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Tue 23 Nov 2021 06.00 GMT



Cain's Jawbone: TikTok helps reissued literary puzzle fly off the shelves

Reissue of a 1934 murder mystery that has only been solved four times sells out online after social media boost



TikTok creator Sarah Scannell has posted a series of videos charting her attempt to conquer the Cain's Jawbone puzzle. Composite: TikTok

The reissue of an “almost impossibly difficult” literary puzzle from 1934, which has only ever been solved by four people, is flying off the shelves after a popular TikTok user began charting her own attempt to crack the mystery.

Cain's Jawbone is a murder mystery invented by the Observer's first cryptic crossword inventor, Edward Powys Mathers, who was known as Torquemada. The story sees six people die - but in order to discover whodunnit, readers must reorder the jumbled 100 pages. The number of possible combinations is a figure with 158 digits, and to date, just four people have found the solution.

Two of these were in the 1930s, Mr S Sydney-Turner and Mr WS Kennedy, who both won £25. The mystery, which is named after the first recorded murder weapon, was then out of print for years, until the Laurence Sterne Trust was presented with a copy of The Torquemada Puzzle Book, which contains its text, and Shandy Hall curator Patrick Wildgust set out to solve it. Once he'd done so, publisher Unbound reissued the title with a £1,000 prize in 2019. There were 12 entrants, with British comedy writer John Finnemore the only one to get the answer right.

Unbound and the Laurence Sterne Trust decided to keep the solution secret, and published Cain's Jawbone as a paperback this July. Sales have gone through the roof in the last week, after American TikTok user Sarah Scannell began charting her attempts to solve the puzzle, papering her room in the book's pages as she tries to crack the code. Scannell, a communications assistant at a non-profit documentary production company in San Francisco called Citizen Film, is known on TikTok as @saruuuuuuugh and has more than 60,000 followers.

“I've decided to take this nearly impossible task as an opportunity to fulfil a lifelong dream and turn my entire bedroom wall into a murder board,” said Scannell, in a video which has been viewed more than four million times, and received more than 5,000 comments.

Her subsequent attempts to solve the puzzle have seen copies of Cain's Jawbone sell out on the Unbound site and Amazon. The publisher, which is fielding foreign rights queries from around the world, says that orders in the US have topped 10,000 copies, and in Canada are more than 3,000 copies. It is now reprinting 10,000 copies in the UK, and plans to have them in shops by mid-December.

Scannell was at a local independent bookshop near her house, Green Apple Books, when she spotted the title.

“I figured \$10 wasn't too big a loss if I couldn't figure it out,” said Scannell. “Like I say in one of my TikToks, I have never read a murder mystery book before but I do love logic puzzles, which is why I bought the book in the first place.”

She has now read the book twice, and while she believes she will be able to put the pages in the correct order, she's not as confident about then solving the mystery.

“I can already tell that the language and cultural differences between not just 1934 and now but also England and American will be very difficult to navigate. But I put it all up on my bedroom wall so that it would be easier for me to work on it in short bursts,” she said. “I officially started on 2 November, but am really taking my time because my goal is just to get in an answer I'm happy with before the deadline next December. I really didn't expect 4.5 million people to be joining me in this activity, but I genuinely don't care if someone solves it before me. I'm just here to have fun on my own time.”

“What makes me most happy about the TikTok success is that half the profits will go to the Laurence Sterne Trust. Sterne would have loved everything about this story,” said co-founder and publisher of Unbound, John Mitchinson. “He adored setting literary puzzles and finding clever ways to market his books. People forget that Tristram Shandy was a huge bestseller in 1759: Sterne literally laughed all the way to the bank.”

Mitchinson said that Cain's Jawbone was “almost impossibly difficult” as a puzzle. “It took ... the comedy writer John Finnemore four months of research. The number of possible combinations of individual pages generates a figure with 158 zeroes. It is full of red herrings and blind alleys,” he said.

Although the main prize of £1,000 has already been claimed by Finnemore, Unbound is still accepting and marking entries, and anyone who solves the puzzle before 31 December 2022 will receive £250 to spend supporting other book projects on the Unbound site.

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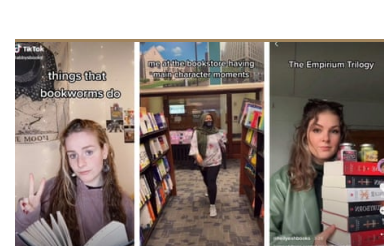
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