

Boxed in across and down by a cryptic questionnaire

UMANITY is cleft in twain; there are those who can, and those who can't. This is not a vision determined by creed, or our intelligence, but by the ability to answer a simple question: having spilled paint, chap is in lab's office (11 letters).

If you reply "What the hell kind of question is that?" you are of the rightward type, and one of us regarded as a captain, humm ... then you well, let's see, 11 letters, humm, let's see, now that could be an anagram, and Ahab, he is a captain, humm ..."

The cryptic crossword completer can be seen on trains and in staff cabbings up and down the country, slipping into those little boxes at the bottom left-hand corner of the page. To those who can't, this is regarded as a thankless way of killing away an hour, but to those who can, it is a veritable passion that spans generations, that scates, that absorbs, and can only

be crafted and solved by a human mind. "Computers," states Barbara Hall, the grande dame of crossword compilers, "simply can't do it. Cryptic clues demand an oblique view of words and meanings, and a sense of humour."

There is no typical crossword fiend; fanatics range from Dartmoor inmates to eminent doctors; captains to cabin-boys. Alike only in that they have "a fascination with words, and a warped mind," comments John Graham, a Church of England clergyman to some, but also Cinephile, to readers of the Financial Times, and Aracuarria (A Monkey Puzzle tree), to readers of the Guardian.

The crossword challenge is compulsive. As one train-journeyming addict described it, "It's like being in the company of some awfully clever person who keeps asking you awfully clever questions, and you think, I know the answer, don't tell me, don't tell me!" And nothing irks like someone leaning over your shoulder and suggesting that 14

Mags, books and now weekends: what's the feel behind crossword appeal, asks Roz Paterson

across might be 'ramification'. "Oh yes, and all these help-books, listing every anagram in the English language, or all eight-letter words beginning with D, make it so boring," exclaims Barbara Hall. "It is the doing, not the finishing, that's the point," says Burt Danher, aka Hendra (the Guardian), Dinamut (the Financial Times, and Aquilla (the Independent).

The lure of the cryptic strikes early. John Graham began at his father's knee in his early teens, solving and compiling simple cryptic clues. Barbara Hall began by compiling a crossword for her father on an aircraft theme, to amuse him between bouts of aircraft-spotting during the war. She continued compiling as a Wren and has since compiled for publications both quality and questionable. The mastermind behind the confound-

either know it or you don't. A good clue should give you two chances."

Hall begins by filling in the longest words in the grid, and working outwards. She keeps a notebook by her bed, and scribbles down words and clues whenever the muse strikes. "I'll hear something in a conversation, or a word will stand out from a printed page. Epiphany. Bedlam. Now they're good words."

Her favourite clue of all time? Not A to G, nor P to X (five letters); Answer: Water.

"Sometimes people do write in and quibble over an answer," says John Graham, "But they're always very nice about it, and I do endeavour to reply." Hall regularly corresponds with discontented crossword addicts, and even has a fan club in Australia.

One crossword compiler however, had a less than pleasant response to his crossword clues. The Daily Telegraph crossword, so long a stranger to controversy, briefly found itself the focus of national concern. This symmetrical knot of

obscure semantic and double meaning caused the British secret service and her armies to falter, and catch their breath. Overlord? Utah? No, mandy? What was the anonymous compiler trying to say? Was passing on the secrets of the D-Day landings to the enemy? Hauled by M16, a very frightened corporal-cum-schoolteacher begged insist that the appearance of crucial code-words at 6 across and 17 down was the merest whim of chance.

Needless to say the D-Day landings went ahead successfully, but since then, the Telegraph has kept weather eye on its cryptic clues. The crossword editor was asked to scan the grids for 'unsuitable' words during the Falklands Conflict.

Despite this cautionary tale, crosswords are an extremely safe occupation, so here is something courtesy of SoS's own Michael McDonald Cooper for starters: The MCP, as it turns out, put MERCUS for service, roundly curse PMT, a toast crumpets suspect rumo would have it (eight letters).

Scotland on Sunday.

January 27, 1996.