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Reprints
Sunday, August 6, 2006
Late Edition - Final
Section B, Page 1 ... 2
Late Edition - Final
Section B, Page 1 ... 2

Sunday Book Review

Spelling Out Worth Where Letters Count

Reviewed by Jennifer Schuessler

Scrabble Nation: The Story of the Game and Its Players
By Stefan Fatsis
Illustrated. 304 pp. Penguin Press. $25.95

Stefan Fatsis

Scrabble Nation is a book about Scrabble players, but it's also a book about Scrabble. Stefan Fatsis, who wrote about the game for The Wall Street Journal before becoming a sportswriter for the same paper, has written a lively, well-reported account of the game's history and its devotees, from the first Scrabble tournament in Jacksonville, Fla., in 1972 to the current crop of competitive players who spend hours memorizing obscure words and strategies. Fatsis himself is a middling player who has spent years trying to improve his game, and he brings a sportswriter's eye to the game's tactics and its competitors, including the 2005 National Scrabble Championship, which he covered for The Times.

Fatsis's main subject is the game's enduring appeal, which he attributes to its combination of luck and skill, its mix of solitary and social pleasures and its ability to satisfy the desire for a game that is both challenging and fair. He also argues that Scrabble's popularity has been underestimated by people who think it's just a game for bookish nerds, and he points to the game's growing popularity among Internet users and its appearance in movies and television shows as evidence of its cultural reach.

The book's strongest chapters are those in which Fatsis describes the game's history and its early days as a marketing challenge for its inventor, Alfred Butts, who had to convince skeptical retailers that people would buy a game that was neither a board game nor a card game. Butts's story is a classic tale of a man who invented something that was ahead of its time and who died before it became a success, and Fatsis tells it with the right mix of sympathy and skepticism.

The book's weakest chapters are those in which Fatsis describes the game's competitive scene, which is so specialized that it will be of interest only to people who already know the game well. The chapter on the 2005 championship is too long and too detailed, and it reads like a sports story that has been padded with background information that readers don't need. The chapter on the game's popularity among Internet users is more interesting, but it raises questions that Fatsis doesn't answer, such as why people who play Scrabble online prefer it to other games and what it says about the game's appeal to people who don't like to play with other people face to face.

Fatsis's prose is clear and lively, and he has a good ear for the language of competitive players and for the jargon that they use to describe their strategies. The book is also well illustrated, with photographs of players and of the game's boards and tiles, and it includes a glossary of terms that readers will find useful if they want to understand the game's history and its culture.

Scrabble Nation is a book that will appeal to people who already know and love the game, but it will also appeal to people who don't know the game but who want to understand why it has been so popular for so long. It is a book that shows how a game can be more than just a game, and it is a book that shows how a game can be a window into a culture and a way of life.

Sunday Book Review Home
Sunday Book Review Home
Sunday Book Review Home

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