one for “Delhi” and it had to start with a V. This could be why they added me to the story—I think they took pity on me!

So the two secret messages are the two main “Simpsons”-related items in the puzzle. The third, and very subtle, connection is that the puzzle’s theme—changing famous people’s last names for humorous effect—echoes what Lisa does when she learns that Homer bet against her—she changes her last name to Bouvier (Marge’s maiden name).

My favorite part was creating a final puzzle that incorporated what Tim had in the script. Lisa’s opponent in the final, Gil Gunderson, “warms up” by throwing three Q’s onto his grid, and then fills in “Enrico Fermi” and “Pet Shop Boys” around them. Now that was fun! Anyway, I hope you liked the episode as much as I did!—MR